



'Emancipation' in Digital Nomadism vs in the Nation-State: A Comparative Analysis of Idealtypes

Blair Wang¹ · Daniel Schlagwein² · Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic³ · Michael C. Cahalane³

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Abstract

Academic and public debate is continuing about whether digital nomadism, a new Internet-enabled phenomenon in which digital workers adopt a neo-nomadic global lifestyle, represents 'real' emancipation for knowledge workers—or if it is, instead, the opposite. Based on a field study of digital nomadism, and accepting a pluralist approach to emancipation, we analyse the 'emancipatory project(s)' that digital nomads engage in. This analysis, following Weberian idealtypes, employs a tripartite structure: unsatisfactory conditions (what people want to overcome); emancipatory means (actions taken); and emancipatory ends (desired outcomes). We critically compare digital nomadism to the traditional descriptions of emancipatory projects in nation-state contexts, as found in prior literature, using the same analytical framework. Juxtaposing these idealtypes, we discuss similarities and differences and analyse their inherent assumptions, logics and ethical stances. We conclude that digital nomadism generates an emancipation that is very much 'real' for digital nomads, whose experience cannot be disregarded, but with a 'postmodern' ethos that is at odds with modernity and its ethos originating from the Enlightenment.

Keywords Digital work · Digital nomadism · Future of work · Emancipation · Emancipatory projects · Ethics · Critical theory · Idealtypes · Post-nation-state · Field study · Qualitative research

Introduction

Digital nomads are an emerging group of typically well-educated digital knowledge workers who abandon traditional life trajectories, corporate employment and settled living in nation-states to pursue a lifestyle of global travel and flexible work/life. They often say do so to "escape the rat race" and the "9-to-5" (i.e. employed corporate work) and to achieve

outcomes like "freedom" and "self-realisation" (Mancinelli, 2020; Reichenberger, 2018). These aims correspond to what "emancipation", or "emancipatory projects" have long sought to achieve. However, from the vantage point of traditional theories on emancipation that almost always assume societies in nation-states to be the relevant context and frame of reference (e.g. Welzel, 2013), digital nomads' pursuit of liberation and self-actualisation may not qualify as "emancipation". In this study, we examine the nature of the new type of "emancipation" found in digital nomadism and suggest a pluralist notion of emancipation that envisions how people might attempt different pathways to seek liberation.

Debates about emancipation have been central to scholarly discourses on critical theory (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010) and ethics (e.g. Brieger et al., 2019). Emancipation is a broad concept but generally refers to "a process" of change through which "individuals or groups" seek to "overcome repression" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) and achieve a "free existence" (Welzel, 2013). In other words, emancipation is about how workers and other people may overcome domination, repression and oppression (e.g. traditional powers, capitalist exploitation) and achieve better living conditions for themselves. Digital nomads—as we will discuss

✉ Daniel Schlagwein
schlagwein@sydney.edu.au

Blair Wang
blair.wang@universityofgalway.ie

Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic
dubravka@unsw.edu.au

Michael C. Cahalane
m.cahalane@unsw.edu.au

¹ Lero, University of Galway, Galway, Ireland

² The University of Sydney Business School, Australia, Abercrombie Building (H70), Office 4066, Cnr Abercrombie & Codrington Sts, Darlington, NSW 2008, Australia

³ UNSW Sydney Business School, Sydney, Australia

below—likewise seek emancipation in a similar spirit. However, what they see as repression, what they seek to achieve and what actions they take are forming a very different path.

Digital nomadism is a promising potential avenue for (digital) workers' emancipation. Digital nomadism involves knowledge workers mobilising the Internet and new ways of working digitally to escape corporations (the capitalist “rat race”), traditions (societal expectations) and nation-states (spatial restrictions) (Schlagwein, 2018a). Digital nomadism has been described using terms such as freedom, flexibility, escape, emancipation and revolution (Aroles et al., 2020, 2022; Schlagwein, 2018a). This positive view regards digital nomadism as a form of self-actualisation and liberation—and consider that “*true freedom resides in being able to travel the world by becoming a digital nomad, having no boundaries or borders to abide by, while being able to live and work from anywhere in the world*” (Adams, 2017, p. 1).

Digital nomadism, however, is not without criticisms and challenges. Digital nomads have been accused of leveraging their own privileges at the expense of host nations and local communities (McElroy, 2020; Thompson, 2018) and of not making meaningful progress towards improving collective labour conditions (Birtchnell, 2019; Thompson, 2018). Digital nomads may not even find meaning and liberation for themselves—“*in a world of digital nomads, we will all be made homeless ... whose utopia is this, when people have to sever emotional links and leave where they grew up to find dependable work?*” (Harris, 2018, p. 1).

The current, ambivalent state of knowledge and sense-making on digital nomadism as a form of emancipation or liberation, or a form of oppression (or, depending on vantage point, perhaps both), is well summarised here: “*Digital nomads are not interested in collective, socialist-inspired alternatives, nor do they engage in political campaigns to reclaim the city. Instead, they quit, choosing to assume a life of individualised precarity in the name of freedom. An unanswered question, suited for further research, is whether this pursuit of freedom actually generates a real emancipation or something more oppressive*” (Hunter-Pazzara, 2022, p. 184).

Given our limited knowledge and this theoretical challenge, we ask the following research questions: (1) *What is the process and nature of emancipation in digital nomadism (compared to the traditional conceptualisations of emancipation in the nation-state)?* (2) *What are the assumptions, logics and ethical stances implied in emancipation in digital nomadism (compared to the traditional conceptualisations of emancipation in the nation-state)?*

In the remainder of this paper, we address these research questions by developing and comparing idealtypical (in Weber's [1904] sense of an archetype representing a stylised idea for theorising purposes) conceptual models of emancipation in the nation-state context and emancipation in the digital nomadism context. While the former is well

described in existing literature, which we reviewed for developing a model, we derive the latter from our multi-year, global, qualitative field study of the emerging phenomenon of digital nomadism that included ethnographic participant observation and interviews with individuals including digital nomads, community members, policy makers and other stakeholders. From that larger research program, the particular study in this paper reports on relevant findings from 25 such interviews. By contrasting the two idealtypes, we reveal similarities and differences in the emancipatory processes, discussing their underlying assumptions, logics and ethical stances. We also discuss the implications of these findings for our theories of emancipation and emancipatory projects and for understanding digital nomadism and the effects of digital work.

Nomadism

Traditional Nomads

Nomads have historically predated settlers. Although still continuing to coexist with settlers and their nation-states, they have become a small minority. However, before the invention of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, the nomadic “hunter-gatherer” lifestyle was predominant for most of humanity. Humans roamed the land in small groups, hunting and foraging for food—our predecessors were all nomads (Iberall & White, 1988).

Pastoral nomads, emerging after the hunter-gatherer nomads, were groups of people who moved from one place to another in search of pasture for their livestock. Pastoral nomads still existing today, such as the Bedouins, Fulani, Mongols, Tuaregs and various others, have been extensively studied by anthropologists (Dyson-Hudson & Dyson-Hudson, 1980; Lees & Bates, 1974; Salzman, 1967). While pastoral nomads continue to live in this manner (Babiker, 1985), the rise of societies and cultures focused on settled farming, agriculture and, later, industrialisation has considerably diminished the mobile abilities needed for nomadic lifestyles and greatly elevated the prominence of settled societies (Konagaya, 1995; Schlagwein, 2018b). Other people have lived, or are living, in similar nomadic patterns for various reasons (Konagaya, 1995); for example, for work (e.g. travelling performers), cultural identity (e.g. Romani people) and historical developments (e.g. the Jewish diaspora) (Boyarin & Boyarin, 1993; Quicke & Green, 2018).

Nomadism and settled living often stand at odds. Nomads have been marginalised, misunderstood and pressured to adhere to the majority's settler norms (Engebriksen, 2017). The transient nature of nomadic lifestyles contradicts notions such as “land as property” (the idea that land can be owned and is not a common resource) and the foundational

principles of nation-states (Boyarin & Boyarin, 1993; Engbrigtsen, 2017), which originated around the fifteenth century in Europe and have, today, become global standards. Nation-states and their administrations frequently grapple with understanding and accommodating nomadic cultures. For example, the Romani people have faced persistent discrimination in many countries (Marin, 2022). Similarly, the establishment of the Soviet Union saw its leadership tightly controlling nomadic Muslim populations (Edgar, 2003). From Native Americans to the pastoral Tutsi and Bedouins, nearly every nomadic group has encountered some form of constraint and antagonism (Gilbert, 2007). In short, nomadic and settled living are in conflict both conceptually and, often, in real life; with settlers having widely prevailed.

Metaphorical ‘Nomads’

The figure of ‘the nomad’ has often been used as a conceptual or poetic metaphor by authors, scholars, and philosophers. ‘The nomad’ evokes imagery of “*the tension between mobility and stasis, in terms of freedom and security, and the fantasies of an independent, free-floating existence*” (Engbrigtsen, 2017, p. 43). Notably, Deleuze and Guattari (1980) introduced “nomadology” as a social theory, contrasting the *noma*, representing the spirit of nomadic peoples with the *polis*, symbolising the spirit of the ‘apparatus’ of the territorialised (nation) state. The authors explore the logics within these contrasts. However, for them, *noma* is more a broad metaphor for certain social patterns of territorialisation and de-territorialisation rather than an actual, specific cohort of people that can be directly observed, interviewed, and written about in situ (as we do here)—the broad metaphor is conceptual, not empirical.

Metaphors or imagined (future) “nomads” have also been notable in writings that theorise the relationship between sociological concepts and emerging technology. The electronic networks of telegraph and telephone lines, which we now view as forerunners to the Internet, inspired Marshall McLuhan and Alvin Toffler. They described the future world and its social networks as a “global village” (McLuhan, 1962, 1964) in which social interactions transition from physical to electronic spaces, all accessible from one’s home or an “electronic cottage” (Toffler, 1980). Similarly, in a book aptly named *Digital Nomad*, Makimoto and Manners (1997) foresee a future where “*for anyone who can obtain the information they need to do their job down a telephone line or over a radio or video link, and who can deliver their work in the same way, nomadism will be a lifestyle option*” (Makimoto & Manners, 1997, p. 16). While these were once only conceptual ideas and envisioned futures, they now seem to be rather prescient, if somewhat dated, descriptions of current digital technologies and societal trends.

