Mobility Revisited: The Illusion in Bangkok & Tokyo Transportation –

A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper argues against the traditional notion of mobility by reinterpreting it through three concepts: Margin of Indeterminacy, Governmobility and Lefebvre's Production of Space. The author chooses to compare the transportation of Bangkok and Tokyo based on direct experience and the city transportation's respective notability. The paratransportation and decentralized transportation in Bangkok allows the city to have a wider margin of indeterminacy than Tokyo. By that, people in Bangkok has other alternatives when a major transportation has an issue. Tokyo depends primary on its railway. Foucauldian governmentality argued that mobility is another way where the government governs over the people. Governmobility is a new form of authority through connections and the power to control mobility. While Tokyo has a rigid predesignated path for ones commute, Bangkok does not, implying a different level of bio-power. Hence, it is argued that Bangkok's mobility actually possesses more freedom than Tokyo's.

Keywords: *Margin of Indeterminacy, Govermobility, Production of Space, Mobility, Public Transportation*

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Introduction

In 2018, The European Union declared it the year of Multimodality. The importance of multimodality in the transportation system in the European Union is highlighted in many studies and the relationship between the multimodality and class mobility has come to a brighter light. As the name of the year pointed out, modality is rather multiple modes of transportation combined. The relationship between mobility and society can determine the state of the people's freedom. On one hand, mobility is the ability for one to travel in a shorter time at a lower cost. However, in some area with transportation disadvantage, this could lead to social exclusion that signifies social disadvantages (Lucas, 2012). According to Lucas (2012), transport disadvantages includes no car, high cost of fares, insufficient information, fear of crime and poor public service. Therefore, social capital and social networks or simply, life opportunity are inaccessible (Lucas, 2012). In short, one's mobility can determine the outcome of people's life and the one who control it has the power; the bio-power. Within this scope of definition, highly systematic transportation such as Tokyo would be among the best since it accommodates the riders. On the other hand, mobility is also about free-will; to travel anywhere, anyhow upon one's volition. Some believe the system in Bangkok is bad for mobility due to its disorganized nature that hinders its people from travelling. Hence, the system with a cost-effective travelling provides more freedom and mobility while the "disorganized" system presents a challenge towards independence.

However, this paper will argue by flipping the traditional narrative. The mere freedom one gains from mobility can turn out to be a constraint and the unmethodical transportation system can be seen as a form of freedom.

The reason behind the choice of comparing Bangkok and Tokyo is that Tokyo is always ranked among the city with the best transport mobility while Bangkok is always ranked as one of the worst transport mobility, not to mention its rampant traffic problem. These two metropolitan areas are comparable in term of size as both of them are mega-cities with population more than 10 millions. As they are metropolitan area, it also needs to channel people in and out of the area through public transportation on daily basis. In addition, as the author of this article had lived in both Bangkok and Tokyo (2019-2020), it is much easier for the author to gain living experience through the transportations in these cities respectively. As a result, the method of study is based on the experience of the author and an attempt to reinterpret freedom and constraint in mobility.

This article will explore this reinterpretation through three theoretical frameworks. It will go through the theoretical framework of margin of indeterminacy to examine the flaws of the highly formalized system and the strength of the undirected system (Fisch, 2018). The governmobility will examine the mobility's potential to impose constraint on the people; the bio-power in mobility (Bærenholdt, 2013). The Spatial Triads will be used to determine the production of space through mobility within the space of Bangkok and Tokyo. These three theoretical concepts are interconnected as it will expose the contradiction of mobility. While margin of indeterminacy shows the reality of the transport systems that are different from the ideal in the physical level, the governmobility shows it in mental

level resulting difference in the production of space. Lastly, this paper will debate whether the condition in these transportation's mobility is really freedom or constraint.

