‘Becoming mainstream’:

The professionalization and corporatization of digital nomadism

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Abstract

Digital nomadism, a mobile lifestyle that encompasses a wide array of professional endeavours, ranging from corporate remote workers to digital entrepreneurs, has benefitted from a steadily growing appeal. Despite this, there is a dearth of research exploring the premises and development of digital nomadism. This paper is concerned with the image of digital nomadism, its underlying structure and practices, and its relation to the current world of work. In order to explore these aspects and problematize digital nomadism, the paper traces the development of digital nomadism and takes inspiration from the Deleuzo-Guattarian image of the nomad. Adopting a qualitative approach to content analysis, this paper argues that digital nomadism is becoming increasingly institutionalized and professionalized, and as such, is distant from the emancipatory dimension underlying its discourse and many of its cultural representations. Overall, digital nomadism appears as an extension of capitalist logics, rather than an alternative to them.

Key words: Digital nomadism; Future of Work; Deleuze and Guattari; Professionalization; Corporatization; Gig Economy; Institutionalization

‘Electronic man is no less a nomad than his Paleolithic ancestors’

(McLuhan, 1994: 28)

Introduction

Globalization, economic volatility and technological development have changed significantly the contours of the world of work (Brocklehurst, 2001; Messenger and Gschwind, 2016; Aroles et al., 2019; Kingma, 2019). New work arrangements, which are becoming increasingly prevalent (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Petriglieri et al., 2019), have affected the ways in which work is both performed and spatially or temporally organized (Halford, 2005). Within the context of the so-called sharing economy, work practices are depicted as increasingly flexible, agile, autonomous, collaborative and entrepreneurial (Felstead et al., 2005; Taylor, 2015). These changes both echo and are further reinforced through various ‘professional’ trends, including coworking (Spinuzzi, 2012), new forms of entrepreneurship (Matlay and Westhead, 2005), Do It Yourself (DIY) and maker movements (De Vaujany and Aroles, 2019), crowdworking (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014), digital nomadism (Müller, 2016), and are connected with the emergence of new work spaces (notably makerspaces, coworking spaces, hackerspaces and Fab Labs).

In the context of workplace diversification and work flexibilisation, the figure of the nomad has been mobilized in different ways (Näsänen, 2017). Most papers addressing nomadism, in a professional context, have equated nomadic workers to remote workers through telework (see for instance Chen and Nath, 2005; Bean and Eisenberg, 2006; Hirst, 2011; Vayre and Pignault, 2017). More recently, attention has been drawn to one particular type of nomad, namely the digital nomad (Müller, 2016; Bonneau and Enel, 2018; Nash et al., 2018; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2018,

2019). Coined by Makimoto and Manners (1997), the notion of 'digital nomadism' encapsulates individuals 'whose work does not tie them to any specific place (or to a specific itinerary), and who therefore travel while working' (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017: 2). While digital nomads and nomadic workers present some similarities, 'what makes digital nomads distinct [from nomadic workers] is their length of travel and decision not to have a home base' (Nash et al., 2018: 212). Importantly, digital nomadism lies at the intersection of three framings: as an economic activity, as a cultural phenomenon, and as a new technology-enabled form of working and organising (see Wang et al. 2018).

While still an emerging topic in academic spheres, digital nomadism is regularly discussed in the media where it is typically depicted as an alternative, emancipatory, fulfilling, glamorous and highly-attractive 'way of living', at odds with the daily humdrum of office work. This paper sets out to probe this image through a focus on the contours of digital nomadism (i.e. what constitutes digital nomadism) as well as its relation to the current world of work and capitalism. In particular, this paper is primarily concerned with the three following questions: How does the digital nomad 'community' portray digital nomadism? What are the underlying structures or practices that frame digital nomadism as a form of working life? Does digital nomadism represent a discontinuity in the current world of work?

Our research adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis and drew from various types of online sources. Online sources can be insightful in the study of work and organizations (Pongratz, 2018; Glozer et al., 2019) and are particularly suited to the study of digital nomadism (as a discourse conveyed through digital channels). In the context of our research, the focus was on forums, blogs, newspaper articles as well as Facebook and Twitter posts, all of which were directly connected to the digital

nomad community. These sources have been mobilised at different stages of the research process, with some sources becoming more central as the research progressed. All the data collected and analysed have been generated naturally (see Boell et al., 2016). Altogether, our empirical research amounts to analysing hundreds of forum threads & blog posts, engaging with many newspaper articles and visiting a large number of websites connected to the digital nomad community.

In order to problematize and explore digital nomadism, the paper traces its emergence and draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) figure of the nomad. More than a mere coincidence of terms, we believe that the concept of the nomad *sensu* Deleuze and Guattari (1987) can be mobilised in the exploration of the discourse(s) underlying digital nomadism. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the nomad is a revolutionary figure that can bring about change; the nomad is perceived as 'the embodiment of freedom and irresponsibility and a challenge to the order of things' (Engebritgtsen, 2017: 44). While digital nomadism is typically portrayed as an alternative to mainstream forms of work (and by extension a move away from capitalist and corporate logics), we contend that it has become increasingly institutionalized, corporatized and professionalized, as the forces of capitalism are constantly seeking to re-conquer the territories of the nomad. As such, digital nomadism appears quite distant from the autonomous and sometimes revolutionary characterization of the nomad and closer to a direct extension of capitalist forms of work organization as they are today.