Digital Nomads

Cohorts of “neo-nomads” or “global nomads” have emerged over past decades. In studies of anthropology, travel and sociology, they are generally considered different to “traditional nomads” but are nonetheless legitimate “nomads”. These new nomads are enabled by and reflect the increasing mobilities of modern societies (globalisation) (Sheller & Urry, 2006), ranging from the global “Goa trance” and rave scene to perpetual travellers engaging in hospitality work worldwide for the sheer sake of being “on the road” (D’Andrea, 2006, 2007).

More recently, a rapidly growing group of these neo-nomads has emerged: digital nomads. During the 2000s and 2010s, digital nomadism has gradually transformed from an imaginary future (Makimoto & Manners, 1997; McLuhan, 1962) to an actual lived social practice (Schlagwein, 2018b). Digital nomads, the term widely used by these nomads themselves and in writings about them, is a lived practice, not a mere conceptual label. Digital nomads have typically transitioned from a life characterised by settled living and employed work to a life of nomadic living whilst engaging in freelance, entrepreneurial digital work (Schlagwein, 2018a). Digital nomads, often in localities attractive to independent travellers, typically work in the emerging class of coworking spaces (Cook, 2020). The exact number of digital nomads is not known since they have often travelled on tourist visas and present themselves to border control authorities as tourists rather than nomadic workers (Thompson, 2021). A commonly-quoted estimate of digital nomads is the tens of millions (Jiwasiddi et al., 2024; Lufkin, 2021), which, if even approximately correct, would mean they approach the number of traditional nomads, estimated to be 30–40 million (New Internationalist, 1995). The lifestyles of digital nomads may be permanently nomadic or alternate between periods of nomadic and settled living (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). In this way, the pattern of ongoing movement delineates digital nomadism from other kinds of migration such as lifestyle migration and economic migration (Holleran, 2022; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023), though it is indeed “a category with fuzzy borders” (Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023, p. 2). The manner in which digital nomads engage with spaces, places and practices is characterised by ‘unsettled’ liminality and fluidity (Prester et al., 2023), which—whilst not identical to that of traditional pastoral nomads—is nonetheless a clear point of differentiation of digital nomads from migrants and expats.

Whilst the literature on digital nomadism is still relatively new and emerging, a common claim is that digital nomads appear to reject or seek to leave behind corporations, traditions and nation-states. They seek to escape from the conventional “settled” knowledge worker life with its monotonous work routines (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021) and

workplace relations where “someone else ... would control [your] time and freedom” (Aroles et al., 2020, p. 121). The prospect of a far-off retirement is seen as “a hedge against the absolute worst-case scenario: ... becoming physically incapable of working and needing a reservoir of capital to survive” (Ferriss, 2007, p. 47). Digital nomads seek to liberate themselves from such constraints (Reichenberger, 2018; Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021).

This idea of freedom is central to digital nomadism (Reichenberger, 2018). While the concept has not yet been deeply explored in the literature on digital nomadism so far, frequent references are made to “freedom”, “liberation”, “self-actualization”, or “emancipation” as a central goal or even a defining feature of digital nomadism (Aroles et al., 2020, 2022; Hensellek & Puchala, 2021; Schlagwein, 2018a; Shawkat et al., 2021). Digital nomads seek freedom from common temporal, spatial, and bureaucratic restrictions (Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020), aiming to escape the “9-to-5” grind (Ferriss, 2007), “corporate cubicles” (Wang et al., 2020) and “the rat race” (Schlagwein, 2018a).

The literature questions the impact of digital nomadism and its ethics. The primary concerns revolve around the host nations of popular digital nomad destinations, often chosen by nomads for their relatively lower cost of living (Birtch-nell, 2019; McElroy, 2020; Thompson, 2018; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). The literature raises concerns about the privileged political and economic status of digital nomads and their contribution to gentrification (McElroy, 2020; Thompson, 2018). In this context, digital nomadism has ties to the legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism (McElroy, 2020; Thompson, 2021). Yet these views are not universally shared, with scholars from host nations often, interestingly, highlighting the positive impacts on their communities, such as the economic and knowledge influx (Anom & Kusuma, 2019; Demaj et al., 2021; Gede et al., 2020; Rakhmadi, 2021; Sukma Winarya Prabawa & Ratih Pertiwi, 2020). In fact, many host nations—including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Portugal, Spain, Sri Lanka and Thailand—have introduced or announced ‘digital nomad visas’¹ to attract nomads (Burgen, 2022; Chang, 2022; Hutt, 2022).

Whether nomadism is liberating for the nomads themselves is also debated. Some suggest that, for the digital nomads, digital nomadism does not provide the economic freedom or security sought: “while digital nomads may have the freedom to spend their time in countries affordable for them, this comes with a downward shift in their financial status as they cannot rely on full-time employment” (Thompson, 2018, p. 23). Cook (2020) identifies an inherent

“freedom/discipline paradox” (p. 356): digital nomads must curtail their freedom in some life areas to maintain the self-discipline and productivity needed to support their lifestyles. Yet, as noted above, others argue that digital nomadism offers genuine opportunities for emancipatory outcomes (Hensellek & Puchala, 2021; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021).

Emancipation

Reasoning About Emancipation

‘Emancipation’ is a broad concept interpreted differently by various philosophers, thinkers and scholars throughout history. While we cannot offer an exhaustive review of the history of all emancipatory thinking, we provide a succinct overview and identify prominent concepts from the literature that allow us to develop a framework to analyse different conceptualisation of and ideas about emancipation in diverse contexts.

The intellectual foundations of the notion of emancipation are based on the effort to apply rationality; emancipation is based on reasoning. Originally, the term ‘emancipation’ comes from the Ancient Roman concept of *ex mancipium* (Latin ‘away from ownership’), referring to the relinquishing of authority over someone else, for example the removal of slaveowners’ authority over their slaves (Biesta, 2008). The Latin term became prominent during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, notably with Immanuel Kant’s famous statement about the Enlightenment—German, “*Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*” (Kant, 1784), typically translated as “*Enlightenment is the emancipation of man from a state of self-imposed tutelage*” (Shearmur, 1988). This established a grounding of the concept of emancipation within the Enlightenment and the project of modernity, where “the grand theme of modernity is human beings taking responsibility for their own destiny, that is the conscious programming and production of society” (Pieterse, 1992, p. 23). In other words, the underlying reasoning of emancipation was that of Enlightenment thought, of modernism (Blühdorn et al., 2022), entailing the rejection of unjust authority, privilege, ignorance and superstition (Parsons, 1942).

From this Enlightenment tradition, the general concept of “emancipation” has seen many historic turns towards various related concepts including “liberation”, “participation”, “empowerment”, “self-determination” and other semantically similar terms; Pieterse (1992) provides a detailed overview of these historical turns in semantics and the shifts in underlying reasoning implied with each. Of course, no one has definite authority on language and, hence, all these terms have been used by people in different ways. These terms, generally, refer to a struggle of particular individuals

¹ Based on our research program on digital nomadism, the authors of this paper have been asked for policy advice on digital nomad strategies and visas.

and groups to achieve better conditions and freedom from societal norms, economic and political oppression, or other restrictive forces, for example, workers’ emancipation, the emancipation of slaves (e.g. Abraham Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation), the emancipation of oppressed religious groups (e.g. the United Kingdom [UK]’s Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829) and the emancipation of women (e.g. suffrage) (Scott, 2012).

The presence of these diverse related concepts does not, however, imply the absence of efforts to develop a theory of emancipation, in general, for all people and all times. Notably, Karl Marx contributed extensively to this effort of formulating a type of emancipation that applied to all. In Marx’s reasoning, the distinct concept of “political emancipation” (the equal status of individual citizens relative to the state) is to be differentiated from “human emancipation” (German *“sein für sich selbst”*, i.e. self-determination). According to Marx, political emancipation serves as a (the) means to attain human emancipation: *“It was in no way sufficient to ask who should emancipate and who [is to] be emancipated. It was necessary for the critique to ask a third question: What kind of emancipation is involved?”* (Marx, 1843, p. 215). He further stated that *“only when man has recognized and organized his own forces as social forces so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of political force, only then will human emancipation be completed”* (Marx, 1843, p. 234).

From this perspective, the universal idea of “emancipation” seeks to counteract oppression and exploitation; the ultimate objective, then, is human emancipation—for all human beings, everywhere. In other words, the expected consequences of successful emancipation would not only include improved living conditions but also an outcome akin to what Marxist theory would call “self-determination” (Kryukov, 1996), Erich Fromm would call “self-realisation” (Fromm, 1961), and Maslow would call “self-actualisation” (Maslow, 1943)—overall referring to the notion of achieving autonomy and reaching one’s full potential (Hammershøj, 2009).² As Christian Welzel proposes in his “human empowerment framework” theory of emancipation (Welzel, 2013), such outcomes would be assumed to be generalised for all people everywhere, not localised to a particular, privileged group. Here, emancipation is considered within fundamental assumption that each society is organised into its own version of “the state” as ruling or governing authority that

imposes order and regulation. This is the frame of reference of the grand effort towards human emancipation (Welzel, 2013). Notably, we may observe, this inherently assumes settled living within the state, not nomadic living outside of or between states.

For our study’s analysis, and consistent with the existing literature, we use the word “emancipation” in a broad sense, defining it as *“a process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions”* (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 432) and aim to live a life *“free from domination”* (Welzel, 2013, p. 2). Essentially, emancipation refers to how people (notably, workers) can surmount domination, repression, and oppression (e.g. stemming from traditional powers or capitalist exploitation) to lead liberated, emancipated, self-actualised lives.

Digital nomads, based on their testimonials, our analysis and the reference sources cited, are seeking “liberation” and “self-actualisation” and, hence, it stands to reason, they seek “emancipation” in the wider sense as stated above. However, *prima facie*, what digital nomads consider repression, what they seek to achieve, and the actions they take to liberate themselves diverge significantly from, say, “the struggle of the industrial worker [class]” in the worldview of Marx; and yet also from the “emancipative values” based on Enlightenment philosophy and reflected in the worldview of Welzel. Essentially, then, although emancipation is a concept with a distinctive meaning, it remains a broad concept that warrants further investigation. Specifically, the stark apparent contrast—between the emancipatory aspirations of digital nomads and established views on emancipation from Kant to Marx to Welzel—necessitates an exploration of pluralistic approaches towards emancipation, which is essential to the argumentation of this paper, and which is further outlined below.