Margin of Indeternninacy

The margin of indeterminacy, understood in this article based on the study of Gilbert Simondon's concept by Fisch (2018) as, a measurement for the ability of the system to retain its performance while facing complications. The higher the retention, the wider the margin of indeterminacy is. The example provided by Fisch (2018), is the commuter-train system of Yamanote loop-line. During peak hour, the train is about 2.5 minutes apart from the next train. It has an additional 5 seconds to spare in each station. If it is delayed for 5 seconds over 29 stations, the cumulative deferral will be 2.5 minutes. This implies that if one train delayed for more than 2.5 minutes over this loop-line, the next train must be cancelled to make way for the delayed train. As a result of cancelling eleven-car train,[1] about 3350 people are left to cram themselves in the remaining trains. The cancellation of one train does not affect the overall train schedule. However, on the occasion of human accident, multiple trains would get cancelled resulting in a ripple effect throughout the system causing a massive holdup, if it is delayed for more than 15 minutes which is the minimum time for the transportation in Tokyo to issue delay certificate; reflecting the margin of indeterminacy of Tokyo extremely low from its lack of resilience.

The reason why the margin of indeterminacy of Tokyo is low, lies upon its transportation's system. The system in Tokyo is consists of companies and government-subsidy bodies on commuter rail companies such as but not limited to JR East, Keio, Toei and Tokyu. The railway network is the center of all public transportation and also the primary choice of travelling. Public bus hubs, for example, usually located next to the railway and service only around the district. However, the fare for the railway is more attractive for the user in Tokyo. While the bus cost 210 Yen, flat-rate per ride, the train usually started from 170 Yen (or 130 Yen on some line) covering a greater distance. The minimum hourly wage in Tokyo area is around 1000 yen since 2019. Therefore, it costs only around 20 percent of an hourly wage for one ride. All of these put a great reliance of mobility on the Tokyo's railway system. The sole system roundups the mass in one area. But since Tokyo relies on only this system to manage the flow of the people, it is vulnerable to sudden problem. A disruption could cause a ripple effect on its schedule and other transportations with the system of that size and responsibility.

On the other hand, in Bangkok, the margin of indeterminacy is the opposite of Tokyo. Bangkok has a lot of paratransportation to choose and does not exclusive to one system including motorcycle taxi, modified pick-up truck and the world-renowned Tuk-Tuk (Kakizaki, 2014; Sporzetti, 2018). The latest addition to this category is transportation via Grab application. Commuter systems in Bangkok is also in the hand of both the small private companies and government subsidized enterprise. Hence, the power of mobility is not concentrated on one mode of transportation. Moreover, the fare of transportation in Bangkok does not accommodate all class of people like Tokyo's. Prime Minister Prayut best illustrated the segrega-

tion of transportation in Thailand *"Rich people should pay to use expressway while poor people should use lower roads so there won't be congestion"* (Sereemongkonpol, 2021). As such, the rich is more likely to use the sky-train while the poor cannot afford it. As a result, the transportation segregates groups of passengers based on their financial status (Jenks, 2003). By that, it creates a parallel system of transportation for each class that help to reduce the congestion (Jenks, 2003). For example, the fare of the public bus starts from 8 Baht flat-rate on non-air-conditioned bus to 15-25 Baht. As for the BTS, it starts from 16 Baht to 59 Baht. While using the bus from Siam to Pak Nam will cost one around 20 Baht, it would cost 59 Baht for BTS (Thai Development Research Institute). The minimum daily wage is around 330 Baht or around 33 Baht per hour. Proportionally, only non-air-conditioned bus is comparable with transportation in Tokyo. The segregation is made through the price that sky-train could be as much as threefold more expensive than the air-conditioned and seven times for non-air-conditioned bus. Instead of using the Bangkok Transit System, a sky-train system (BTS), a cheaper option would be to use bus no. 2, 25, 508, 511 which their routes almost overlap the line of the BTS. Bus route no. 2, 25, 508, 511 share similar course with BTS for almost 20 Kilometers, more than half of BTS's route. The carrying capacity for each sky-train (four cars, 1000 people) and bus (80 people) in Bangkok are also much lower than metro (3350 people) in Japan making the effect of removing one train or bus out of the system minimal in Bangkok. By that, if one mode of transportation is unable to fulfil its duty for a specific time, this highly independent system can continue without any hindrance by having other modes of transportation fulfil its duty in the same line. Even if it cannot, the number of people affected by it is much smaller. With the price, the existence of paratransportation and the overlapping routes of transportation, the margin of indeterminacy in Bangkok is extremely high.

