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[2025-10-10-migration-bike_project.mp3](#)

Transcript

Speaker 1

Hello and welcome to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Jackie Broadhead.

Speaker 2

And I'm Delphine Bogie.

Speaker 1

Delphine, what are we talking about today?

Speaker 2

Thanks, Jackie. Well, we're talking about ideas of mobility and ideas of mobility, particularly across and within the city. We're looking at how transport affects people, how they move across London in particular, across London boroughs. And this conversation today is largely stemming and centering around how people newly arrived to London experience transport, experience mobility, and how the city is effectively in conversation with refugees, asylum seekers, those that are newly arrived about this.

Speaker 1

Thanks, Delphine. It's such an interesting conversation, and I think it's something that we haven't looked at so much, which is we think about mobility to the city, people arriving in places, but this idea of how people get around and the way that impacts the way that and understand the place that you live in. I was really struck in the conversation about, the inaccessibility of things like the tube, for example. People can't afford certain modes of transport and what providing a mode of transport, in this case a bike, might be able to do for people, the way that it might change their understanding of the city and of a place. and also the way that some of those dynamics can be impacted by things like gender. So the way that cycling is totally different for men and women and then the way that you kind of see that reproduced when we're thinking about asylum seekers or people who have newly arrived. One of the other areas that we talk about in this discussion is around ideas of openness and the idea of the city being open or closed and what that means. I think we have this idea of the city as open and London for a while had the slogan London is open as you know it's kind of post-Brexit marketing.

slogan. I just wondered what your thoughts from the conversation about this idea of openness, what does it mean to be an open city?

Speaker 2

I think it's something that we can experience whether we are newly arrived or not to a city. When you first kind of enter into a city space or a cityscape, you're often met with these signals and signs of what might determine subliminal messaging around what's open and what's closed to you, be it as a tourist or a traveller or a migrant or a refugee. I think the conversation today was really enlightening and powerful with that, with exploring that question around how your relationship with the city can change depending on who you are, where you've travelled from, and also kind of broader questions around how long you're staying in the city. be it a few days or years. So the conversation with Michael and Ezza today was, we reflected on these messages and these different ways that the city, be it councils and bureaucratic institutions, can create zones. And of course, we all know London kind of zones, one, two, and so on, and London boroughs, but how these words and this messaging shapes your experience of moving through the city and accessibility of the city's resources and different opportunities. It was really interesting to talk about ways in which the city. As you mentioned, we kind of considered these aspects of how the city can be, aspects of the city can be racialised and gendered and the image of the bike being so powerful in kind of constructing and deconstructing those aspects of your sense of self We also looked at the terms kind of having an imagined city and an emergent city and how arts-based approaches like the Bike Project can further research and offer a way to articulate this understanding of accessibility and inclusion within the city.

Speaker 1

Thanks so much, Delphine. That seems like a perfect moment to turn over to the conversation with our two experts.

Speaker 2

I'm joined by Dr Edda Yazdiner, Research Associate at the University of Bristol, and Professor Michael Keith, Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, Compass, here at the University of Oxford. Thank you both for joining us today. we're talking about the ESRC Open City Research Project and one of the initiatives that have stemmed from this, the Bike Project. Michael, I'll come to you first. What do we mean when we talk about an open city or a closed city?

Speaker 3

Thanks, Delphine. Well, the term means different things to different people, but most importantly, I think, the notion of an open city both reflects on what the city does, but also what the city ought to do. In one sense, the open city characterizes the way all

cities function. There tend to be spaces of freedom, spaces where places where new ideas flourish and people arrive and are free from the constraints of tradition and family. But also the open city is sometimes reflected on by particularly architects, planners and some people who write about cities to think about how some cities are more open than others, particularly in terms of the built environment, how we think about how we build, design, shape cities and how we govern them and how we make them places where people can dwell and people can make a home, which is why in one sense migration is quite often a litmus test for how open a city is and how friendly a city is in some ways, but also how possible it is to make a home in the city.

Speaker 2

Thank you so much. I love that idea of a litmus test. Edda, for those that are not involved with the project and not familiar yet, what is the BIKE project and could you tell us a bit about your involvement as a researcher?