Emancipatory Project(s)

As described above, a direct genealogical link exists from the broad contemporary concept of emancipation back to the Enlightenment and the project of modernity. From Immanuel Kant (Kant, 1784) to Christian Welzel (Welzel, 2013), the totality of all these efforts, is therefore often referred to as a single, universal, intellectual–political project for all humanity: “the emancipatory project”. This modernist agenda aims to secure for people the right to think, act, express themselves, and associate freely (Young et al., 2021). It is not “a” but “the” “emancipatory agenda of equality, empowerment, and democratisation” (Blühdorn et al., 2022, p. 2).

However, this view of emancipation, grounded in the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment and the project of modernity as described above, is not without criticism and objections. These arise from pragmatic concerns about

² While beyond the scope of this paper, there are other meanings of the term ‘self-realisation’ which go beyond the generalised meaning to which we are referring in our argumentation here. We point the interested reader to the following references for further elaboration about those alternative meanings, particularly in relation to ‘self-realisation’ vis-à-vis ‘individuation’: Simondon (1964) and Stiegler (2012).

how “the” emancipatory project could actually work universally. For example, the question is raised as to whether “the” emancipatory project establishes a world where “*the one to be emancipated is ... dependent upon the intervention of the emancipator, an intervention based upon a knowledge that is fundamentally inaccessible to the one to be emancipated*” (Biesta, 2008, p. 172) (i.e. as if “someone knows better”). Other criticism may arise when we philosophically examine “*the exclusions of modernity [and] the dark side of the Enlightenment*” (Pieterse, 1992, p. 23), particularly when coming from various schools of thought that could be described as “postmodern” or “postmodernist” in a broad sense (Brosio, 1994). These include proto-postmodernism (Brown, 1995), anti-modernism (Burrell, 1988) and “post-structuralism linked to postmodern ethos” (Fox, 2003, p. vii): that is, generally pointing to issues or shortcomings in modernist ideals. In other words, the point is raised that emancipation can be based on different kinds of reasoning, not only conventional Enlightenment or modernist reasoning. Finally, criticism arises of the rigidity of the very assertion of a single emancipatory project as “the” emancipatory project, as it overlooks the dialectical relationships between different iterations of that supposedly singular emancipatory project (Blühdorn et al., 2022; Haderer, 2021).

When considering the issues with a single “emancipatory project” as outlined above, a pluralist view seems to be more appropriate, that is, multiple emancipatory projects (Haderer, 2021). Alvesson and Willmott (1992) sees such as “*micro-emancipation, in which attention is focused on concrete activities, forms, and techniques that offer themselves ... as vehicles for liberation*” (p. 446).

For our study’s analytical purpose, we endorse this pluralistic and inclusive view and see emancipatory projects as “*context-specific, historically informed, [and of a] contingent nature*” (Haderer, 2021, p. 10). Emancipatory projects may have different means and ends, may run concurrently and/or may even be divergent from one another (Haderer, 2021). This more contextual and relativist approach allows us to analyse and assess the reasoning process for each class of emancipatory projects, for example, in the nation-state and in digital nomadism, on its own merits instead of pre-judging them from a universal and absolute position (i.e. we take an analytical, not ideological, stance).

To be clear, although this pluralist notion of emancipation does not preclude the possibility of wider ideals, it allows for various contextualised emancipatory projects each with its own scope and pathway. In this study, it is important to note that we recognise both “*the virtues of emancipatory microprojects*” as well as the danger that “*an overreliance on local projects of emancipation ... might leave virtually undisturbed the vital sources of oppression associated with the laws and principles of capitalism, historically and culturally anchored gender stereotypes, and the domination of*

professional and managerial ideologies” (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, pp. 448–449).

Emancipatory (micro-)projects, such as those in digital nomadism, whilst possibly aligning with these wider ideals in some ways, they may not in other ways. By discussing these projects separately, our study draws attention to the potential and limitations of emancipatory projects, as found in digital nomadism.

Tripartite Model of Emancipatory Projects: Unsatisfactory Conditions (UCs), Emancipatory Means (EMs) and Emancipatory Ends (EEs)

Given that emancipatory projects may not be entirely uniform, for the purpose of our comparative analysis below, we developed a tripartite model to present the trajectory and reasoning process of any emancipatory project.

Existing models of (micro-)emancipatory projects exist but our study found that they were already too specific in terms of their nature and assumptions. Huault et al. (2012), for instance, draw on the work of Jacques Rancière to develop a model of emancipatory projects in which “*emancipation is triggered by the assertion of equality in the face of institutionalized patterns of inequality; it works through a process of articulating dissensus, and it creates a redistribution of what is considered to be sensible*” (p. 22). While their model is compelling, it assumes a specific, narrowly-defined type of emancipation (i.e. as a struggle for equality against inequality) that excludes many other types. In another proposal, Thomson (2020) draws on postcolonial theory to develop a model of emancipatory projects where “*actors working from marginal positions use mimicry to ‘make possible’ their invasion of spaces from which they were previously excluded*” (p. 501). This model is again compelling but also assumes a very specific, narrowly-defined type of emancipation (i.e. as a struggle of the marginalised against invasion and exclusion) which is not applicable to other types.

However, a rather universal aspect of emancipation is the two aspects of ‘emancipation from’ (past or current constraints) and ‘emancipation to’ (a better future) (e.g. Berlin, 1969; Blühdorn, 2022; Laine & Kibler, 2022). It appears convincing that there must be some ‘emancipation from’ (inequality, exclusion, oppression, etc.) and some ‘emancipation to’ (equality, inclusion, self-realisation, etc.) as it is undisputed that emancipation is about change. A second universal aspect of emancipation is the distinction of “emancipatory means” and “emancipatory ends”, as per Agnoli (2002). Not only must the ‘emancipatory ends’ or ‘emancipation to’ be defined but also the (change) process of working towards these ends via means (actions).

Based on the above points, we conceptualise emancipation as generally seeking to address unsatisfactory

Table 1 Tripartite model of emancipatory projects (study’s analytical framework)

Concept	Definition	References
Unsatisfactory conditions (UCs)	Repressive status quo against which individuals or groups struggle, which they seek to change or from which they seek to escape	Berlin (1969), Blühdorn (2022), Laine and Kibler (2022)
Emancipatory means (EMs)	Patterns of resource mobilisation and emancipatory actions	Agnoli (2002), Blühdorn (2022)
Emancipatory ends (EEs)	The outcome of emancipation, the desired ends: less restrictive and less oppressive conditions	Berlin (1969), Agnoli (2002), Blühdorn (2022), Laine and Kibler (2022)

circumstances (UCs) (repressions, restrictions or oppressions that people want to overcome) via emancipatory means (EMs) (actions taken) to achieve emancipatory ends (EEs) (desired outcomes). This combination of concepts are selected as they apply widely and allow differentiation of the various types of emancipation (specific emancipatory projects) within a shared wider framing (emancipation as a general concept). This tripartite structure for analysing emancipatory projects is summarised in Table 1.

For a classical example, we consider the emancipatory actions of the working class: to overcome capitalist exploitation (UC), workers fight through unionisation and worker protests (EM) to achieve fair wages and better working conditions (EE). This would be one example of an emancipatory project, but many others can be identified.

While the above review of “nomadism” and “emancipation” does not entirely answer our research questions and indicates that the literature has not entirely addressed them either, this foundational understanding of “nomadism” and “emancipation” provides us with the necessary conceptual foundation. The proposed tripartite model of emancipatory projects enables the analysis and comparison of different emancipatory projects and trajectories. We use it as a conceptual tool for our analysis, with a detailed unpacking of (idealtypical) ‘emancipatory projects’ in digital nomadism (based on a comprehensive field study) and for reference, comparison and discussion, with an equivalent analysis of (idealtypical) ‘emancipatory projects’ in the nation-state (based on the literature review). Our study’s method is discussed next with the analytical findings then presented.

Research Method

Idealtypical Analysis

In this study, models of emancipatory projects are developed using Weberian idealtypes (Weber, 1904). Our analysis reasons about social conditions or phenomena articulated as abstractions, that is, “idealtypes”, and emphasises certain characteristics, elements and perspectives. Per Weber’s German term “Idealtypus”, “ideal” in this context does not

means “optimised” or “perfect” but “related to an idea”. Our analysis is, therefore, a kind of archetypal analysis (Stoker et al., 2023). It is agnostic to any specific theoretical framing. It is not aligned with, for example, Jungian “archetype” psychology.

Specifically, our engagement focuses on: (1) the *idealtypical* emancipatory project within the nation-state; and (2) the *idealtypical* emancipatory project associated with digital nomadism. These idealtypes are what we mean by the terms “emancipation in the nation-state” and “emancipation in digital nomadism” in this study. In this approach, our reasoning navigates through abstractions rather than strictly adhering to “mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive” taxonomy in which every concrete instance would neatly fit. The approach is based on qualitative and interpretivist analysis rather than quantitative and variance-based statistical analysis. In other words, we acknowledge that many cases are found of individuals living life somewhere between the idealtypes of ‘the nation-state’ and ‘digital nomadism’, that is, at the periphery of the idealtypes rather than at the core. Examples of these cases include workers who engage in location-independent digital work within a nation-state, for example, freelancers and entrepreneurs (Daniel et al., 2017); dual citizens who alternate their time between two fixed locations; retired ‘grey nomads’ who travel during their retirement; those working-from-home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Richter, 2020); and employees of international corporations who travel regularly, for example, “fly-in, fly-out” workers (Dorow & Jean, 2021). We acknowledge variations on the political entity of “the nation-state” and the sociological concept of nationhood, such as microstates, supranational unions, spheres of influence, regional fraternity, unitary vs federal states, empires, devolved governments, etc. (Dadabaev, 2021; Elazar, 1997; Frankman, 1997). However, by engaging with idealtypes based on “the nation-state” and “digital nomadism” rather than with specific cases between these two extremes—that is, the unit of analysis being the idealtype rather than the individual cases or specific instantiations—we can more clearly examine the logical reasoning of the idealtypical emancipatory project in each of these two settings and thus address our research questions.

