

MOBILITY ACCORDING TO NOSTRADAMUS



What might Nostradamus predict about the future of mobility if he were alive today? As we attempt to divine what the future has in store, the quatrains of history's most illustrious soothsayer suggest we would be better off looking inward than trying to read the stars.

The mobility of students and scholars between centres of learning predates both the nation-state and the university. It can be argued that 'international' existed before 'national'. Aristotle of Macedon was a student of Plato in Athens (approx. 368 BC), perhaps one of the first foreign students on record. More recently, post-Cold War global stability has been fundamental to the international higher education sector's success. With mobility now in the balance, pondering its historical influences and trajectories might better inform our anticipation of its future.

THE PROPHET AND THE PLAGUE

In 1555, Nostradamus predicted that after a period of disturbance, "the world becomes smaller, for a long time the lands will be inhabited peacefully, people will travel safely through the sky over land and seas." Pre-pandemic, there were conservatively over seven million students abroad, as well as countless academics, practitioners and road warriors engaging in foreign climes. Despite occasional roadblocks since mass mobility became 'a thing' (SARS, MERS, 9-11, Asian Currency Crisis, BSE, Black Monday *etc* – most of which, by the way, Nostradamus had a lot to say about), the sector has done scant introspection and had little motivation to revisit the value proposition of this successful endeavour.

But, "good advice comes too late." Nostradamus variously predicted "diverse plagues upon mankind, ... the great plague of the maritime city, ... great calamity through America and Lombardy." With COVID-19, mobility has truly been visited by a plague of Biblical proportions, as if Samson himself brought the pillars of the sector crashing down upon the academy, seduced as he was by the foreigners

from Philistine. The borders are closed, the ships idle, and mobility devastated.

The sector is awaiting a return to normalcy, but like a second marriage, this may represent the victory of hope over experience. Are we designing the new normal, or merely waiting for the return of a recent and nostalgic past?

NOSTRADAMUS THE EXCHANGE STUDENT

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Experience begets behaviour. Reliance on historical precedent is perhaps our best recourse to divine how mobility will return, and it is instructive to consult the experts. Michel de Nostredame was born in France (1503) into a Jewish family that converted to Catholicism prior to his birth; his quatrains are rife with Biblical imagery. He entered Avignon Université, which then closed during an outbreak of the plague. When lockdowns were rescinded, he became a poster boy for mobility and resumed PhD studies at Université de Montpellier, but was soon kicked out due to his part-time work as an apothecary, or hobby pharmacist. He worked variously as an apothecary, astrologer, physician, seer and finally a prolific author in serial publications. His opus *Les Prophéties* is a collection of obscure quatrains predicting the future. He denied that he was a prophet, rather that he was merely reading signs and basing predictions on 'judicial astrology'.

Today's academy is similarly prone to reading signs that might be omens, or those we choose to read, nuanced by whatever hope or despair we are disposed to. We make informed predictions supported by what we know to be true, what we think we know to be true, and what we hope to be true: mobility is universally missed; it is important,

transformational and fundamental to internationalisation, research and the academy; internationalisation is now embedded deeply into the core mission of higher education; economies demand international experience and intercultural skills; governments need to support international education; technology is part of the solution; we will build back better. If all of this were true, and if it were shared currency with senior levels of our economies, governments and institutions, we should have little to worry about.

PRAGMATIC PROPHECY

But we are worried. A reckoning over globalisation has been brewing since before COVID, and the pendulum was already swinging against our open world order. Democracy was in retreat, authoritarianism everywhere rewarded, walls erected, ships of homeless, tired and hungry pushed back to sea, and even cosmopolitanism contained strands of nationalism. COVID then nationalised supply chains, weaponised interdependence and in some ways can be seen as a logical conclusion, an exclamation mark on the global liberalism enjoyed for 30 years. This may be temporary.

Negativity is why people consistently underestimate the progress of humanity. Bad things happen suddenly and with immediate effect: the Spanish flu, World Wars, the roadblocks, COVID merely the latest. Pessimism fosters caution. There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in. The instinct to focus on problems is sound, as it means things often get fixed.

Optimism argues that things are not falling apart. Good things are diffuse and

happen incrementally, in spurts. Progress is not a steady march: no Obama, no Trump; no Trump, no Biden. Curiosity, youth and wanderlust will prevail, science will win, memories will lapse, and history will repeat itself better.

Pragmatism suggests that mobility will return, changed but recognisable. But still, we shouldn't waste the pandemic. There are things we should be talking about. Despite being a core tenet of internationalisation, mobility has been historically elitist. From the Grand Tour to the Semester Abroad, mobility has built programmes for the demographically privileged and conversely further privileged them by their participation.

WHY MOBILITY?

We also need to answer the question of "Why mobility?" for the unconverted. It is only since World War Two that nation-states have actively supported structured mobility through programmes such as Fulbright. Events from 1985–1995 (eg, Reagan, Thatcher, perestroika, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War) relaxed borders, encouraged mobility and trade, and raised the speed and trajectory of globalisation. It is not coincidental that this same period saw the birth of Erasmus (1987) as part of an EU trade-bloc-and-nation-building exercise, the creation of NAFTA trilateral consortia (1993) for the same purpose, the repurposing of the term 'internationalisation' as the academic antithesis to globalisation (1994), and the birth of mass mobility and export education. It became imperative to support mobility to create globally literate populations, interculturalised

workers and interconnected economies. Universities may have always been international institutions, but globalisation altered the means and manner of government support, altered attitudes towards revenue, expenditure and international experience, and branded education as an export service rather than a social good. But with the recent weaponisation of interdependence, global economic recovery will increasingly restructure along regional lines with more local supply chains, and these will colour future mobility.

Plato argued that it is the role of the state to educate its citizenry, to educate each individual "for the place and work to which he is best fitted." Aristotle chimed in that "the state should educate its citizenry to play their parts in society." Our sector will not likely dictate how mobility will re-emerge but it can greatly influence its emergence.

Given the scarcity of original texts and the ambiguity of the quatrains, few have accurately translated Nostradamus' 16th-century French, allowing great latitude in interpretation. Many still believe the prophecies, although only in hindsight can they agree on what Nostradamus predicted. With mobility in the balance, our sector can similarly interpret the signs using judicial astrology, or we can make plans based upon what we know. We can watch passively as predictions come to pass, or we can help author a novel future for mobility marrying experience and core principles with perhaps some inevitable baggage from the pandemic. "Let those who read this verse consider it profoundly."

— RANDALL MARTIN