

Mobility Story: Paolo Costa

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Paolo Costa is a researcher at Fondazione Bruno Kessler's Institute for Religious Studies. He has already been on three Mobility Programs, the latest one has recently ended. All of them in Vienna, all of them somewhat different, but each one of them lived as a "precious incentive for mental mobility, intellectual dynamism".

The last experience – conducted in two institutions of the Austrian capital, the University and the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), “a Mobility within Mobility of sorts” – served the purpose, among other things, of closing a circle. “My main goal – the researcher observes – was to complete research work that had been started in the first two stays. The result is a book on the idea of ??secularization – or, as we would rather say in Italy, “laicism” – which I expect to complete by the end of the year. At the same time, however, I wanted to start exploring new horizons. I was bringing some ideas about the relationship between spirituality and mountain today and, after discussing it with colleagues from different geographic and disciplinary backgrounds, I was convinced that the project has potential. As soon as I finish the book, I hope I can immerse myself in this new intellectual adventure. ”

Paolo, you just finished your third Mobility. If you wanted to describe it, what does this experience represent for you?

I would start from the reasons that make you invest in a project that is called, not by chance, “Mobility”. I personally interpret the word and the experience of Mobility in the broad sense. Actually, what always happens to me when moving is that I experience a sense of total mobility. This happens both physically and spatially, because you actually move to another place, but also and above all in the metaphorical sense, as inevitably your way of thinking, your reasoning and your ideas become mobile.

And that is what the intellectual professions need, in an almost vital way, I would say: to explore, discuss, change perspective.

Inevitably, during the experience, the two levels, the physical and the metaphorical one, end up overlapping and becoming one. You move spatially, meet scholars coming from other contexts, they in turn in a new environment. The biggest benefit is that you end up incorporating new points of view and perspectives other than yours, which reading and research activity only would probably

never have unveiled for you.

The risk of getting somewhat curled up in our usual ways of thinking, not being able to see other ways, is always lurking. The mental jolt produced by Mobility dissipates this risk and opens new perspectives, offering new insights. And new inputs can come at any time, even just going to lunch with colleagues.

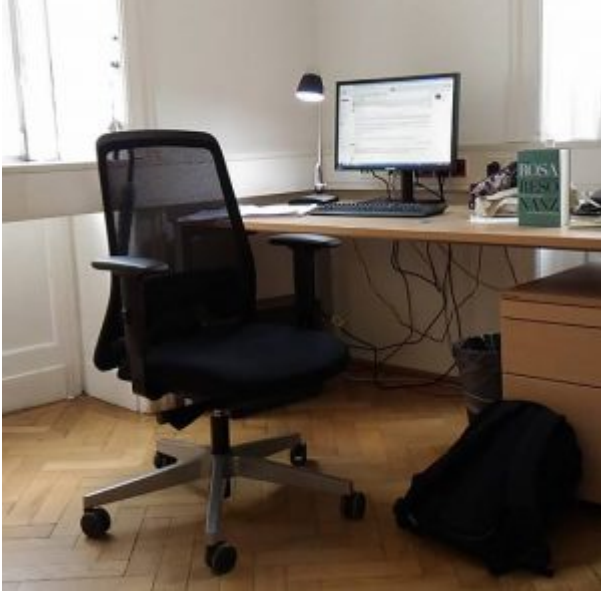
Is that why you chose to go on Mobility once more?

Also. This is my third experience, still in Vienna. The first two had proved to be very positive from many points of view and offered me, in addition to being able to exchange views with other scholars, that mental mobility I mentioned earlier.

In addition to mobility, there is also the stability of bonds. With time, work and perseverance, I have had the chance to build relationships that have progressively grown stronger. Going back to the same institution means becoming part of a community, a family. And these things matter. For this reason I always try to combine continuity and discontinuity in my stays in Vienna. The “setting”, the context, has to be a little familiar and a little unfamiliar. You have to feel at home, but also a bit out of your element. In my opinion this mix is ??the real secret to intellectual creativity.

The peculiarity of the latter Mobility, compared to the first two, is that I spent it at two institutions, both prestigious, but different. The feeling that has stuck with me is a further increase in “intellectual dynamism”, a kind of Mobility in Mobility. I had two offices in two different parts of the city. Different colleagues. Different styles of work, but the same level of hospitality and friendliness. Having... much easier. Without adaptation problems, also produ







What did you deal with during these months in Vienna?