The process of our analysis is as follows. Our knowledge about what constitutes the idealtypical emancipatory project in the nation-state, as summarised in the next section, is derived from the existing literature as ample studies have addressed this topic. The section is constructed as a narrative literature review, citing references as necessary to elucidate the idealtypical emancipatory project within the nation-state. Subsequently, our understanding of the idealtypical emancipatory project within digital nomadism, as discussed in the section following the one below is derived from our empirical data.

Literature Review (Analysis of Emancipation in the Nation-State)

Our study's literature review, used to analyse emancipation in the nation-state, is presented as a narrative literature review developed using a hermeneutic approach to a literature review (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

We began our hermeneutic circles (Gadamer, 1960) by reading more recent texts on emancipation, such as Christian Welzel's book on his human empowerment framework theory of emancipation (Welzel, 2013); a recent special issue on emancipation in a sociology journal (Blühdorn et al., 2022); and business ethics studies on the related concept of emancipatory entrepreneuring (Haugh & Talwar, 2014; Pergelova et al., 2021). We identified foundational philosophical works and social theories, such as those by Hobbes (1651), Kant (1784), Marx (1844), Berlin (1969) and Habermas (1986). By reflecting on the conceptual relationships between the recent works and the foundational philosophies/theories, we developed an initial working knowledge of how the concept of emancipation has developed (implicitly) within nation-state settings.

We next turned our attention to mapping our initial working knowledge of emancipation to our tripartite structure, re-reading the above works with sensitivity towards unsatisfactory conditions (UCs), emancipatory means (EMs) and emancipatory ends (EEs). Based on a draft version of these UC/EM/EE clusters, we then embarked on further reading/re-reading of related contemporaneous works, such as those by Weber (1921) on bureaucracy; Piketty (2013) on capital and inequality; Graeber (2018) on "bullshit jobs"; Zuboff (2019) on surveillance capitalism; and Nycyk (2020) on digital serfdom. While these works do not relate directly to emancipation per se, they provide additional understanding of the social conditions around the changing nature of emancipation in light of digitalisation and globalisation, specifically critiquing the current status quo of emancipation in the nation-state. From these contemporaneous works, we further identified a diverse range of sociological matters of relevance to the emancipatory project in the nation-state. These range from the meaning of song lyrics in *The Internationale*

(Cloud & Feyh, 2015) and critiques of global neoliberalism (Hursh & Henderson, 2011) to current pressing issues such as job displacement related to generative artificial intelligence (e.g. ChatGPT) (Verma & De Vynck, 2023) and the emancipatory values implied in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020). All these materials are integrated into our narrative literature review to provide a relevant and illustrative overview of emancipation in the nation-state. This does not define emancipation in a proverbial vacuum but instead engages with the social conditions in which emancipation in the nation-state has developed, evolved and been criticised in its current form.

Having outlined some key ideas from our narrative literature review, we later present the details in the "Emancipation in the Nation-State" section, structured according to UCs, EMs and EEs that constitute the emancipatory project in the nation-state.

Empirical Material (Analysis of Emancipation in Digital Nomadism)

Our empirical material, used to analyse emancipation in digital nomadism, is based on interviews with digital nomads and other stakeholders, obtained from an interpretivist, qualitative field study (Locke, 2011).

To collect this empirical material, we travelled to multiple popular and notable digital nomad destinations: Bali in Indonesia; Taipei in Taiwan; Tallinn in Estonia; and Helsinki in Finland (see Table A3 in Appendix A for more information about these locations). In each location, we interviewed digital nomads and other stakeholders (e.g. local community members and government representatives), and engaged in participant observation (e.g. in digital nomad coworking spaces and at events).

Our fieldwork comprised five international field trips, during which we observed and interacted with numerous digital nomads and staff working in coworking spaces, cafés and other locations, interviewing 25 of them (including 18 digital nomads and 7 others).³ To protect their privacy, pseudonyms are used for the purpose of our study. The full details of these individuals, with their pseudonyms, are documented in Table A4 (in Appendix A).

We conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions derived from a predefined list of general topics, aiming to elicit detailed and meaningful responses. Following the principle of interaction between researchers and subjects (Klein & Myers, 1999), our interviews involved

³ The study reported in this paper is part of a larger research project, funded by the Australian government, investigating multiple different aspects of digital nomadism. The larger study involves more locations and interviews than are reported here; however, its scope is broader than this paper on emancipation.

follow-up questions on specific topics that emerged during the interview, in response to interviewees’ comments, thus inviting interviewees to expound on any interesting or unexpected experiences or concepts. More information about the topics involved in our interviews is documented in Appendix B.

Using a data-analytical approach akin to a purely inductive method (Gioia et al., 2013), we began by identifying interesting ideas and naming them (giving them a code name) and then merging similar ideas (codes) mentioned by various interviewees. We undertook this coding based on our interpretation and understanding of the interview transcripts, resulting in first-order codes (open codes). In line with Gioia’s methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), these first-order (open) codes were then grouped into second-order (conceptual) codes, with these abstracted into third-order (theoretical) codes based on our tripartite model of emancipatory projects.

The data structure,⁴ depicted in Fig. 1, presents a traceable trail of evidence from interview quotes to conceptual abstractions, that is, second-order (conceptual) codes and third-order (theoretical) codes which form the building blocks of our tripartite model of emancipatory projects. While our analysis is inductive at the level of first-order (open) codes, we then transition to an abductive approach. This involves pattern recognition (Locke et al., 2022) within the interviews, spanning and reflecting on the existing literature, as well as abstracting from our findings to lead to the idealtypical models of emancipatory projects.

With the overview of the data structure of our empirical material presented, it is later described in detail in the “Emancipation in Digital Nomadism” section, structured according to UCs, EMs and EEs that constitute the idealtypical emancipatory project of digital nomadism.

Emancipation in the Nation-State

The conceptual model of emancipation in the nation-state is depicted in Fig. 2. We next describe each component, starting with “rule of tyranny” (unsatisfactory condition 1, UC1).

⁴ Our data structure notably includes several in-vivo codes (Manning, 2017), indicated with «*guillemets*» in Fig. 1, to emphasise that the wording here is not some kind of ‘scare quote’ but instead drawing attention to the authenticity of these concepts—coming from the actual vocabulary of our interviewees. In other words, we reassure readers that “[t]his is what the informants told us. We’re not making this stuff up” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 23).

Rule of Tyranny (Unsatisfactory Condition 1, UC1)

The first unsatisfactory condition identified in the literature, especially by Welzel (2013), is the rule of tyranny, where the powerful dominate the powerless. In this setting of tyranny, workers have no protection at all for their personal safety and property. As Welzel (2013) describes:

From the dawn of our species until recently, most people lived in poverty and insecurity, and their lives were short. Worse, with the onset of civilization, people were subjected to overlords. ... Only recently did this trend begin to reverse itself. The first signs occurred with the English, Dutch, American, and French revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ... These liberal revolutions brought a game change in history: tyranny, although it continues to exist, is no longer safe; in fact, it is receding at an accelerating pace. (Welzel, 2013, p. 230)

Although this absolute tyranny seems anachronistic in some modern settings, overcoming it remains pertinent as the starting point for emancipatory action in human societies. As Welzel argues: “when universal freedoms have little utility, little value, and no effective guarantee [i.e. are not backed by the rule of law], a society is trapped in a cycle of human disempowerment: ordinary people have little control over their lives and their society’s agenda” (Welzel, 2013, p. xxiv). Although simply protecting someone from the rule of tyranny alone may not seem sufficient to constitute ‘emancipation’ for most readers—a proverbially “low bar” to set—this step is the first towards any kind of emancipation situated in the context of the nation-state (Zdravković, 2021). Indeed, the prospect of reverting to the rule of tyranny remains a clear and present risk, reflected, for example, in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal towards “peace, justice and strong institutions” (United Nations, 2020).

Capitalist Exploitation (UC2)

The second unsatisfactory condition that we identify is capitalist exploitation which has historically entailed the manipulation of property rights to stake surplus division strongly in favour of capital owners and against workers (or labourers). This condition works well for capitalists (i.e. owners of the “means of production”) but not for workers selling their time and labour. This is the condition that Marx (1844) calls “the economic relationship of exploiter and exploited” (p. 62). As Blühdorn (2022) explains:

Referring to capitalist industrial society, Marx and the post-Marxian tradition saw labour, the enslaved industrial working class, as the primary subject of the