The paper is structured as follows. Following on from the introduction, the second section reviews the literature around remote work, contextualises digital nomadism and presents the figure of the nomad *sensu* Deleuze and Guattari (1987). An overview of the methodology constitutes the fourth section. The fifth section

explores the ways digital nomadism has become institutionalized, professionalized and corporatized. This is followed by the discussion in which we delve into the relation between digital nomadism and the current world of work. Finally, the conclusion reflects more widely on the future of digital nomadism.

Contextualising digital nomadism

Remote and nomadic work

Technological developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s have altered significantly the ways in which professional activities are conducted (Wilson et al., 2008; Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). In particular, they created the possibility for employees to work remotely, thus challenging the traditional '9-to-5' model (Barley and Kunda, 2001), blurring the boundary between the professional and private spheres (Gold and Mustafa, 2009; Sayah, 2013), freeing work from both spatial and temporal constrains (Hislop and Axtell, 2009; Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2010), and offering workers a greater sense of flexibility and autonomy (Baruch, 2000; Golden, 2009). By enacting the idea that a growing share of work activities can take place outside the walls of the organisation, remote work paved the way for a wide range of new work modalities, including zero-hour contracts, crowdwork, agile modes of management, collaborative entrepreneurship and new forms of nomadism (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014; Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Most papers addressing nomadism, in a work-related context, have classed nomadic workers as remote workers (Haddon and Brynin, 2005; Hirst, 2011) and have explored various aspects of this trend, including the technological conditions underlying the rise of a nomadic culture in an organization (Chen and Nath, 2005) or

how employees make sense of the transition from office to nomadic work (Bean and Eisenberg, 2006). Importantly digital nomadism has received relatively little attention in the organisation studies and sociology of work literatures. This is due, we contend, to the fact that this is very much an emerging research topic, and the difficulty in defining what actually constitutes digital nomadism. Regarding the latter, a quick glance through online media highlights how, at times, digital nomadism seems to encapsulate freelancing, remote work, digital entrepreneurship and gig work, thus considerably obfuscating digital nomadism as a work phenomenon. The following section sets out to briefly trace the origin and development of digital nomadism.

The development of digital nomadism

One of the earliest progenitors of digital nomadism is Steven Roberts, a 'high-tech nomad', who in 1983 travelled across the USA on a 'computerized' recumbent bicycle while pursuing his career as a writer. Digital nomadism reached what could be considered conceptual maturity with Makimoto and Manners who prophesised that 'with the ability to tap into every worldwide public information source from anywhere on the globe, and the ability to talk to anyone via a video link, humans are going to be given the opportunity, if they want it, of being global nomads' (1997: 6). Over time various technological innovations and platforms have considerably enhanced the possibilities and opportunities for prospective digital nomads. These developments have, for instance, facilitated remote payment and money transfer and enabled long-distance, cheaper and real-time communications. In addition, the sharing economy provides 'platforms' that have fostered flexibility in terms of peer-to-peer services and offered freelancers unprecedented possibilities to find work that is independent of location. Fiverr, one of the best-known platforms for digital

freelancers, has recently advertised for a 'chief digital nomad' (Curran, 2018). Altogether, these developments translated in an exponential increase in the number of self-reported digital nomads.

The ever-increasing range of books, how-to guides, blogs, forums, YouTube channels, newspapers articles, and other resources that have emerged around the digital nomadism testifies to its growing appeal, both as a lifestyle and as a professional endeavour. Müller (2016: 344) notes that 'the digital nomad has evolved from a merely fictional character into a social figure of current work life'. In 2008, the Economist magazine ran a multi-part special report on digital nomadism and today, the figure of the digital nomad features regularly in the popular, business and 'new' media, from *The Guardian* (Harris, 2018) to *Medium* (Westenberg, 2018). Although they tend not to draw extensively on nomadism as a sociological or philosophical trope, some contextualization through social theory has been known to feature. The Economist (2008) for example makes reference to Manuel Castells, whose work is of particular relevance to the concept of digital nomadism.

Castells came to prominence through debates over the 'future of work.' Such debates, spurred in part by the development of Artificial Intelligence and the (continued) advance of automation, have exploded in recent years but in fact they are ever present, tending to intensify during periods of rapid economic, cultural and social change (see Granter, 2009: 93-112). During the 1980s in particular a 'future of work' literature flourished, with 'postindustrial utopians' (Frankel, 1987) such as Alvin Toffler offering predictions on new ways of living and working. Indeed, Toffler's concept of the 'electronic cottage' can be seen as part of the genealogy of the digital nomad, combining as it does notions of network technology and working remotely, and a changing attitude to labour and consumption in the market economy (Frankel,

1987: 28).