Speaker 4

Yeah, absolutely. So the Bike Project is a charity that at the most basic level takes unused or unwanted bikes, refurbishes them and gives them to refugees and people seeking asylum. They're based in London, but also in Birmingham and I believe now in Middlesbrough. And I think the fundamental way that the Bike Project describes what they do is try to eliminate the choice between eating a square meal and catching the bus. So asylum support, the weekly payments for asylum support, which are around 50 pounds, are below the rate of destitution. And in defining the rate of payment for asylum support, the Home Office excludes transport from their definition of an essential need. So to meet the basic need of getting from one part of a city or one part of a neighbourhood to the other, transport for many people in the asylum system is prohibitively expensive. And my role as a researcher, so I was one leg of the co-production of the research along with participants in the Bike Project Women's Cycle Training Scheme, with my fellow researchers and with the artist that we worked with, Natasha Davies.

Speaker 2

Thank you. Michael, back to you. Putting the Bike Project into context of the ESLC Open City Project. How has the research team looked to explore the dynamics of London life as a city, at the borough and street levels? Why is this unique to London? Is it unique to London? And perhaps you could talk to us a bit more about your four research strands that you've identified and how these have proven useful.

Speaker 3

When we look at a city, the scale that we imagine it at makes an incredible difference to how we think about it, how we know it. and how people come to kind of think about

where they live. So we've tried to work at four different scales. So we work at the scale of the city as a whole, in particular, thinking about how the city churns through time. Churn is a term that has some kind of vernacular use, but also conceptual sense in some of the literatures about how rapidly some places change over time. It always struck me when I was working in the East End of London that you could Sometimes in a single year in the part of London that I know best in the East End, in any one year, up to 35% of the population move on. So very often, year by year, 1/3 of the population are on the move. So seeing how churn evolves, and particularly from the 1980s to the present day, the rate of churn in London has increased, which means that the dynamics of the city as a whole change over time. But also we are very keen to think at many different scales. So we've worked at those three other scales that you touched on, the borough as a whole, particular neighborhoods, but also a micro scale. And in brief, what that means that we've worked very closely with one borough, the London borough of Camden, who are very interested in the kinds of quantitative data we've kind of found out through examination of the census. But also we've worked with something called the Consumer Data Research Centre, another ESRC investment. because the census only measures a single point every 10 years, whereas you can use other data sources to see how the city evolves and changes year by year if you use different data sets, particularly consumer data, and you see trends that see sudden inflection points of change at times like the financial crisis or Brexit. So the borough scale has been very important for us, but also we've tried to work with the borough, just as we worked at the city scale with the GLA and other institutions. At the borough scale, we've worked quite closely with one particular London borough, but also NGOs and community organisations at that scale. But we've also, the estates scale makes a difference. And we actually began looking at 3 estates which have very different logics. One's an old garden city model of an estate. One's a Plan Voisin Corbusier style modernist block. And one's A brutalist concrete block. And thinking about the built environment, these three different estates all exist in one neighbourhood really around Swiss cottage in particular. And so thinking at that scale allowed us to think through the dynamics of the built environment more closely, which also gave us a fourth scale, the micro scale, thinking about what happens on playgrounds, on lawns, on individually cherished pieces of land. So thinking at those four scales allows you to use both different forms of methodologies of research to kind of make those places visible, but also different dynamics that work at different scales to get an understanding of a much more four-dimensional understanding of the way the city changes over time.

Speaker 2

Thank you so much. That really speaks to, I think, also to the relationship that you fostered with the different boroughs.

Speaker 3

Absolutely, yeah. Yeah, I mean, that was very important for us. I mean, we were both, the boroughs as a whole, but also particular NGOs and schools. So we worked with the Migration Museum in schools to try and think through what a local history of migration and change would mean for people, not just in London as a whole, because there are lots of stories one can tell about migration in London. There are whole books written about it. But what the changing landscape alongside changing demographics through migration might mean for people in one part of London is something that we worked through to make sure that there was an output from the research that can be used in schools as an educational project.

Speaker 2

Thank you. So looking at that output and considering the ways in which you considered the projects to kind of evolve, develop and kind of culminate, Edda, perhaps I can turn to you. The Bike Project takes an arts-based approach to thinking about the permeability of the city for new arrivals. Transport for work or leisure is, as we know, rarely free and often quite inaccessible, especially in London. Why was the image of a bike so powerful for the project?