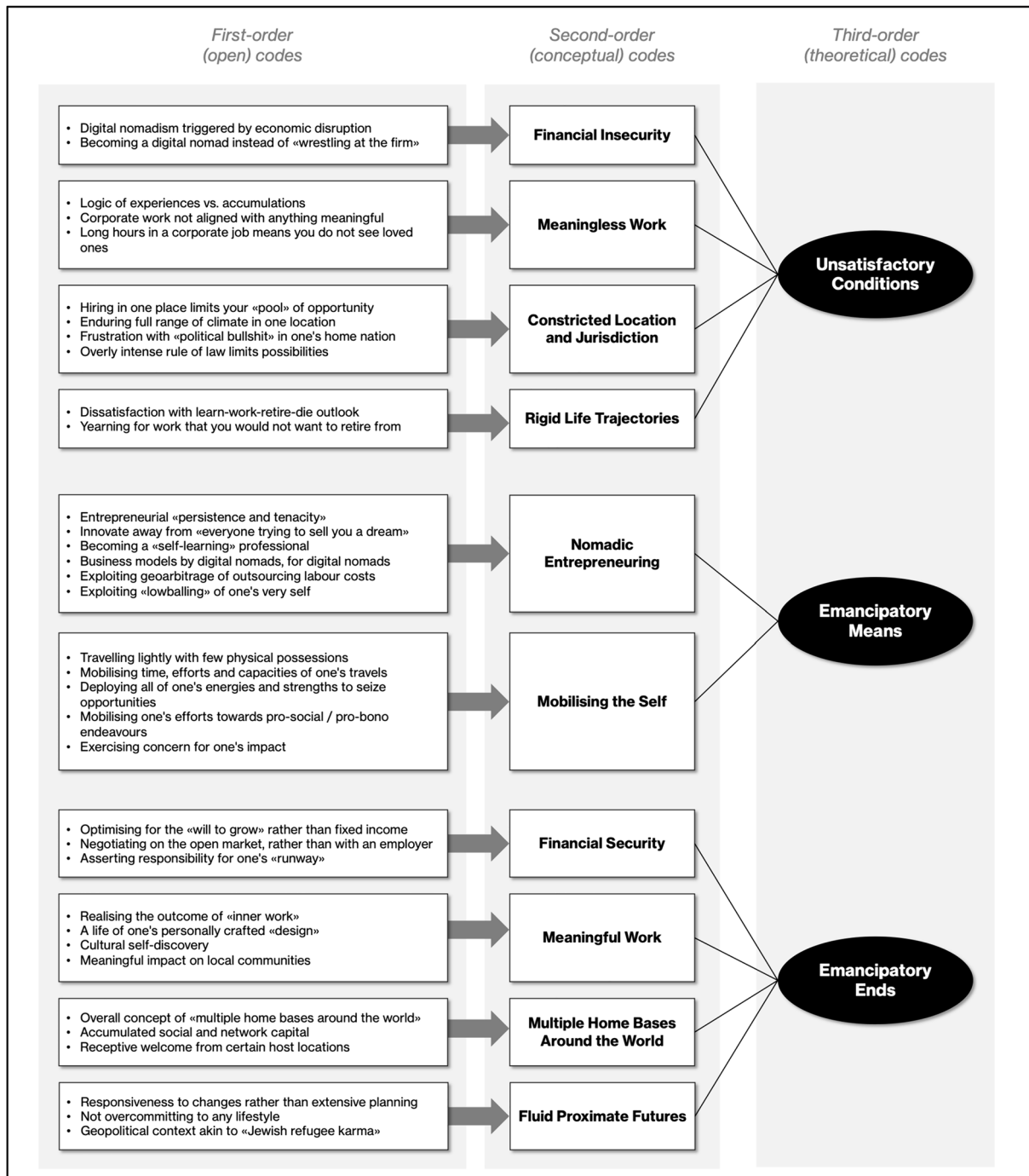


Fig. 1 Data structure of empirical material

emancipatory project, constituted by the material conditions of industrial capitalism. Its claim to autonomy implied, in the first instance, the liberation from, that is, the struggle against, the domination, exploitation and oppression by the owners of capital. The formation of a new class consciousness, the ability to see through ideology and false consciousness, the acquisition of capabilities for political organization and collective

action as well as the development of an ethos of solidarity and collectivity were the formative dimension of this emancipatory project. (p. 36)

Marx's concerns about capitalist exploitation have not been entirely resolved. As highlighted more recently by authors such as Thomas Piketty, conditions of capitalist exploitation tend to manifest to the extent that free-market

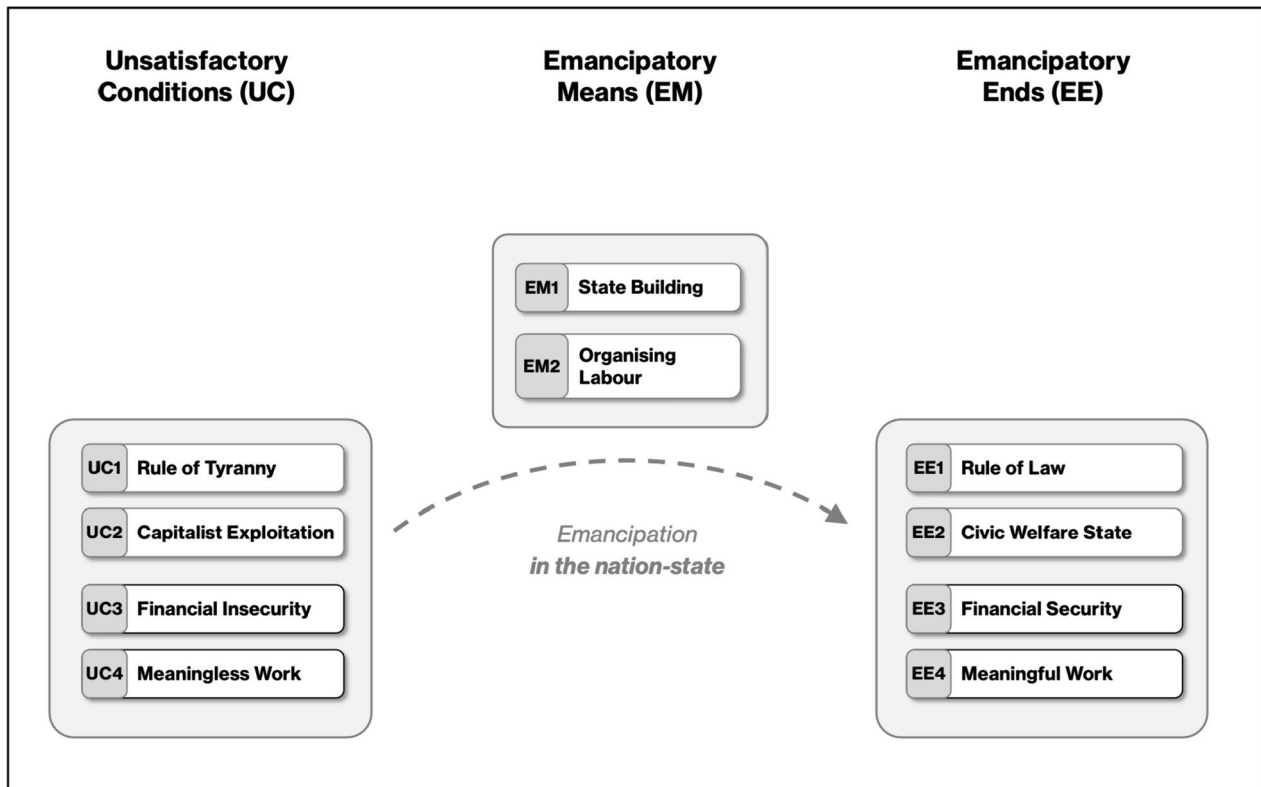


Fig. 2 Conceptual model of emancipation in the nation-state

economies are concentrating wealth in the hands of ever-wealthier asset owners (Piketty, 2013). An argument is also proposed about the relative inequality not only between those within a nation-state, but also between nation-states; that:

at present, those who ‘have nothing to lose but their chains’ are not the Western industrial workers enjoying a good deal of social protection, but the innumerable have-nots among the peasantry and the urban sub-proletariat of the Third World (Wertheim, 1992, p. 260).

Trying to resolve capitalist exploitation remains at the forefront of contemporary thinking, for example, in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal to “reduce inequality within and among countries” (United Nations, 2020).

Financial Insecurity (UC3)

The third unsatisfactory condition visible in the literature is financial insecurity. Although conceptually related to capitalist exploitation, financial insecurity refers specifically to the experience of not having enough accumulated wealth or reliable income to ensure one’s survival. A further deconstructed definition is provided by Ranci et al. (2021):

Though there is no consensus on a specific objective measure of insecurity, a few dimensions of financial insecurity regularly appear in existing measures ... we identify three main dimensions: (1) exposure to temporary poverty as [the] result of income downward volatility; (2) financial strain of the households; and (3) incapacity of households to meet their financial obligations and consequent[ly] their over-indebtedness. (p. 542)

Financial insecurity is entirely possible even when the rule of tyranny (UC1) and capitalist exploitation (UC2) are seemingly resolved, for example, due to unstable business cycles in the modern global economy leading to recessions (Mankiw, 1989) or due to technological changes that displace jobs, ranging from the Luddites being displaced by industrial equipment (O’Rourke et al., 2013) to ChatGPT displacing marketing copywriters (Verma & De Vynck, 2023). Depending on the countermeasures taken in the respective nation-state, the COVID-19 pandemic was such a crisis (Emerson et al., 2021). In addition to capitalist exploitation, financial insecurity remains a central unsatisfactory condition, for example, being represented in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal of “decent work and economic growth” (United Nations, 2020).

Meaningless Work (UC4)

The fourth unsatisfactory condition identified in our study in the nation-state is that of meaningless work. In the context of emancipation, the meaninglessness of work has been associated with Marx's concept of alienation (Marx, 1844), regarding the material conditions of work that may dehumanise individual workers (Sharma, 2016). A related contemporary concept is that of so-called “bullshit jobs” (Graeber, 2018):

Mark is Senior Quality and Performance Officer ...

Mark: Most of what I do—especially since moving away from frontline customer-facing roles— involves ticking boxes, pretending things are great to senior managers, and generally “feeding the beast” with meaningless numbers that give the illusion of control. (Graeber, 2018, pp. 46–47)

Recent business ethics research draws attention to different factors that may exacerbate the perceived meaninglessness of work. These factors may include the objectives of the work, for example, regarding its (lack of) purpose and impact on others (Martela, 2023); the form of the work, for example, regarding job design, task identity and the variety of tasks (Michaelson et al., 2013); and the “management of meaning” at the level of organisational leadership, organisational culture, policy design and normative control (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).

To overcome these UCs, emancipatory projects involving a range of EMs are undertaken in the nation-state.

State Building (Emancipatory Means 1, EM1)

State building involves working towards a democratic and bureaucratic rule of law and justice (Welzel, 2013) and creating the foundation of a society ruled by *de jure* institutions instead of *de facto* power. This foundation effectively forms a “social contract”, which requires citizens to abide by the authorities of their nation-state (Hobbes, 1651). As Berlin (1969) writes:

Since justice demands that all individuals be entitled to a minimum of freedom, all other individuals were of necessity to be restrained, if need be by force, from depriving anyone of it. Indeed, the whole function of law was the prevention of just such collisions: the state was reduced to what Lassalle contemptuously described as the functions of a night watchman or traffic policeman. (p. 236)

The historical evolution of these authorities into sophisticated public administration bureaucracies enables stability and continuous improvements that are fundamental to modern society in nation-states (Weber, 1921). At a basic level, these bureaucracies enable state building efforts to

address the rule of tyranny (UC1) and bring about the rule of law (EE1, discussed later below). In addition, state building efforts may entail addressing capitalist exploitation (UC2) and financial insecurity (UC3), bringing about the civic welfare state (EE2, also discussed later below). The extent to which the scope of state building should be thus expanded is a central topic of the debate about small vs big government (Rose, 1981) and the merits/perils of neoliberal approaches to policy-setting and governance (Hursh & Henderson, 2011).

Organising Labour (EM2)

Organising labour involves collective actions taken in the interests of workers overall. It entails negotiations between the interests of labour and the interests of capital owners, typically around increasing wages, improving working conditions and setting minimum standards. The importance of collective action over individual concerns is paramount; consider, for example, the following portion of an English translation of *The Internationale* (Cloud & Feyh, 2015), the anthem of workers organising to secure their rights (emphasis added):

Let racist ignorance be ended, for respect makes the empires fall!