For Attali (2011), the nomad will be a significant feature of the global future. By the late 1980s he had begun to sketch out a bifurcated nomadism as the mode of being for workers and citizens in the twenty first century. The global 'elite' of workers would 'become privileged nomads, roaming the globe attached to cellular telephones, portable fax machines and wristband computers. They don't have real addresses, and they work all the time because they can't get away from all their high tech paraphernalia' (Carrington, 1991). For the less privileged – the enforced nomadism associated with destitution in the global south. Attali's conceptualization of nomadism is given further elaboration in his book *A Brief History of the Future*. Here, businesses and corporations themselves become nomadic and are characterised as 'theatres' or 'circuses' which draw on a similarly nomadic workforce for short and long term enterprises, respectively. This workforce is comprised of 'hypernomads'; 'financial or business strategists, executives of insurance and leisure companies, software designers, creators, jurists, financiers, authors, designers, artists, creators of nomadic objects' (Attali, 2011: 195). The figure of the nomad has also notably been discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in ways that, we contend, can further our understanding of digital nomadism.

The Deleuzo-Guattarian figure of the nomad

In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari (1987) distinguish between two forms of space (striated and smooth). Striated spaces are envisioned as highly codified and extensive forms of space that are governed by a plethora of rules and a grid-like imagery, while smooth spaces are characterized by their openness, revolutionary potential and resistance to codifying processes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The

nomad is pivotal to this conceptual framework. The nomad is the image of smooth space and the State that of striated space, amounting to an opposition between *nomos* and *polis* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The State is seen as seeking to exert control over space by striating smooth spaces; 'sedentary states have always sought to control the nomadic flows of labour' (Noyes, 2004: 162). In contrast, smooth spaces are characterised by a revolutionary potential, as they seek to undo problematic over-codification and striations in order to open up and actualize new possibilities and territories (see Aroles and McLean, 2019).

Smooth and striated spaces are not diametrically opposed; 'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 474). The nomad challenges the State by occupying un-striated spaces and smoothing striated spaces, thus embracing and embodying difference. The nomad is akin to a warrior; Deleuze and Guattari (1987) take inspiration from Clastres' (1977) work on war in nomadic societies to argue that waging war is not exclusive to the State – for nomads, the war is 'a mechanism directed against the threat of the State' (Reid, 2003: 63). By extension, the nomad is seen as a revolutionary figure, defined 'by the subversion of conventions' (Braidotti, 1994: 5), and who carries the potential to effect change. In that sense, the nomad is perceived as 'the embodiment of freedom and irresponsibility and a challenge to the order of things' (Engebritgtsen, 2017: 44) who exists as 'force, movement, difference, change' (Wuthnow, 2002: 186).

Importantly, this imagery around the figure of the nomad (and similar ones) has fuelled much of the discourse surrounding digital nomadism; this is particularly noticeable when examining the imagery upon which digital nomadism is constructed. Given the ever-growing presence and visibility of digital nomadism, both on social

media platforms and in the press (as digital nomadism seems to become more mainstream), one may question the extent to which digital nomads still embody an 'ethics of difference', as found in representations of nomadism and, in part, used to frame the narratives around digital nomadism. The image of the nomad as understood by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) can, we argue, help us problematize and explore present-day digital nomadism.

Research Method

Data collection

Our research adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis and drew from various types of online sources. Online sources have been used in various ways in management and organization studies with, for instance, scholars drawing from corporate advertorials (e.g. Livesey, 2002), company reports (e.g. Jose and Lee, 2007), press and media sources (e.g. Joutsenvirta and Vaara, 2015) or websites of online platforms (Pongratz, 2018). In the context of our research, the focus was on forums, blogs, newspaper articles as well as Facebook and Twitter posts, all of which were directly connected to the digital nomad community. These sources have been mobilised at different stages of the research process, with some sources becoming more central as the research progressed. Importantly, our research revolves exclusively around platforms that are open to the public (i.e. that do not require any membership, login or sign up).

Our data collection process involved three main phases. Twitter and Facebook posts (on public accounts) have been used in the first stages of the research in order to identify further relevant online sources connected to the digital nomad community (e.g. blogs, forums, online platforms, etc.) and to get a feel for some of the on-going

discussions occurring within the digital nomad community itself. This preliminary phase of research allowed us to get a general overview of the current trends and topics of interest connected to digital nomadism. In the second phase, we turned our attention to newspaper articles (in particular American and British as they regularly feature digital nomadism) in order to explore how digital nomadism was portrayed in the media and how that image compared to that articulated on both Twitter and Facebook. While newspaper articles initially played a role similar to that of Twitter and Facebook posts (i.e. providing an overview) in our study, they became increasingly relevant in our attempt to unpack what lies behind the notion of digital nomadism.