Speaker 4

Oh yeah, I mean for lots of reasons really. The bike as an object is something that gives you choice. You decide on your route with a bicycle and you are the one being present, taking up space on the city streets. And for the women that we worked with, that is a gendered assertion of presence and often a gendered assertion of presence in a space where you wouldn't be expected, you know, where the assumption of the cyclist is the middle-aged man in lycra on a 10,000 pound bicycle. So there's that choice of presence. But on the other hand, there's something quite powerful in the gendered assertion of having choice where you are straddling this machine that is between your legs. And I think that has some quite powerful symbolism. Although we found that the women that we worked with didn't use their bikes that often, the bike was also an object, a permanent material thing. In people's lives, particularly when people's lives were so shaped by uncertainty and change because of their legal status. And I think we complemented this well with the arts-based approach that we took. So thinking about the bicycle as an object of choice and possession, the arts-based workshops that we did were effectively chosen and led by the women who shared with us what art forms they would like to follow throughout the workshops. And the film was a culmination of those different art languages that the participants we worked with wanted to speak in. So I think the arts-based approach is the visible traces of other things that a bicycle can reveal. So, you know, it enables us to reflect on how the city is both imagined and what those different imaginaries of the city reveal about different layers and different forms of social division. One person might think of moving across London with the iconic tube map, but the tube isn't accessible to all. So imagining mobility through the city via the

tube reveals particular classed and gendered mobilities. And I think for me, taking that arts-based approach really revealed how different parts of the city are experienced differentially. I've shared this anecdote a lot, but I'm going to share it again. It made me think a lot about a school trip when I was maybe 14, and we walked to the local tube station and one kid in my class was terrified to go down the escalator. And we thought that she was afraid that, you know, there was going to be another 7/7, but it turned out that her fear was that she'd, you know, lived in London her entire life, but had never been on the London Underground. And I think it's in the artistic work that we did with the participants that we were able to think critically about which London's are accessible to whom and what that means for how the city is lived in.

Speaker 2

Thank you. That conversation around accessibility and inclusion seems really kind of at the forefront of this project and of course should be at the forefront of lots of conversation around migrant integration and inclusion. The project, as you describe, explores the challenges refugees face in moving to a new city in London. But much of the project seems, from an outsider as myself looking into the project, it seems to centre around capturing the everyday and an everyday life, transport being a big part of that. So Michael, to come to you, drawing on your extensive work in this thematic area, how does the project speak to wider themes of emergent urbanism and living in a contemporary city?

Speaker 3

Part of the idea of the project came from research with migrants that predated the Open City Project, actually. And when it became very clear, if you're working on the ground, that many people in situations of precarity and uncertainty don't have the resources to use public transport, the bus costs a lot, the tube is actually incredibly expensive. And so people come to know the city intimately, but mostly by Shanks's pony, by walking around the city. And that leads to a circumscribed life for many people who can't afford either the tube or the bus, let alone the car. And a different mental map of the city. Many middle class people in London you speak to often have a kind of mental map of London that is very often, you know, a number of iconic tube stations and ways to get to them. And then the landscape, the pubs, the theatres, the places of entertainment or consumption that are close to certain nodes in a public transport network. But if you don't know even the broad outline of those networks, you know the city very differently. So the mental maps of the everyday are very different for different demographics. And this is one of the things that we wanted to interrogate, but also one of the things that came through the project precisely because the work we did with Natasha Davis, the filmmaker, was co-produced. What came through was a thematic that was, in a way, much more affective than instrumental. In a sense, one of the things we expected to find, recognizing the importance of a gendered approach to what we were doing, that