Freedom is merely privilege extended, unless enjoyed by one and all.

So come brothers and sisters, for the struggle carries on.

“The Internationale” unites the world in song.

In addition to asserting the notion that any individual worker's emancipation is “merely privilege extended” unless it can be reproduced for all workers, this rallying cry for organising labour also draws attention to the unclear relationship between organising labour (EM2) and state building (EM1). Historically, communist and socialist nation-states have been formed as the amalgamation of these EMs (i.e. EM1 + EM2).

In modern liberal democracies, unionisation has traditionally been the key measure for organising labour through the formation of worker unions for collective bargaining in specific companies or sectors (Fuchs et al., 2021; Logan, 2021), even if worker unions are now somewhat decreased in many contexts (Sevcenko et al., 2022). Beyond unions, other measures can ensure the interests of workers. For example, the German Mitbestimmung (code-termination) principle requires worker representation on corporate supervisory boards (Thimm, 1981).

Through these actions, emancipation strives towards several emancipatory ends, that is, the desired outcomes.

Rule of Law (Emancipatory Ends 1, EE1)

The rule of law entails the protections and obligations provided by the nation-state to its population. These are codified into law and often follow notions like *Justitia's* "blind justice" (law applying equally to all) and "separation of powers" (judiciary independent of government) (Çullhaj, 2021). The rule of law typically entails the protection of personal rights and worker rights, as well as the protection of the rights of political participation and engagement with the public sphere (Welzel, 2013).

Although the rule of law can be described in general terms as above, its actual extent (i.e. how far it has been achieved) and configuration vary between locations and jurisdictions. These differences cannot merely be attributed to different levels of development (i.e. so-called "developing nations" vs "developed nations") but are also due to nuanced differences in history, tradition, culture and societal values (Welzel, 2013).

Civic Welfare State (EE2)

The civic welfare state, as termed by Habermas (1986), is the bureaucratic state structure that supports equitable redistribution and overcomes capitalist exploitation. It is based on, but in addition to, the rule of law. The civic welfare state, typically in the form of progressive taxation regimes and other such economic policies, seeks to be conducive to ideals of upward social mobility and equality of opportunity (Briggs, 1961; Vitaud, 2019).

Although the civic welfare state is, in principle, robust, it is criticised for its increasingly limited ability to sufficiently address capitalist exploitation. For example, the taxation of income from work rather than from wealth (Piketty, 2013), now entrenched in social norms and ideology (Piketty, 2019), erodes the efficacy of the civic welfare state to fairly redistribute society's resources. Technological changes may also be enabling new forms of capitalist exploitation, variously conceptualised as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019); "digital feudalism" (Koenig, 2018a, 2018b); and "data serfdom" (Nycyk, 2020). Addressing these new technological forms of capitalist exploitation is fundamentally beyond the scope of the civic welfare state.

Financial Security (EE3)

Financial security is the presence of some kind of proverbial "safety net" to "catch" individuals who, for whatever incidental reasons, experience reductions or loss of the income that enables their survival. This financial security is relevant for individuals experiencing situations such as retirement, parenthood, widowhood, unemployment and disability (van Oorschot, 2006).

Financial security is based on, but in addition to, the basic concept of the civic welfare state. Different jurisdictions may all have some form of redistributive civic welfare state to prevent capitalist exploitation but may differ in their determination of who can receive financial security benefits in the form of welfare payments and what the requirements are for these individuals to receive these payments. At one end of the spectrum, a jurisdiction could have a civic welfare state that addresses capitalist exploitation (UC2) but does not address financial insecurity (UC3) to the same extent. For example, a jurisdiction could move in the direction of a 'mutual obligation' model, that is, that recipients of financial security welfare payments must also make efforts to be self-reliant and participate in society (Humpage, 2007). At the other end of the spectrum, a jurisdiction could move towards a 'universal basic income' with very few limitations on who can receive it (Hoynes & Rothstein, 2019).

Although notions like a universal basic income may inspire visions of expanded financial security for the future, in practice, emancipation in the nation-state is criticised for its actual trend towards reduced financial security. This erosion of financial security in nation-states may be due to the following: reduced political will to support them—the "exhaustion of utopian energies" in public consciousness (Habermas, 1986); fundamental changes to the structure of the economy (Vitaud, 2019); or the acute effects of sudden shocks such as recessions, pandemics or wars (Desalegn et al., 2022). One especially prominent risk to the civic welfare state is the combination of reduced fertility rates and increased life expectancies. This is leading to the rapid depletion of pension funds (Bongaarts, 2004); the possible raising of the retirement age and the resultant civil unrest (Cetinic & Charlton, 2023); and the overall erosion of the implied social contract and economic viability of the civic welfare state (Brandstedt, 2023).

Meaningful Work (EE4)

The aim of meaningful work (EE4) is to overcome its opposite, namely, meaningless work (UC4). Although the meaningfulness of work and meaninglessness of work are—as previously discussed (UC4)—now understood broadly in the business ethics literature in terms of purpose, form and organisation (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Martela, 2023; Michaelson et al., 2013), emancipation in the nation-state, in practice, has traditionally taken a very specific approach towards meaningful work.

As stated by Welzel (2013), what has traditionally made work meaningful is its ability to deliver improved material conditions, specifically in terms of not only what and how workers produce, but also on their ability to consume what is produced. Overcoming poverty and improving living standards are the first rungs of what Welzel's (2013) theory of

emancipation refers to as the “utility ladder of freedoms” where:

the more existential pressures recede, the more does the nature of life shift from a source of threats into a source of opportunities. As this happens, societies ascend the utility ladder of freedoms: practicing and tolerating freedoms becomes increasingly useful to take advantage of what a more promising life offers (Welzel, 2013, p. xxiii)

Especially in recent decades, the shift in public consciousness from production towards consumption (Burrell, 1989) has transitioned societies into consumer societies (Baudrillard, 1970). In these societies, consumerism, purchasing power, and access to and accumulation of consumer goods are more powerful motivators (Campbell, 2021) than, for example, the civic and patriotic motivations of the Stakhanovite ideology in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Stalin era (Shlapentokh, 1988).

These consumer societies and consumerism are, of course, heavily criticised for their excesses. Anchoring the meaningfulness of work to consumption has the potential to commodify and trivialise culture (Marcuse et al., 1979) and to allocate society’s limited resources towards artificially increasing the desire for luxury products (Baudrillard, 1970). The criticism here is not levelled against the basic notion that work can be meaningful if it is delivering improved material conditions, particularly for those whose work may not appear intrinsically fulfilling with its meaning being in the wages that facilitate escape from poverty (Michaelson, 2021), but it also remains relevant for those already well above the poverty line. More broadly, recent business ethics research has problematised the very notion of meaningful work by asking questions such as “meaningful to whom?” (Michaelson et al., 2013), drawing attention to the subjectivity of the term “meaningful work”.

To be clear, in other words, we are not claiming in our study that normatively meaningful work “ought to be” equated to consumer spending power. The literature on meaningful work presents very good reasons to aspire to more transcendent ideals of meaningful work, such as self-realisation, service to others and workplace recognition (Bailey et al., 2018; Michaelson, 2021). Instead, we are observing, descriptively, that the actual reasoning of those living out emancipation in the nation-state is more as Marcuse (1964) describes: “the people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 11). Present-day empirical evidence reveals that these transcendent ideals are indeed central to what constitutes “meaningful work” (Bailey et al., 2018) but, if given the choice between these transcendent ideals vs improvements to material conditions, people are more likely to prefer

improvements to material conditions (Ward, 2023). Likewise, people may express scepticism towards the “hero” or “noble profession” narrative of some professions (e.g. health care workers, schoolteachers) where perceived transcendent idealism entails societal expectations of self-sacrifice rewarded with applause rather than improvements to material conditions (Halberg et al., 2021; Pelini, 2016).

Emancipation in Digital Nomadism

The conceptual model of emancipation in digital nomadism is depicted in Fig. 3. We next describe each of these components, starting with the digital nomads’ understanding of “financial insecurity” (unsatisfactory condition 3, UC3).

Financial Insecurity (UC3)

As with emancipation in the nation-state, emancipation in digital nomadism involves seeking emancipation from financial insecurity. Specifically, digital nomads seek emancipation from financial insecurity in ways that the nation-state does not or cannot provide. For example, for the digital nomad Ross, the journey to becoming a digital nomad started with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of the late 2000s:

The financial crisis hit pretty viciously. My plan was to move to London, and then kind of base myself in Europe—but everything was sour, really sour. I put out feelers to Australia, to London, and to Canada. All these recruitment staff in Australia said, ‘don’t even bother’ ... so, I landed a gig in the Cayman Islands, initially just for six months, just to kind of get my feet on the ground.—Ross

Essentially, Ross’s journey of becoming a digital nomad was prompted by a systemic shock to emancipation in the nation-state, the GFC being an illustrative example of emancipation in the nation-state failing to prevent financial insecurity. Although Ross could have turned to the civic welfare state for whatever limited welfare payments were available to him during the post-GFC austerity era, he chose to seek his fortunes elsewhere.