In the third phase, we concentrated on forums, blogs and websites connected to the digital nomad community. Two forums in particular (which, by the number of members, appear to be the main forums for digital nomads) were investigated for this research. In the interests of anonymity we have chosen not to name these forums. We started our exploration with threads inviting members of the forums to introduce themselves. This amounted to analysing 639 individual profiles, 346 of which were self-identified digital nomads. We carefully analysed the profiles of both digital nomads and non-digital nomads, as we sought to draw the contours of digital nomadism and strove to have a better appreciation of this phenomenon that still lacks a consensual definition and a clear framework (Reichenberger, 2018). We also examined over thirty forum threads connected to the practicalities of being or becoming a digital nomad. This phase of the research was complemented by the study of approximately thirty personal blogs run by digital nomads with a high public visibility as well as the websites of the main ‘associations’ connected to the digital nomad community.

Data Analysis

In order to articulate the themes and concepts emerging from our research, we analysed and coded our data through an inductive approach. More precisely, we followed a 'three-stage process' that involved generating first-order codes, second-order themes and an overarching theme. By working through our research notes and the data collected, we could formulate a series of first-order codes that captured the essence of our data. These first-order codes are *in vivo* elements from the data collected in blog posts, forum threads and newspaper articles. They were revised several times for accuracy and consistency. These first-order codes include skills, planning, competition, identity, intra-community relations, search for support, entrepreneurship, success, market, inequalities, location-dependency, community, collaboration, financial, networking, professional, sustainability, transition, travel, freedom, etc.

We then crafted our second-order themes; this involved an iterative engagement with our first-order codes, our data as well as various debates and concepts within different streams of literature. These literatures included research on digital nomadism (Müller, 2016; Nash et al., 2018; Reichenberger, 2018; Wang et al., 2018); more general research on recent changes in the world of work (such as Spinuzzi, 2012; Schörpf et al., 2017; Pongratz, 2018); the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) on the figure of the nomad as well as critical engagement with the Deleuzo-Guattarian image of the nomad (Wood, 2003; Noyes, 2004; Beck, 2016). This process allowed us to establish connections between our emerging first-order codes and the existing literature. In particular, this enabled us to develop a better understanding of the place of digital nomadism in the current world of work as well as

its specificities.

Three main second-order themes resulted from this process. Our first second-order theme relates to the fluidity of the concept of digital nomadism and highlights the difficulty in grappling with this elusive lifestyle and work modality, and also considers the implications of the lack of clear definition. Our second second-order theme describes the commodification of digital nomadism (the commercialisation of the digital nomadism movement), thus looking at the different structures and associations/organizations that frame digital nomadism. Finally, our third second-order theme focuses on the professionalization of digital nomadism and on the shared problems, difficulties and concerns encountered by digital nomads and workers in more 'traditional' forms of employment, thus suggesting that digital nomadism is not much different to other forms of employment. This led to the development of our overarching theme, which sets to capture the increasing professionalization, institutionalization and corporatization of digital nomadism. Our three second-order themes are used to structure the following section.

Finally, while this article does not engage with any sensitive topic, we sought to protect the anonymity and privacy of those we researched. This entailed referring to various guides of best practice around the collection and analysis of publicly available 'private' data (Hewson, 2016). We ensured anonymity by systematically 'cloaking' our data; this involved 'the subtle alteration of text through changing word order and/or using synonyms to preserve meaning while avoiding traceability through search engines' (Glozer et al., 2019: 634). While we analysed original data to produce our research findings, all the quotes presented in this article are in 'cloaked' form.

Digital nomadism, territories and professionalization

The fluidity of the concept of digital nomadism

When analysing some 346 profiles of self-reported digital nomads on online forums, the diversity of their claims to belonging to the digital nomad community was apparent. While being engaged in certain professional activities was, in most cases, used to legitimize one's status as a digital nomad, there were, however, clear disagreements regarding what professional activities were seen as falling within the remit of digital nomadism. For instance, one member of a key forum explained: '*I feel like I'm half way there. For me, the other half is having consistent revenue stream built. But then again, as I write this, I realise that it's just a difference in definition'*. This was echoed by another member of the forum: '*I work remotely for a start-up company, I guess this does not allow me to be a full-fledged digital nomad, but I find this better than constantly hunting for freelance jobs*'. We found five main modalities that capture the professional lives of digital nomads: remote employment, entrepreneurship, freelancing, travelling through work as an employee and having more than one professional activity (See Table 1).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

While insightful, these five modalities also obfuscate a somehow more complex reality. Analysing the profiles of self-reported non-digital nomads helped us explore what was registered (or not) as legitimate in terms of digital nomadism. On forums, digital nomads explained that digital nomadism '*covers a wide spectrum of individuals*', '*gathers a very diverse crew, that is somehow like-minded*', evincing the elusiveness of digital nomadism both as a concept and as a community. In practice, this raised a multitude of practical questions relating, for instance, to the length, speed

and frequency of travel, the notion of location independency, the relationship to the idea of home base, the financial viability of the professional activities of digital nomads, etc. Discussions around the frequency of travel illustrate this point. Various self-reported digital nomads state how, by the virtue of remote working, they can, for example, afford to be based in one country while working for a company located in another. Yet, individuals in very similar situations argued that they were not digital nomads, as they were not travelling frequently enough and were simply living abroad. Others still problematized the relation between remote work and digital nomadism, questioning the legitimate level of 'independence' required to be a digital nomad.