we wanted to create safe spaces, as Ada said, for people to articulate their own ways of expressing how they valorise the bicycle, but how they use the bicycle in the everyday. What that meant was that, you know, we thought that it would be about the routes people chose, the mobility it gave to transcend the limits of not being able to afford bus or tube. But it became in a way much more symbolic than that very often. The main theme that they pushed for the film itself was particularly about visibility and that the tension between the visible and the invisible is one that runs through a lot of discussion in migration but also other areas of urban life. That on the one hand... Some people, particularly migrants of long-standing, want to be recognised, want to be made visible. There's A long-standing campaign for Latin Londoners to have the Latin migrants recognised as an ethnicity or to have other particular ethnicities or religions. recognized, the politics of recognition is kind of quite understandable. But also the city is kind of valorized often precisely because people don't necessarily want to be subject to surveillance, want to be known, want to be made visible. So there's always a tension between a politics of recognition and a politics of visibility. And one of the themes that came through the project, I think, was that The bike is very much a symbol of freedom. One woman explained in an interview that we carried out about how she kept the bicycle in a special place that she could almost see as a symbol of her ability to move around the city, even though she didn't use it as much as we thought she might do. So that sense that we come to know, we come to dwell in a city, we try and make this strange, unfamiliar place familiar and homely precisely through ways of moving through it. The permeability of the city is part of 1 aspect of our security in the city. But that permeability isn't just about the instrumental nature of getting to work, getting to pick up the kids. That's part of the story. But in many ways it's much less a notion than thinking about the propensity of the city, the possibilities that the city offers, it kind of relates back to that thematic of freedom that is symbolic when we are thinking about making a home as much as it is instrumental and geographical. And so it was actually incredibly powerful in seeing the women's reactions to the film that that Ada described. And the film allowed us to kind of think differently about our own project, not only in terms of the gendered nature of it, but think about this interface between mobilities and migration in a more conceptual sense as well.

Speaker 2

Thank you. As you've both mentioned already, the collaboration culminated in the production of a film, which is available to watch in both short and long form online. I've watched it with you and I consider it very moving and and hopeful. Edda, to come to you, considering how we think about the mobilities Michael's mentioned at multiple scales, globally and locally, what did you learn from the process of the film's production? Was this the kind of outcome that you initially expected when you started the project? And perhaps you could share with us any kind of challenges you encountered that you'd be happy to share?

Speaker 4

What was really beautiful about the project was A lot of it was unexpected. we as researchers didn't go in saying, this is what we want to do and this is what the outcome will be. And so it was really a source of delight to encounter the unexpected together. Just to pick up on what Michael was saying about the yellow dress that people made, I mean, it started off with one person holding her shawl up to the breeze to symbolize the sense of freedom she felt when cycling. And through the iterations of our workshops, this was then turned into a traditional Kurdish dress that was reimagined for people to cycle in. And actually the woman who said, let's make a dress was also the woman who said, one day I want to cycle my bike to Tower Bridge and stand there and watch Tower Bridge open. And so I think what was really powerful was then seeing this dress that was collaboratively made, projected and inscribed onto these iconic London landmarks. And I think it's quite interesting thinking about that inscription alongside one participant saying, my bicycle is my support animal. And another participant saying, and actually this is kind of what I want to come on to, thinking about some of the structural and infrastructural issues faced by the women who took part in the project, that, you know, because there was nowhere to store her bike, God was looking after it. And she spent most of her days peering out the window to check that her bike was safe. insecurely locked against a drainpipe in her shared accommodation. But thinking about the scales, I first wanted to talk a little bit about gendered barriers to cycling. So a lot of London's cycling infrastructure is arterial. So if you look at where London's cycle routes are, they tend to go from zone 2 to zone 1 and serve most often people who are commuting into central London for work. And if you look at maps of where cycle racks are, again, they tend not to be so much in local areas. Research shows that women tend to cycle along more orbital routes based on gendered, socially reproductive labour. So women are more likely to cycle to local schools, to healthcare centres and grocery shops. So we're not very well served by those arterial routes. You can see that quite clearly in the data on gender and cycling in London. The majority of London cyclists are men. And this is something that we shared from our findings from the project with colleagues at Sustrans. So Sustrans is a charity that promotes active travel, and also with the Women of Colour Cycling Collective. One of the things that we really focused on was actually, whereas a lot of the existing literature that looks at promoting migrant women cycling focuses on migrant women as having some sort of deficit for not cycling or for not knowing how to ride a bike. The issue there is structural and infrastructural about how the city is designed to serve certain groups of people. So it really points to... some of the gendered and racialized assumptions that are made about why people do and don't cycle, and really highlight some of the more reductive approaches to simply encouraging people to cycle or seeing a lack of cycling as something on a deficit model. So the challenges of doing the project. So one thing that we were really keen on as the research team and the artist was being able to have this