Governmobility

As the politics of the world prioritize more on territory than the people, the governmentality emerged as the way for the government to control its territory through the use of its apparatus (Foucault, 2008). By this, the bio-power emerged as a way to mobilize its people to defend not only the sovereignty but any threats to the government; from natural disasters to population shortage (Foucault, 2008). The government embedded its relation with the people. Within this perspective, governing through mobility is one of the ways to impose government's orders. Thus, Bærenholdt (2013) argues that the government operates through the administration of mobility while at the same time mobility is a way for the people to be overseen. Hence, governmobility is the new form of authority which govern through connections, individual's self-governing body and shaping technology and environment to control mobility.

With the notion of governmobility proposed by Bærenholdt (2013), we could observe that every state exert its power through the control of mobility at different extent. To one end, not giving any means to transport could prevent its citizen from gaining enough resources to resist the authority. On the other end, the authority is able to exert its control through mobility's regulation as well as organizing and controlling the transportation's joint. Within Tokyo, especially after the 1968 student protest,[2] the authority implemented transportation's regulation.

Tokyo does not only possess a huge system of commuter rail, but also connects with other systems which mostly overseen by the government. Everything from the parking lot to the interchange between transport system is to place a pre-determined, rigid route for the passengers. In doing so, there are maps of trains and complex systems of signs telling which specific train carriage to board and exit to go, one should take; even if it is not the shortest way confirmed by the mobile application.[3]

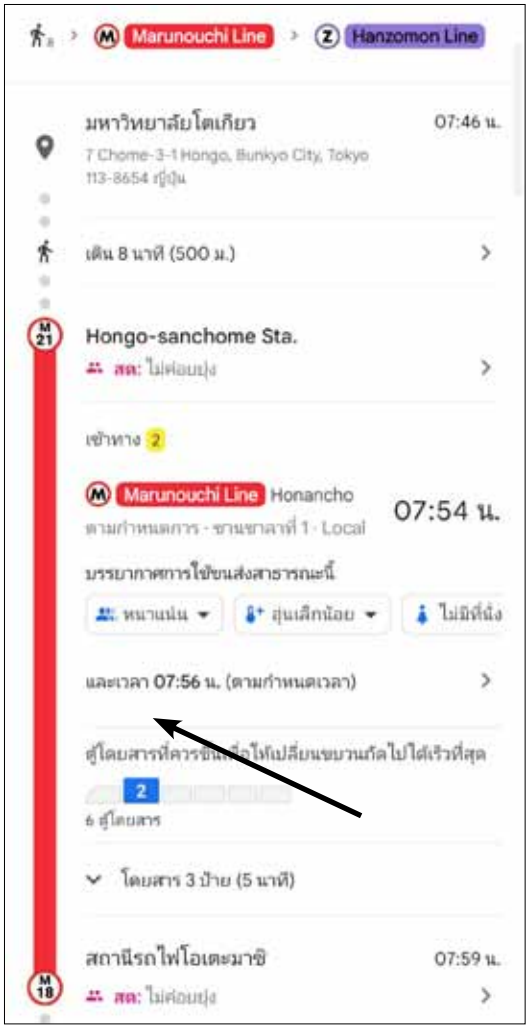

Figure 1. When one is using Google Maps application to find a route, it will automatically show that to go from Hongo-sanchome station to Shibuya station, one has to board train carriage number 2 for the convenience of changing a train at Otemachi station.