Another example that emerged during our research was the relation to the idea of a home base. For some, being a digital nomad meant selling all their possessions and engaging in minimalist travelling; a digital nomad couple explained that '*we became full DNs last February when we sold/gave away everything we owned, terminated the rent and became homeless*'. This point was echoed by another digital nomad: '*After being stuck in a job I hated, I realized that I had nothing to lose so I decided to sell everything I possessed, purchased a one-way plane ticket and was abroad the following day*'. This was typically associated with 'fast travelling' (i.e. changing locations several times a year). In contrast, other nomads praised the importance of having a home base; '*if you want to be financially sustainable, you need to have a home base, or at least engage in slow travelling in your journey as digital nomad*'. In addition to diverging on the topic of home base, this raises the question as to whether digital nomadism is not simply a transitional phase, at least in the sense that sustaining this lifestyle over the long term would rule out traditional forms of home and family life.

Interestingly, the motivations of digital nomads are particularly disparate, ranging from an attempt to explore one's inner self to a desperate escape from the corporate world. Interestingly though, digital nomads frequently expressed the desire to explore something different from the corporate world; a digital nomad explained '*I joined the digital nomad movement mostly because I was growing tired of my regular day job and I couldn't bear the thought of having someone else who would control my time and freedom*'; another highlighted that '*After some years working in the corporate world, I realized that I found intolerable just everything about it, and in particular having to attend interminable soul-crushing meetings and to work on other people's silly project*'; a third argued that '*Sitting in an office all day is the pits*'. In a sense, they seem to resemble Deleuze and Guattari's nomads, inasmuch as they are attempting to liberate themselves from the control of the State through the enactment and embodiment of a different way of conceptualising and actualising work and one's relation to space and time. This was particularly noticeable in the ways in which many of them would articulate their departure from the corporate world as a 'leap of faith' into the unknown in order to try and experiment with a different life configuration; '*I have been free from the corporate world of London since 2007 when I took a leap of faith*'.

The commodification of digital nomadism

A whole spectrum of opportunities has followed in the wake of digital nomadism. This not only involved the creation of new jobs, but also the emergence of a wide range of events, infrastructures and groups specifically dedicated to the digital nomad movement or community, as revealed through our research. Some of the most significant examples include (i) the creation of the annual digital nomad festival ('The

Mega Event for Entrepreneurs, Digital Nomads & a Holistic Lifestyle'[i]) in 2012; (ii) the emergence of 'coworkation' ('Coworkations are inspirational coworking retreats, set in stunning locations around the world'[ii]); (iii) the development of digital nomad camps, the purpose of which is to gather like-minded people, foster collaborations, enable participants to expand personal networks, and informally teach them how to become successful entrepreneurs; (iv) the organization of digital nomad cruises ('Imagine a big group of like-minded people on a worry free all-inclusive cruise. Together you'll experience incredible destinations and learn new things along the way while making friends for life'[iii]); (v) the rise of collaborative work spaces (coworking spaces, co-living spaces, makerspaces, etc.); (vi) the expansion of various services directed at the digital nomad community (e.g. some companies specializing on organizing trips for digital professionals); and finally, (vii) the creation of a wide range of closed, sometimes elitist, groups focused on networking.

Furthermore, despite an emphasis on an ethos of sharing and community, the aforementioned events and opportunities all come at a significant cost. Conferences and events are packaged and priced at different levels (i.e. the more one pays, the more opportunities and features one gains access to); there is an annual membership to pay to join groups focused on networking; if interested in organizing a DNX camp, one can become a franchised partner, etc. Interestingly, this might lead to a scission within the digital nomad community, with a situation where those who can afford those events will in turn benefit from a higher online visibility and as such contribute to conveying and reinforcing a certain image of digital nomadism.

The vocabulary mobilized in the context of the aforementioned examples is strikingly corporate and business-oriented (e.g. networking, collaboration, success, strategy, entrepreneurship, etc.), a paradox in the light of the depiction of digital

nomadism as an alternative way of living and working. These events and structures reveal, we argue, the extent to which digital nomadism, as a movement, has become institutionalized and corporatized over the years, with some of these events presented as 'key moments' in one's journey to become a fully-fledged and highly-successful digital nomad. Importantly, some of the events described above could be seen as structuring digital nomadism and act as 'referential institutions' through which legitimate claims of belonging to the digital nomad community can be articulated. For instance, a digital nomad explained that '*now we have the ability and infrastructure to make digital nomadism the norm*' and that '*this lifestyle is the future and us digital nomads are ahead!*'. Another, pondering over the evolution of the sector, argued that digital nomadism has become '*a multi-million dollar industry and corresponds to one of the biggest changes that we are currently experiencing*'.