sense of sharing, so being hosted in one another's home boroughs and home localities and inviting others in. So when we were choosing the locations, so a lot of the filming took place in parks, we thought, oh yeah, this is accessible. And we certainly found that our idea of accessibility did not cohere with others. So a lot of the time, so for example, when we turned up at Greenwich Park, we spent maybe an hour trying to get everyone in the same spot, sharing our locations on WhatsApp, and then also encountering the fact that the long traverses people are making from very peripheral outer ring boroughs where asylum accommodation tends to be, because it's also where housing in London is the cheapest, to say Greenwich Park or Victoria Park involved several buses and several changes in buses. So in this way, we as researchers put these quite difficult demands on our participants for saying, get to this place, please. And whilst when we were together, people were like, oh my God, it's great to be able to see a whole new part of London. That's something that we didn't necessarily think about. But what we did do to support that was we brought everyone an oyster card, which we pre-topped up ahead of each workshop taking place. Because I think one problem in academic research is that people tend to be reimbursed and not necessarily recognizing that participation has a high cost barrier prior to taking part.

Speaker 2

Thank you so much. It's really interesting to hear about how the relationship with the city can change. and the relationship between yourself as a researcher, the research team and participants can change and evolve throughout the course of the project. We know that living in a city where different cultures and lifestyles coexist and interact can and of course does lead to enrichment. How do you think that this research impacts the people involved in the project going forward and potentially could offer some space for further interdisciplinary research?

Speaker 3

One of the interesting things I think that came through in terms of the interdisciplinary is that we obviously worked with a wide range of approaches, a lot of quantitative data, a lot of qualitative data, ethnography, as well as a number of arts-based approaches. But one of the things that emerges, which is a truism, is that many of the claims that are made about London, London is open for business, it's open for investment, it's open to newcomers, it's open to new ideas. are also very easily falsified in many particular contexts. There's something very paradoxical about the city, there's something very paradoxical about London that very often one finds that the places where these forms of welcome are met with the most closed opposite reaction, those sites where there are intense forms of racism, racial violence and hostility to newcomers. quite often are the same spaces where new alliances, new ways of thinking, new ways of crossing boundaries between cultures, between people of different backgrounds emerge in the same space. So this sense that both opening and closing are paradoxically often found

in the same place, what matters is what generates the sense of opening and what generates that sense of sense of closing. I think it offered us new ways to think about how one combines different approaches to making sense of both migration and the city and urban change more generally. So even if we look at just the arts-based approaches we discussed, there was the film on with the bike project, which was not, it wasn't a record of the the way in which the Bike Project makes a difference to the lives of people, but it was more, as Ada described, it created a, the film created a space through which people's sense of living, moving through and dwelling in London evolved symbolically and practically as well as politically in a very gendered context. But we also worked, it comes back to the point about scales that we also touched on. When we worked on an estate, we worked, then another artist, Anoro Lorescu, To actually work with the local tenants association to think about what kinds of futures would make a difference to people living on the city, and we had a project with banners placed across the... across the estate for a month or so, showing, which kind of emerged from a series of workshops of people talking about how the estate might change in the future from the more utopian down to the more practical ways. So it comes back to this notion that if we think through the city at different scales, if we think through the city through different lenses, it means that we unpack different dynamics, which are all happening simultaneously. It's like a multi-layered form of life. And understanding those multiple layers help us to understand the paradoxes that emerge, the paradoxes that some spaces can be precisely spaces of conviviality and sociability as people make new worlds. But also those self-same spaces can become places of symbolic and actual violence, of exclusions of gender, race, migration, and other demographics. So I think what I would say comes out most powerfully is that the plurality of approaches that we've worked through is very helpful in generating an understanding of the multiple realities of everyday city life.

Speaker 2

That leads me nicely to a final question, if I may. Edda, I'll come to you first. What are your hopes for the future of the project and other initiatives that might have been sparked as a result of this?