However, even under regular (non-GFC) conditions, life in the nation-state may entail job insecurity and, thus, financial insecurity. It may be necessary, as the digital nomad Angela describes, to continuously “wrestle” just to keep one’s place:

I didn’t really want to keep wrestling at the firm. So, I recently left, and I decided to take some time off to travel and figure out what I wanted to do professionally, because even though I knew I didn’t want to do

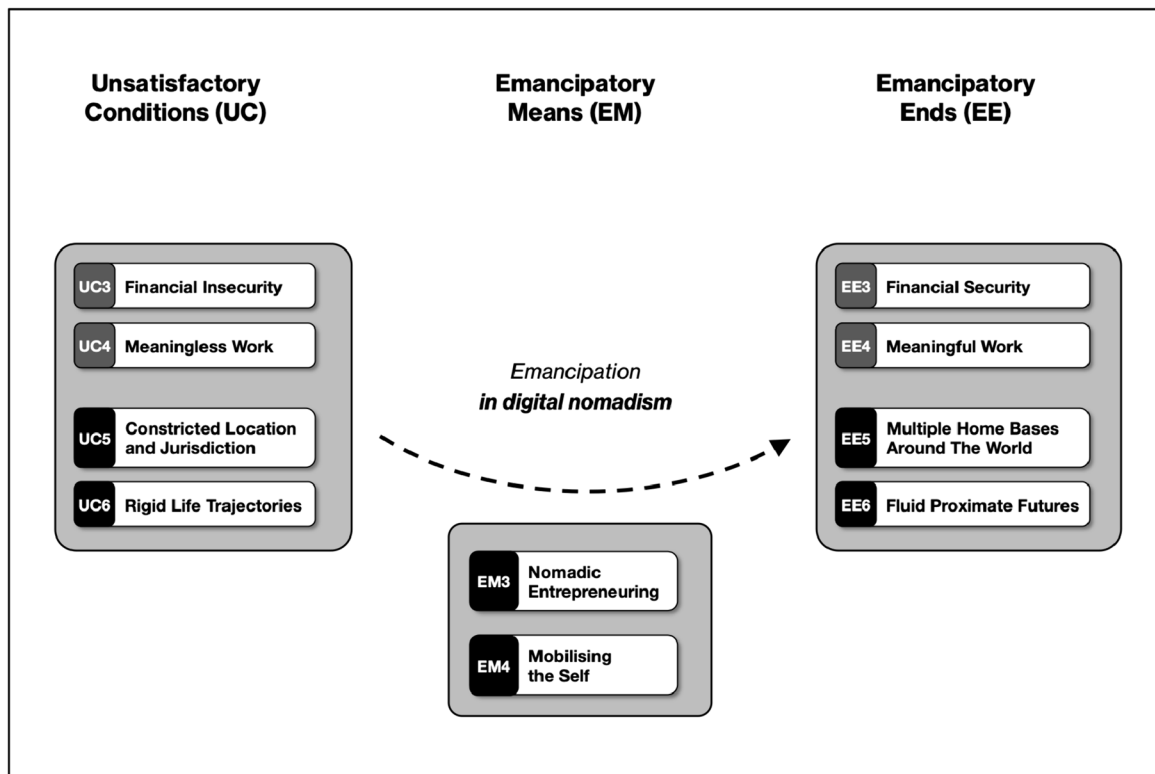


Fig. 3 Conceptual model of emancipation in digital nomadism

consulting any more, I wasn't quite sure what I did want to do next.—Angela

For Angela and Ross, as with many other digital nomads, the deterioration of traditional welfare structures in the nation-state that could no longer guarantee financial security was the motivation to explore alternative avenues to achieving that security.

Meaningless Work (UC4)

As with emancipation in the nation-state, emancipation in digital nomadism involves seeking emancipation from meaningless work. Digital nomads are specifically seeking emancipation from meaningless work in ways not covered by emancipation in the nation-state. For example, for the digital nomad Sandra, emancipatory projects in digital nomadism are aligning with a shift in the broader Zeitgeist in relation to what constitutes meaningful work:

In my era, you know, being 45, it was accumulation. Success looked like big cars, big houses, having the boat, having the kids, the jet ski ... [but now] it's about experiences, travelling the world, where you were, who you met, what you did there. I saw that a lot when I asked my clients at the executive level 'what do you want for your life' and they would say the house, the

second home, you know the home in Tahoe, you know the car, the kids going to Princeton—whereas now it's more like, 'oh I want to make sure that I can go to Australia and Portugal this year and I want to make sure that I'm going to these festivals and I've seen this band'—it's it is a big difference.—Sandra

It is as if the consumerism, purchasing power, and access to and accumulation of consumer goods delivered by emancipatory projects in the nation-state are "out of alignment" with what people find meaningful once they have already greatly surpassed the poverty line. Adding to the point that Sandra makes above about extrinsic motivations for work, the digital nomad Matt likewise states the following about the intrinsic motivations for work:

I grew up in California, I went to Stanford University, I joined a big successful video game company, [but] in the corporate world, something was pulling on [me]. It was out of alignment with what I wanted to really be doing. I wanted to be doing more; I wanted to be doing something different; I wanted to be doing something more meaningful.—Matt

Moreover, digital nomads appear to be frustrated with the emancipatory project in nation-states not only because the outcomes that it delivers no longer feel meaningful but also

due to what one must give up for those not-so-meaningful outcomes. As the digital nomad Evelyn explains:

[I was] working in a 9-to-5, which isn't a 9-to-5 is it? You leave the house at 6:30 in the morning, get home at 8:30 at night, and never see each other [her partner]; you work with people you don't like.—Evelyn

For digital nomads like Sandra, Matt and Evelyn, the motivations behind embracing digital nomadism are shaped by the following reasoning process: they perceive the sacrifices required to maintain their status in the nation-state as outweighing the perceived benefits, especially when those benefits no longer align with their evolving definitions of meaningful work and life.

Constricted Location and Jurisdiction (UC5)

In addition to UC3 and UC4, which take on new meaning in digital nomadism compared to in the nation-state, emancipatory projects in digital nomadism involve seeking emancipation from a constricted location and jurisdiction. For example, the digital nomad Mathieu—who is originally from Paris, France, and now runs a location-independent software development company registered in Estonia—explains:

When actually trying to build a team in Paris, for some reason at the time I really believed that it would be better for the company culture to have all the team in the same place and I was picturing having a nice office in Paris, [but] the difficult thing while trying to hire in Paris is that if you actually want to hire in one place you really limit your pool. I think that's a shame, it's hard to find awesome people.—Mathieu

For Mathieu, mobilising to a nomadic lifestyle and meeting people in coworking spaces (which is where we met and interviewed him) offer opportunities that he would not want to lose, not even for a “*nice office in Paris*”. The digital nomad Sebastian—originally from Berlin, Germany—offers a similar line of reasoning, although with an additional point about the climate:

First, the image and the idea of Bali are very, very attractive; it's a paradise ..., et cetera. This is something that we hear all the time ... but also because in recent months or maybe years, Bali has been increasingly a location for digital nomads or people who are working remotely and there's a lot of structure for that; there's a lot of people doing that; there's a lot of possibilities of connections ... and South-East Asia in winter is amazing because in Berlin it is like minus five degrees [Celsius]. [It is] all of that, together.—Sebastian

Sebastian's desire for “*paradise*” to enjoy the northern hemisphere and southern hemisphere during their best weather every year would simply not be possible if he were constrained to living full-time in either Berlin or Bali.

For other digital nomads, the frustration with a constricted location and jurisdiction is not merely the feeling of a missed business opportunity or a yearning for a self-constructed “*paradise*” but is indeed an active frustration with the political direction that one's home country is taking. As the digital nomad Ross—who is originally from Australia and who we met in Ubud, Bali—explains:

The political bullshit that's happened in Australia has destroyed the NBN [National Broadband Network]. It's going to really disadvantage us moving forward because we're not going to have that ability to interact with the worldwide economy ... Ubud was never a place I wanted to focus on, but here is a better entrepreneurial vibe, and one of the founding trailblazers in remote working, coworking environments. One of the reasons I really want to come here was because it was a strong Bitcoin community.—Ross

Indeed, it may be the intense application of the rule of law (refer to EE1) that adds to the sense of being constricted to one's location and jurisdiction. As the digital-nomad-turned-coworking-space-operator Luke—also originally from Australia and who we met in Bali—explains:

You can move rapidly here; in Western society you can't, you're always constricted. Like if you're in your car, if I was in my office in Australia and I wanted to go somewhere quickly, I can't. I've got to get my car, I've got to press my button to get out of the gate, I've got to go through these little roadblocks continually to make anything happen, then when I get there, I've got to think about parking, I've got to think about putting money in the parking meter and ‘oh no, I'm going to get a fine if I stay at this place for too long’. So it's like this paradox of freedom, you're not really free. Here, you can park your scooter wherever the hell you want. OK, we've got this parking area for everyone, I park my scooter, I sit down, bam. Order a smoothie, sweet. I want to go down to the beach, cool, leave my stuff here, now I'm at the beach. That's the difference, that's why I think these South-East Asian countries are more free.—Luke

For digital nomads—like Mathieu, Sebastian, Ross and Luke—the emancipatory project of digital nomadism carries the following reasoning process: being limited to the lives that are possible for them to lead in their home country is unacceptably constraining and they can do better.

Rigid Life Trajectories (UC6)

In addition to the UCs detailed above, the emancipatory project of digital nomadism involves seeking emancipation from rigid life trajectories. As the digital nomad Matt summarises:

Most of us ... were told to get good grades to go to a good university; go to a good university to get a good job; you get a good job to make a lot of money; get married, have two kids, the house, the white picket fence, and then you'll be happy ... [but] if you have a room of 1,000 people, 200 people are satisfied with their work, 800 people are dissatisfied with their work ... 20 years in education, most people not enjoying it. Learn; work; then we're supposed to live once we get into the last third of our lives; and then you die. Well, to me, this model is so immoral and unethical, it's unbelievable.—Matt

While we present Matt's quote here, we acknowledge that his "learn, work, retire, die" description of the typical life trajectory in the nation-state might be challenged. For instance, one may object to his description in that learning and working are the efforts that facilitate—albeit laboriously and not always enjoyably—the state building and organised labour (refer to EM1 and EM2) that collectively and societally secure the civic welfare state and whatever financial security one might find there (refer to EE2 and EE3). However, his frustration with (lack of) emancipation in the nation-state cannot be overlooked. The emphasis here appears to be the excessive focus of life enjoyment deferred towards the prospect of retiring from work. As the digital nomad Ross puts it:

The game that we've been taught is that you work your arse off until you're 65, getting to retirement age [when] you access your superannuation ... and then you get the freedom to live the way you choose to live. I want to flip that ... I don't want to ever retire ... I want to choose how I want to live, the entire time. I want to be passionate about the work that I'm creating and trying to make the world a better place while doing it ... for me, the goal is to create something that I never want to retire from: then I'll work until the day I die, because it keeps me interested in life.—Ross

For digital nomads, such as Matt and Ross, the motivations behind digital nomadism arise from the following reasoning process: they are not averse to learning and working, but they challenge the traditional division of life into phases of maximum effort with minimum enjoyment (pre-retirement) and minimum effort with maximum enjoyment (post-retirement). Instead, they advocate for a balanced approach where effort and enjoyment are interwoven throughout

one's entire life, enabling continuous personal growth and fulfilment.