Its commuter pass even has its own pre-determined route of transportation.[4] For example, a commuter pass with route from Hongo-sanchome station to Shibuya station will have a predetermined route that one has to pass through Asakasa-mitsuke station through Ginza line. Actually, one can travel to Shibuya by changing at Otemachi station to Honzomon line as well. However, the system will detect the unfamiliar course when the pass touches the sensor. Therefore, if one travel outside the predetermined route, even for the same destination, one has to pay

extra for that. With all of these, the bio-power is formed becoming a subconscious for one to follow all of the sign and routes, allowing the authority to take full control of the connecting points; The perceived space which will be discussed later (the spatial practice). At the same time, there is a great number of crowd control patrols whom are deployed in and outside the station for occasions such as festivals and state ceremonies to mobilize the mass accordance to the authority's direction.[5]

Figure 2. The poster illustrates the specific train carriage one should board for the greatest convenience such as being close to the exit, escalator and/or connecting trains.

On the other hand, Thailand has a different level of governmobility because of its decentralized urban transportation system. Because the choice of transportation is diverse and independent, its margin of indeterminacy is wide. The absence of integration in the transportation system makes it harder for the authority to possess this bio-power; hence, another type of governmobility. However, Thai authority, instead, modifies the transportation disadvantage to solve its problems. The expensive fare is unattractive to the working class. As a result, the fare segregates the people in the system more efficiently by having middle class taking

the BTS and the working class taking the bus, pushing them out of the mobility and the social capital come along with it by making a barrier at the connectivity. Decentralized system also makes it harder for the service provider to track down the passenger. As we could see from the failure of the Mangmoom card (all-in-one transportation card), each system remains independent from each other which means that they cannot track the transfer passenger beyond the station. On the other hand, with the pre-determined commuter pass and IC card in Japan, it is much easier to track the passenger as the system is all linked. All in all, we could observe that each state utilizes the governmobility in its own way to achieve the goal whether by regulating it or having none of it.

Lefebvre's Production of Space: Spatial Triads

According to Lefebvre (2004) in the production of space, we have to consider three elements: The Conceived Space (Representation of Space), Perceived Space (Spatial Practice) and Lived Space (Representational Space). The conceived space is the ideal representation of space that the hegemony aims to have and the abstract space it created. It is about the knowledge of that space and the ideology that shape the spatial practice of that space. Perceived space is the spatial practice. The routine of the human body that appropriate the space for their use (Lefebvre, 2004). In this case, it is about the urban realities, the route and network which connected to places. This leads to the reproduction of social relationships and the creation of ideal spaces according to the user. Lastly, the lived space is the real experience one encounter in daily life and is filled with cultural memories. At the same time, this space challenges the dominant ideology through memories cultivated from all the encounters. All of these make the social space a social product of the relation in society.

Within Lefebvre's production of space, we could find that the difference in mobility also affect the production of space as the ideology is reproduced through mobility. Indeed, the ideology of the hegemony is imbued within the infrastructure to achieve its ideological goal (Adey, 2006; Humphrey, 2005). In Tokyo, the conceive space is made by the authority who holds the most complete vision of the map. Its goal is to control its population and the flow while minimize the resistance through daily symbolism.[6] By that, it tries its best to create spatial practice as a daily routine for one to follow the designated route. The memories of practice turn into common sense for one to follow the path making it easier for people to be guided (Bissel, 2014). The repetition lead to the formation of spatial practice which allows the government to produce order in the society through controlling the connections and putting constraint in the mobility. Hence, it could be said that the Japanese government could control the spatial practice of its people to a great extent, since the spatial practice is a mode of social relation's reproduction that expects to continue (Lefebvre, 2004). The lasting success of controlling people in Japan produces the social relation between the government and its labors; powering by both facilitating them to work and discouraging them from political gathering. Therefore, the state of Japan controls the mode of production to a great extent by controlling the labour since the government is the owner of the map while the people are the one who has to follow the map. This shape, the living space, the

real experience is normalized by spatial practice. The lived space is the oppression disguised as mobility due to the normalization. It becomes normal for one to travel by train in the determined route which is the constraint for one's freedom. In short, it could be said that the state of Japan successfully controls the spatial practice that allows it to create the social relation and social space at its will.