Speaker 4

So I think I'll be the boring academic researcher first and start with the academic writing that we hope to write and to get out there from this project. So Michael and I are currently working on a paper about the Bike Project and what it means for seeking asylum in London to have a bike and what are the gendered realities of having a bike in London. Susanna, another colleague on the project, and I are also working on a paper that looks specifically at how we did the co-productive side of the work with the Bike Project and starting to explore some of the questions around whether co-production as a method and approach is adequately supported by higher education institutions and

whether it is a silver bullet or not. And as Michael mentioned, we're also working on a book based on some of our findings from the project overall. I think some of the nerdy, let's get writing things aside, I've had the pleasure of meeting with and spending time with the nine women that we worked with for the Bike Project piece of work multiple times since we wrapped up the field work over two years ago. So I think my greatest hope of the project is to continue some of those really meaningful relationships that we were able to build. in the time that we spent together and hopefully nurture them. I saw one of the women who took part in the Bite Project work quite recently, actually, and she shared that she recently got refugee status and is being joined by her husband in London. And to be able to hear that, I think, is the most beautiful thing. And in terms of sort of future initiatives, one of the things that I thought about a lot through this piece of work was how the system of asylum dispersal, which has been going since the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, really relates to the housing crisis. So I've been thinking a lot about how the system of asylum dispersal forcibly moves people to different parts of the country and different parts of the city. And I've also been thinking a lot about this in terms of the housing crisis, particularly in London, and thinking about how people who have secure legal status, who find themselves statutorily homeless, are being placed out of area beyond their borough and often beyond London, and starting to think a bit more about what those dynamics of churn mean for the management, to use the words, the state, of groups of people who are classed and racialized as other. So that's something I'd really like to take forward in terms of future research from the Bike Project piece of work.

Speaker 2

Michael.

Speaker 3

So moving forward, conceptually there are all sorts of leads that come from the project. I think that are exciting for me personally, but also draw on things that we've been talking about a while, that in work at Compass Bridget Anderson, we talk in detail about problematizing the question, who is a migrant? And thinking about how the tensions between mobility and immobility are quite often closely linked. In Bridget's work, she makes the point that if you go back to the Poor Laws, people were only eligible for Poor Law relief if they were stayed in a parish for at least 12 months. If they moved out of a parish, they were then not eligible for Poor Law relief. So it kind of, there was an obligatory immobility. And in that same way, one of the things that comes out of the bike project is this tension between, on the one hand, the state tries to immobilize and mobilize at the same time. People are both concentrated in particular places. They're almost forced to remain in particular places so that the state can keep an eye on them. But also they're forced into these incredible... forms of precarity that emerge from being shovelled around from one part of the country to another at a very short notice, as Ada

just described. So conceptually, this kind of interplay of what is mobile and what is immobile creates a different way of thinking about migration, and particularly migration in the city. Moving forward, I think that opens up all sorts of ideas. On the one hand, hopefully we'll produce a book of the project as well in the near future. But also there's a very practical dimension to this. We're still working with Camden. We're working with some of the NGOs on the ground, including that as Ada described from the bike project itself, but also some of the material we fed back into the London planning consultative exercises and held consultations with people from the GLA and the planners from the GLA. So in a sense, I think it follows work that is one of the strengths of Compass research historically, that it is both interested conceptually, particularly in things that come through an urban lens, but also tries to nudge at least slightly the ways in which some of the institutions think about migration and change and rapid change, the interface between gentrification, studentification in Camden as students occupy massive tower blocks in the south of the London borough of Camden. but also the forms of rapid turnover, that the population churn is produced by the sofa surfers, the migrants, and all sorts of demographics, gives a different way of thinking, I think, when policymakers come to consider how they create estates that are more neighborly, that deal with housing, not just as bricks and mortar, but places where people live. So hopefully there are some very practical aspects that come out from the research, both with folk who live on the ground, but also some of the institutions that are governing. That sense of both governing and living in the city is something that we hope to push towards something slightly more open.

Speaker 2

Thank you both so much for joining me in this really engaging conversation today. Edda, where can people go if they'd like to find out more about the project?

Speaker 4

You can find us on our website, opencitywarwick.co.uk. You can read about some of the work that we've done with the Bike Project, watch the film, but also read about our wider work, including our work with artist Natalia Orendon, who we worked with for the Estate Anatomies Project, and that's estateanatomies.uk.

Speaker 2

You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Delphine Bogie.

Speaker 1

And I'm Jackie Brodhead.