Many individuals also became digital nomads by catering 'more practically' for the digital nomad community. Some of these professional endeavours include activities around public speaking, online consulting, digital marketing and web development, the creation of start-ups specifically aimed at helping online businesses grow, to name but a few. Some digital nomads '*organize co-living and fun experiences for online entrepreneurs and digital nomads*' or '*operate websites and platforms that help people gain location independence and become digital nomads*'. An adjacent and interconnected phenomenon has been the emergence of 'digital nomad gurus' (similar to the management gurus lionized in the corporate world) who have used various platforms and media (books, blogs, vlogs, YouTube channels, websites, etc.) to present apparently unproblematic paths to becoming a digital nomad in the form of 'how I/we did it' narratives. They managed to create a business around helping other businesses to grow, teaching others how to be financially successful

while ‘nomading’, etc. Some of them are digital nomads reflecting on their own experiences (e.g. writing books on their own experience or advising others) while others became financially-independent digital nomads by documenting their journey (e.g. product placement through blogs, vlogs, etc.). A digital nomad described how ‘*professionally, I make people rich. I am not a designer, a coder or anything of the like, I am just that guy who knows how businesses work*’. This phenomenon has become so commonplace that it is now critiqued in the most digital of forums such as *Medium* (Westenberg, 2018). The development of these profit-making ‘initiatives’ has also directly contributed to professionalizing digital nomadism in the sense of skills, training, mentoring and so on.

Digital nomadism as a professional endeavour

Many recent books on digital nomadism have emphasized the ease with which one can adopt a digital nomad lifestyle, arguing that anyone could become a digital nomad providing they use their skills smartly and direct their efforts in the right direction. Adding to this image of apparent ease, various newspapers articles have endowed digital nomadism with a glamorous aesthetic[iv]: ‘New year, new job? How about one where you could work from a pristine beach in Thailand or a café in Tel Aviv?’[v]; ‘Living and working in paradise: the rise of the 'digital nomad''[vi]; ‘When You’re a ‘Digital Nomad,’ the World Is Your Office’[vii]. Consequently, digital nomadism is often associated with ideas of exoticism, travel and leisure and portrayed as an emancipatory and enviable lifestyle. Interestingly, these romanticized accounts of hyper-connected individuals who can establish themselves virtually anywhere have occulted the practicalities of being a digital nomad.

Digital nomads discuss these practicalities on forums and blogs. Some look for advice regarding the skills they should acquire before embarking on that journey (how to get started as a digital nomad, what to do with particular qualifications or experience, etc.). Others, who took a 'leap of faith', are looking for advice or collaboration in order to set up their first online business – '*at some point I decided to quit my job and become a full time digital nomad. I'm still living out of savings and will take any freelance job that comes up while I work on my project. It would help to meet others who have gone through the same path'*. Others use forums or blogs to advertise their services or business. Evidently, while related matters are discussed (e.g. friendliness of a given city), many blog and forum posts are concerned with the business side of digital nomadism. As noted by a digital nomad, '*one starts an online business in order to become a digital nomad, and then somehow get caught up in a logic of trying to earn more and more; this is probably what happens when one is surrounded by other business people*'.

Financial matters are occasionally registered as causing difficulties, with some explaining how they sold all their possessions to embark on a digital nomad journey but are still not making any money (living off their savings while attempting to set up some sort of online venture). As noted by one digital nomad, '*unfortunately, I'll be returning to the US in a couple of weeks, as money has run out and my blogging activities has not yet afforded complete location independence*'. This highlights the 'financial reality' for many digital nomads. Another quote illuminates the perception that digital nomads are less reliant on generating financial support; '*I have to admit that while I am curious to know how fellow nomads actually support themselves, I was hoping that we had moved away from the idea that work is a central feature of our lives*'. On the one hand, digital nomadism tends to be portrayed as a very liberal

lifestyle revolving around self-development and discovery but on the other, there is a concomitant image of ambition, drive and wealth that frames it and produces clear images of success and failure. In that regard, a digital nomad reported '*for me, it feels like there are no other ways to be productive and successful*'.

A further point of interest concerns the role of community in the framing of digital nomadism. In many cases, (future) digital nomads are especially enthusiastic about the idea of joining the 'digital nomad community'. In parallel, many have argued that being a digital nomad is a very lonely experience. In a sense, the idea of community is always mobilized, or conjured up, as a way of both promoting digital nomadism and perhaps pre-empting concerns about what ultimately appears as an isolating experience. Contextually prominent digital nomads have themselves reflected on the 'dark side' of digital nomadism (Thomas, 2016) and in the UK national media, commentators have called for a 'new politics of home' as a countermeasure to the malign tendency towards increasing ontological dislocation associated with nomadic capitalism (Harris, 2018). Conceived of thusly, digital nomadism does not differ from other contemporary forms of employment that may generate feelings of isolation and loneliness (see Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Whittle & Mueller, 2009). Despite an ethos of conviviality, the promise of belonging to an inclusive and highly heteroclite community, even to be 'alone together' (Spinuzzi, 2012), remains, in many cases, unfulfilled.