On the contrary, Thailand has different ideology compared to Japan as it uses the governmobility for another purpose. The ideology of infrastructure of Thailand is to segregate the people from those who financially able and those who are not able to access the mobility. It has created the parallel system in the transportation of Thailand in which contradict with the conceive space. The conceived space of the authority of Thailand is the smooth connection of transportation called the train-boat-bus project under one system with rail system as the centre similar to Japan but it is far from realization (Sukkhaarun, 2016). The conceive space is still on the map but is undermined by the complex urban layer of Bangkok. This also affects the spatial practice of the people as people perceive the current system as confusing due to the overlap between services and the system. The spatial practice also affects social mobility as it enlarges the transportation disadvantage of certain groups of people developing the social relation between the middle class and the subaltern, embedding the segregation and systematic oppression of their positive freedom in the social space and social practice (Thailand Development Research Institute, 2019). As a result, it differentiates the lived space greatly from those of Japan. The reality of mobility in Thailand is not in the hand of the states but rather on the paratransportation throughout the city making them the owner of the map since they are the one who knows each layer of the city and able to guide the people through the complexity (Sopranzetti, 2018). This greatly shapes the lived space as it is the reality everyone living. The lived space in Bangkok is rather disorganized from the aforementioned overlaps allowing other than the state to have an active role in the politics of mobility. On the other hand, it is much harder for the state to achieve its hegemony in controlling and suppressing the mass since the people's mobility is still autonomous due to the extreme self-sufficiency of the system. However, this also save a lot of budget for the state from trying to facilitate the people by organizing the system.

Conclusion: Freedom or Constraint

The answer of whether the mobility in both cities is freedom or constraint lie upon everyone's viewpoint since it is subjected to one's determination and one's perception on whether these abstract spaces are a freedom or a constraint (Negishi & Bissel, 2020; Fujii, 1999). As this paper shows us about the effect that mobility could produce, it is necessary to acknowledge that mobility is a vital part in our daily life and play a vital role in governing the people. However, to only acknowledge the surface value of mobility is to ignore the underlying notion of freedom and constraint. This essay compares the mobility in Bangkok and Tokyo and found out that the existence of paratransportation in Bangkok, with its decentralized structure, greatly diminish mobility in the traditional sense but increase the freedom of choice for user as the government has less resource to implement control on its people. The margin of indeterminacy shows the resilience of transportation

in Bangkok compared to the cost of efficiency in Tokyo. The governmobility shows the extent that the government could control the mass through connections. Tokyo has great system that allow ones to travel far but in a very controlled manner compared to Bangkok which the choice still exist with substitute and independence. These lead to the formation of lived space through the spatial practice. The differences of the system reflect the ideology in transportation of each city. Tokyo seems to aim at controlling the mass through connections while Bangkok aims at separating the mass into groups defined by financial status. These create the memories of practice that embedded within the people producing the relation between the people and the state. Nevertheless, mobility is subjective. The choice falls on the people to feel the oppression in the system of mobility or to find the freedom within the inefficiency. In freedom, constraints existed and vice versa.

Endnotes

1 According to Fisch (2018), it is 10 cars but author found out that it is 11 cars as of 2020.

2 All open space for gathering was diminished to prevent student from being able to gather in the public without the control of the police. Tokyo University of Education also relocated and changed to be Tsukuba University as well.

3 Author's experience.

4 Author's experience.

5 Author's experience in Sumidakawa fireworks festival, Tsuchiura fireworks festival and the coronation ceremony.

6 According to James C. Scott cited in Sopranzetti (2018).

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