In every stay, besides the injection of intellectual mobility, I always set specific goals for myself. This year I was trying to clarify my ideas on Religion Unmusicality. It is a beautiful English (and also German) expression that in Italian could be translated as religious insensitivity. It serves to describe the attitude of those people – and they are more and more in our society – who have no hostile feelings about religion but simply cannot understand what pushes other people to join a religion, to believe in its dogmas, and to participate in its rites. Let's say they do not have an ear for these things.

While in my previous project I was concerned with the decline of religion in modernity and secularization, in this Mobility I was mainly engaged with the origin of this metaphor of Religion Unmusicality, how people understand it, the uses they make of it and their compatibility with other visions of religious experience. Are all people who declare themselves insensitive to religion really so or do they do so only to be left free to experience their personal form of spirituality?

As you can see, I really closed a circle. Working on religious unmusicality gave me the inspiration to reflect on the outcomes of secularization and the real meaning of the alleged decline of religion in modernity. So, insights conceived in the past mingled with new interpretations, and the end of a project has opened up a new research thread that I hope to continue exploring over the next few years. Obviously, in order to perform such an acrobatic operation, it is necessary to exchange views with other scholars. Presenting and sharing the results of your work, especially if the feedback is positive, is a priceless aspect of our work. This productive closing of the circle made my stay in Vienna even more exciting.

How can an experience like this affect, if it does so, the life and work of a scholar?

The experience of Mobility, and the relationships that follow, has a profound effect on two levels: on the researcher who participates and, indirectly, also on the Foundation.

What happens, according to my own experience, is that time is used both to grow individually as a researcher and to create the premises to initiate possible institutional collaborations.

For a scholar to go somewhere else also means working toward earning that reputation that is the necessary condition to earn the attention of people you might be interested in collaborating with in the future. To do this, you need to make an effort so people in new environments get to know and appreciate you, perhaps even discrediting, it is useless to hide it, some stereotypes.

Obviously, it is a time-consuming process, and as I have said, having stayed several times in the same institution for my Mobility has certainly helped me achieve this.

In addition to this, there is a more or less direct “promotion” activity of your institute of affiliation: personal relationships are established, that are also useful to the Foundation.

As far as I am concerned, in my experience I have always tried to create the preconditions for discussion on some aspects and forms of know-how on which Vienna is very strong, such as self-financing, but also on organizational aspects or how to design the future. I think there may be a lot to learn. I would like and hope that a more structured institutional collaboration among the organizations that have worked for my Mobility will be started soon.

If you had to recommend the Mobility Program to a colleague of yours, what would you tell him/her?

I would encourage them to do it. It is an initiative of the Foundation that I have always found appreciable. Farsighted, I would say. As with any human experience, both positive and negative aspects should be taken into account. And like any other demanding choice, it should be backed by a strong motivation, and especially by the awareness that it will also be an opportunity to test oneself.

If you want to join the Mobility program, you need an exploration attitude. To use an image that biologists often use, mobility, dynamism, can be a survival strategy. But there are others, less expensive, such as staying in one’s comfort zone to defend oneself. It depends on one’s attitude. There are so many things to consider.

Then it is also possible that the people who created the Mobility Program had something more ambitious in mind, such as traveling as a boost to professional mobility for researchers. In an ideal context this goal would also be logical, but in a context of scarce resources as is the case for the Humanities, it is almost impossible to create new professional opportunities in such a short time. Most of the time we are satisfied with something less, which is, however, not little. In terms of collaboration and knowledge (including environments), Mobility is a great opportunity for growth, including professional growth. You just mature as a person, as a human being.

Then, as they say, there are no free meals. Everyone, of course, is called upon to deal with their own personal situations and to balance personal needs and the professional sphere, weighting their own choices based on them. Vienna, in my case, also had the advantage of not being a too far away destination preventing me from occasionally visiting my family for the weekend. This is crucial. It cost me some night train trips, but made the experience even more adventurous. It rejuvenated me. After all, the train is the same as it was when I was twenty years old when I did not have a penny!

Anything in the pipeline?

As I said, my immediate goal is to publish the book in which my multi-year research on secularization will come together. Soon after that I need to get something out of my reflections on Religious Unmusicality. My Center has opened a research project titled “Arguing Religion,” in which

my reflection on this particular strategy of accommodating spiritual plurality fits well.

In a wider horizon, there is the line of research on new forms of spirituality. Recently, reading the novel by Paolo Cognetti “The Eight Mountains” has convinced me that there is something significant to investigate in the relationship that people have with the mountain today. Trento seems to me the right city to try to bridge people’s experience and theory. Hope the project will be a successful one.

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