Discussion

Images of digital nomadism

Digital nomadism clearly emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon involving individuals engaged in many different forms of work and pursuing a wide array of

interests and ambitions. This plurality, we contend, makes it difficult to position digital nomadism as a community and to categorize its key features. Importantly though, digital nomads appear politically as privileged citizens, especially in the context of the difference between forced/coerced and wilful nomadism. As noted by Noyes (2004: 159), 'And yet, alongside the nomadic freedom that we all dream of, we are constantly confronted with the brute facts of how territoriality affects lives – whether it takes the form of simple (or not-so-simple) border crossings, ethnic conflict, land ownership disputes, or the injustices suffered by refugees and migrant labourers'. In other words, they constitute, as in Attali's analysis, a privileged elite who can afford to travel. More precisely, digital nomads with a high online visibility represent an elite who have constructed a belief in their own power to subvert the system, when in reality, they are a privileged group of rich individuals who can afford to brand themselves as representing some kind of 'alternative'. Clearly, not all digital nomads fall into category and it is important not to overlook issues of precarity and lack of benefits for digital nomads (see Thompson, 2019).

Furthermore, Gorz, perhaps the 'future of work' theorist *par excellence*, drew attention to attitudinal changes in his discussion of 'generation x'. Drawing on perspectives around 'post materialist' attitudes developed earlier by Yankelovitch, Gorz (1999: 61) observed the emergence of 'new protagonists…who, instead of passively putting up with the insecurity and discontinuity of most jobs, try to use these as a springboard for their self-affirmation and for a richer, freer, more solidary life'. This would certainly fit with the professed aspirations of many digital nomads although it must be said that Gorz's overall analysis is one that points to a radical progression *beyond* capitalism, rather than adaptation within its interstices. In his later work, Gorz (2010: 121) maintains the notion of an 'anti-productivist, anti statist shift'

and, notably, links this with software, digital networks and communications.

Framing of digital nomadism as a form of working life

Through our research, it became apparent that digital nomadism was increasingly being constructed as a career path. While it might initially have constituted an 'exit door' for those discontented with the corporate world or more generally with their lives, individuals are increasingly organizing their time strategically and directing their effort in such a way that they can maximize their chances of success in a digital nomad lifestyle. In other words, as digital nomadism gained momentum, it became less of a fortuitous path and more of a voluntary and professionalized choice of career. Arguably, the formalisation of digital nomadism around certain skills and key experiences opened the door to its corporatization. Not only has digital nomadism become increasingly professionalized and institutionalized (enacted as a career path revolving around specific skills and marked by specific processes and events), but also its development has been paralleled by the emergence of corporate endeavours that have sought to cater for and expand the digital nomad community. As argued by Thompson (2019: 38), 'the DNX is one conference that socially constructs a normative mainstream digital nomad community'. In that context, digital nomadism is increasingly becoming a space for formalised learning, part of an alternate entrepreneurial process discontinued by employment or more traditional forms of entrepreneurship.

It appears that despite operating in a different context, digital nomadism presents many of the concerns encountered by employees in more 'traditional' forms of employment – concerns over financial matters, issues around training and skills, the role of education and experience, the fear of failure, the importance of regulations,

the search at some point for disconnection, etc. (see for instance Johnson et al., 2005). As such, not only have capitalist logics enabled the rapid expansion of the digital nomad movement in different ways, but they have also led to the reproduction of similar conflicts, struggles, and power asymmetries. There are resonances here with Harvey's notion of the tendency for capitalism to search for a 'spatial fix'. Internal contradictions lead to new spatial fixes, only for these to lead, in turn, to further contradictions. The result is a constant search for both internal and external transformations of capitalism through 'geographical expansion and geographical restructuring' (Harvey, 2001: 24). As previously argued, this highlights the extent to which the forces of capitalism and the codes of corporate and even bureaucratic cultures have infiltrated the digital nomad movement (see Schörpf et al. (2017) for a similar comment on crowdwork), with both the opportunities and threats connected to capitalism framing the development of digital nomadism.

Digital nomadism and the current world of work

The relation between the current world of work and digital nomadism is at once uneasy and intricate. On the one hand, digital nomadism could be seen as a challenge to the logic and authority of the State and its established structures as it seeks to deterritorialise dominant and established codes and materialize new logics, relations and possibilities; 'what is nomadic about them is their refusal to settle within established codes and conventions… the necessity to run free of established structures and systems of organisation and territories' (Plant, 1993: 92). In the context of hacktivism, Beck (2006: 344) argues that 'the trajectories for these digital nomads include the eradication of oppressive institutions, large-scale surveillance, and governmental invasion of privacy'. This is precisely the revolutionary potential of the

nomad, as envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). On the other hand, digital nomadism is also heavily reliant on the logic of capitalism and corporate culture for its own expansion – it is intrinsically connected to possibilities of free movement, the development and availability of ICTs, and the entrepreneurial 'win-win imageries' that drive members of the creative/knowledge classes to ever more inventive forms of self-exploitation (Ekman, 2015). Paradoxically then, nomadism, and we argue digital nomadism as well, is not only a 'radically anti-capitalist strategy,' but also 'one brutal characteristic mode of capitalism itself' (Young, 1995: 172–3). Altogether, this highlights the extent to which a corporate logic has been infiltrating the digital nomad movement and how the forces of capitalism have progressively re-territorialised and striated the spaces originally claimed by digital nomadism. This process of re-territorialisation occurred through the development of institutions framing the professionalization of digital nomadism by creating the image of the 'professional digital nomad'.

We see two concomitant and interconnected processes that seem to frame the relation between digital nomadism and the forces of capitalism. As digital nomads manage to escape the logics and codes of capitalism (by un-striating certain spaces, deterritorialising major codes and practices, and exploring smooth spaces), they are almost simultaneously re-integrated and absorbed in a form of capitalism that constantly reinvents itself. In that sense, digital nomadism and the forces of capitalism have a tempestuous, paradoxical relation, as constant micro-conflicts over the control of the territories of the digital nomad occur – 'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 474). As noted by Noyes (2004: 166), 'capitalism relies on the production of nomadic lifestyles, just as

it relies on the reintegration of these lifestyles into its own modes of production'. As such, we argue that digital nomadism represents a discontinuity in the current world of work in the sense that its potential for difference and change seems to have already been captured by neoliberal forces.

While our paper contributes to research on digital nomadism by investigating what lies at its core and how it relates to the current world of work and capitalism, we contend that the relevance of our argument goes beyond the particular case of digital nomadism. In particular, we see the trends described in this paper as symptomatic of the current and somehow paradoxical relations that unite new work practices with capitalism at large. New work trends revolve around ideas of difference, emancipation, solidarity or even wellbeing; collaborative entrepreneurship, the gig economy as well as the coworking movement and ethos are good illustrations of this. Yet, these trends also internalize and imbue a capitalist logic in such a way that they ultimately end up being repositioned or repurposed as commercial endeavours. Mindfulness is a case in point of this process (see Purser, 2019).

Conclusion

Despite the growing presence of digital nomads in national media and the substantial market that both frames and surrounds their activities, there is a lack of clarity regarding what exactly constitutes digital nomadism. This ambiguity is in part connected to the variety of individuals who identify as digital nomads, ranging from freelancers to remote workers to independent entrepreneurs. This lack of clarity, we contend, is commercially exploited through different endeavours. This is particularly noticeable through the range of opportunities, events and jobs that emerged in the wake of the development of digital nomadism. In addition, when examined closely, it

becomes apparent that digital nomadism does not differ fundamentally from other forms of employment, at least not to the extent that it claims to. Overall, this prompts us to argue that digital nomadism, which invokes an imagery grounded on the figure of the nomad (freedom, emancipation, revolution, etc.), is becoming increasingly institutionalized, corporatized and professionalized.

The rhetoric and discourse on which digital nomadism is premised convey the idea that digital nomads represent a form of rupture in (or reaction to) the corporate and bureaucratic landscape of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Digital nomadism is portrayed as having the potential to both challenge the formality of organizations (and organizing) and shatter the rhetoric of 9-to-5 jobs and may as such be perceived as a dangerous and subversive practice. Yet, digital nomads rely on their dialogical figure, namely bureaucrats, as their activities require structural layers. In addition, these layers enable organizations and events to monetize their activities. Paradoxically, both bureaucrats and bureaucracies appear as necessary landmarks for digital nomads, in particular when it comes to articulating (and sometimes monetising) their narrative. In that context, digital nomadism might be best approached as 'a social (dis)arrangement and a subjective (dis)order on the fringes of empire, as a regime of technological, social, and conceptual innovation that is fundamentally opposed to empire, but that can also serve as a repository of resources on which empire can draw for its own perpetuation.' (Noyes, 2004: 160-161). Ultimately, while digital nomads may disturb the current order, we argue that through 'a technological negation of both physical space and solar time' (Noyes, 2004: 160), digital nomadism can be seen to embody an extreme form of capitalism.

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TABLE

Professional situation	Number of digital nomads	Illustrations
Remote employee	64	Working for a global company; Digital marketing for online company; Account manager for digital company; Remote engineer
Entrepreneur	100	Founder of a SaaS (software as a service) platform; creator of Apps; Founder of mobile development agency; Co-founder of start-ups and online companies
Freelancer	101	Translator; online language tutor; front-end web development; marketing consulting; 'growth hacker'
More than one professional activity	31	Freelancing with setting up a digital marketing company; working remotely for company and freelance translating
Travelling through work as an employee	6	Travelling for specific projects; global management trainer and coach
No information/have not yet started professional activity	44	

Table 1. Professional situation of digital nomads (based on profiles analysed on the two main forums)

[i] From: https://www.dnxfestival.com/#nav-speakers
[ii] From: https://coworkation.com
[iii] From: https://www.nomadcruise.com
[iv] We certainly do not claim that all newspapers articles present digital nomadism in this way but rather that it seems to be a dominant trend.
[v] From: https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/the-rise-of-the-digital-nomad-a3740466.html
[vi] From: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/11597145/Living-and-working-in-paradise-the-rise-of-the-digital-nomad.html
[vii] From: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/magazine/when-youre-a-digital-nomad-the-world-is-your-office.html