To seek emancipation from the UCs detailed above, digital nomads must undertake efforts—EMs—that are very different to the state building and organising of labour of the nation-state (refer to EM1 and EM2). For example, digital nomads allude to "making the world a better place" as Matt mentions in the quote above, which appears at the moment abstract but becomes concrete in the localised examples of pro-social endeavours outlined in "mobilising the self" (EM4).

Nomadic Entrepreneurship (EM3)

The first emancipatory mean in digital nomadism is what we refer to as "nomadic entrepreneurship".⁵ For digital nomads, the attractiveness of the digital nomad lifestyle that one does not wish to give up appears to force a certain level of "tenacity": as the digital nomad Emily puts it:

This [digital nomad] lifestyle requires you to be an assertive person; you have to have a bit of persistence and tenacity to go after what you want ... going after the lifestyle is going after clients: you need clients to make this work.—Emily

However, unlike other forms of entrepreneurship, the "tenacity" of nomadic entrepreneurship is specifically applied to the search for specifically location-independent digital work. Digital nomads may therefore gravitate towards business models that are well-known for being conducive to such location independence, yet disappointingly find themselves crowded out by others hoping to do the same thing; the outcome of these tensions being their resolution through the exploration of innovative business models rather than the exploitation of existing business models. Such pressure towards innovation is at the heart of what it means to engage in nomadic entrepreneurship, as we outline below. As the digital nomad Markus explains:

For beginners, everybody is trying to sell you a dream. You go online, you check all these YouTube videos, or

⁵ This term is adapted from the emerging concept of "emancipatory entrepreneurship" from recent business research (Laine & Kibler, 2022; Rindova et al., 2009) and business ethics research (Haugh & Talwar, 2014; Pergelova et al., 2021) where entrepreneurial efforts are understood as "actors seek[ing] to escape from or remove perceived constraints in their environments" (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 480). We adapt this term into digital nomadism, given the similarities, for example, as with traditional (non-nomadic) entrepreneurship, a defining characteristic of nomadic entrepreneurship is "how entrepreneurs persist when their passions wane" (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 480). However, we rename it to reflect the new form that "emancipatory entrepreneurship" takes when situated in digital nomadism rather than in the nation-state.

on Facebook there's so many sponsored videos, where people are saying 'oh it's so easy, you start with \$500 and then you become a millionaire'. They're selling a dream: they're selling their courses. ... You have to look different from your competitors. If you want to be successful, this is the name of the game: you have to [open] a brand-new store.—Markus

The reasoning process of digital nomads navigating this “game” thus appears to unfold as follows: a continuous exploration for ever more specialised, new or distinctive domains where they can provide unique skills, products or contributions that set them apart from competitors. Identifying unique areas becomes crucial. One approach is to transition skills from a previous occupation to a format suitable for location-independent work. For example, Sebastian—a former architect—found new work as a nomadic software developer in this area. He explains how he was able to become nomadic by instead learning web programming and developing a digital product to help architects:

I'm still kind of figuring it out. I'm a self-learning programmer. In architecture, I was doing a lot of Python [for] designing using 3D code, 3D programming. [Now, I am working on a website] for architects to help develop their career ... when I started to look at web applications, I was looking at Python with Flask and all of that, and then I fell into the world of JavaScript, ... so now I'm doing JavaScript, Vue, GraphQL, SQL and all of that.—Sebastian

Another distinct approach is to cater to other digital nomads and nomadic entrepreneurs, exemplified by Ross who provides guidance on international financial challenges that might affect these individuals:

I started a new business that revolved around helping entrepreneurs that, in this modern age, are operating like mini or micro multinational companies but don't have the legal resources and the accounting resources to be able to navigate the choppy waters ... You can access my skills and my knowledge and my extensive experience operating all over different places for a fee. But you don't get me full-time. You don't have to. I don't have to be with you full-time. I don't have to provide specialist tax advice in each jurisdiction.—Ross

Having secured their unique niches, the reasoning process of digital nomads shifts towards amplifying their ventures as client volume and, thus, revenue avenues, surge. Here, digital nomads demonstrate that whilst they seek emancipation from the constricted location and jurisdiction (UC5) and rigid life trajectory (UC6) of the nation-state, they do so not by rejecting capitalism but by embracing the logic of capitalism and the market economy for their own endeavours.

Digital nomads may expand their workforce from one (themselves) to many, by visiting locations with a known pool of knowledge workers and recruiting those workers as needed. A typical strategy that emerges is: if one is already traveling, why not visit places known for skilled yet cost-effective labour? We were introduced, by our digital nomad contacts, to Fadi, a coworking space operator in Tunisia—an example of such an economically attractive location. As Fadi explains:

They're earning money instead of just begging their parents for pocket money or begging the government to work at a government job; [but] it should be equal pay regardless of location. If the client is ready to pay 5,000 euros in France, then it should not matter where the website is made.—Fadi

While this example particularly emphasises the “nomadism” of digital nomadism, another way in which digital nomads recruit others leans more towards the “digital” of digital nomadism: digital nomads may draw on gig-labour platforms. Markus explains how he outsourced administrative aspects of his work:

[I have] a virtual assistant, she's from the Philippines ... [and] I am not so good at copywriting in English, so usually I just use somebody from UpWork or Fiverr to do the product descriptions.—Markus

These gig workers may be people trying to live out the emancipatory project in the nation-state: working jobs, accumulating wealth and contributing to their country's welfare state. Yet these gig workers may, in fact, be other digital nomads. Incidentally, the digital nomad Angela was finding work through precisely these platforms, describing the arduous game that must be played there:

You have to just lowball on a bunch of jobs, do jobs at a really low rate, work your ass off, to start getting those ratings and reviews. Once you've got a bunch [of those] under your belt, then you can start trying to sell work at a reasonable rate. [This is] because so many other people [are doing] what I do.—Angela

Navigating these platforms, as recounted by Angela, becomes a game itself. Success often involves starting with lower rates to build a profile before demanding more competitive pay. As these dynamic hints, the pathways of nomadic entrepreneuring can mirror corporate trajectories, albeit with milestones marked on online gig platform ratings rather than traditional corporate performance evaluations.

Mobilising the Self (EM4)

When we take a closer look at the seemingly paradoxical finding above—of digital nomads being both the capitalists

outsourcing to cheaper labour and yet also being the workers to whom that cheaper labour may be outsourced through gig-labour platforms—we can see that another EMs emerges. Specifically, we observe digital nomads engaging in what we refer to as *'mobilising the self'*.⁶

At the most basic level, mobilising the self simply starts with the ability to be physically mobile, for example by travelling lightly. As the digital nomad Alvaro explains:

I always have to think from the travelling point of view; if I'm not going to travel with this [possession or item] around, then I'm going to have to throw this [out] ... you can only bring [a] small carry-on.—Alvaro

The logic of mobilising the self also entails mobilising one's time, efforts and capacities to make the most of this travel. The digital nomad Alberto explains:

[For] start-ups or companies like mine, it is pretty useful to explore and go to different places to build your network, to build the structure, to find collaborators. This is slightly different from a normal digital nomad life because you do it with a purpose: a purpose to meet more people, expand your network, expand your network globally. [Those are] the most interesting things, instead of going to random places and working from the beach ... I'm working the weekends now, but we work more during the week for our clients, and on the weekend usually we do our marketing, so, we work for us.—Alberto

For Alberto, mobilising the self for digital nomadism is thus not only about changing one's lifestyle to facilitate travel, but also about changing one's travel style to facilitate the entrepreneuring that supports one's digital nomad lifestyle in the first place. It may involve working on weekends for now, but it is the means through which he achieves his instantiation of the emancipatory project of digital nomadism.

Indeed, working long hours and making sacrifices for the sake of future reward (albeit reward that at least arrives sooner than one's retirement pension) seems to be a common logical outcome of digital nomads' efforts of mobilising the self. While the earlier example of Angela's "lowballing jobs" demonstrates this sacrificial self-mobilisation, another striking example is that of the digital nomad Catherine, who shared her story with us in relation to her work on language preservation and activism:

I grew up in a legal environment. I worked in law for a while. I had a couple of years when I made a lot of money doing law work and that was nice. I would like to make a lot of money again one day. ... [but now] I run a non-profit that's focused on language preservation and activism ... I usually work 70 to 80 hours a week depending on my travelling, I'm constantly working for money and funding ... I'm travelling [so much] this year because it's the International Year of Indigenous Languages. I've been travelling about 28 days a month.—Catherine

Catherine's story of mobilising her strengths—working a huge number of hours a week to take timely advantage of the opportunities presented to her—exemplifies the reasoning of digital nomads in this regard: emancipation is not necessarily about working less but involves deploying one's efforts in a way that is meaningful to oneself and perhaps others also.

Indeed, a point to emphasise here is that mobilising the self can be for entrepreneurial gains but is not limited to these gains. Digital nomads describe mobilising themselves towards pro-social endeavours that do not directly enhance their profitability. The digital nomad Evelyn, for example, described being involved in:

... a social enterprise trying to make tourism work here and actually be beneficial to community and heritage [in Bali].—Evelyn

These initiatives may be organised by or associated with coworking spaces, the places that serve as the physical representation of digital nomadism in host communities. For example, Luke describes an environmental protection project entailing:

... a waste separation strategy for the villages and a decentralised waste management facility—we've been working on that for two years now—a lot of the members will be helping out by making videos for the website, going to meetings, designing user interfaces, building an app: using their talents, their skills.—Luke

Behind this mobilisation of digital nomads' professional skills on pro-bono charitable projects appears to be a reasoning driven in part by a sense of self-reflective guilt felt by digital nomads, that their EMs have negative impacts on local communities. For example, the digital nomad Sandra reasons as follows:

Ubud [in Bali] is a town built for white people, it's not a town for locals, you don't go to the restaurants and see local people at the restaurants, you don't go to the shops and see them shopping ... the number one thing that we could do for this economy and this island is to get off [and] leave ... I don't want to leave, but we're taxing the environment.—Sandra

⁶ This term is adapted from the emerging concept of 'mobilising resources' in the literature on "emancipatory entrepreneuring" (Rindova et al., 2009). We adapt this term into digital nomadism but rename it to reflect the focus on mobilising oneself as the resource rather than mobilising other kinds of resources.

Similarly, from the digital nomad Samuel's viewpoint, there seems to be:

“... a certain economic parasitism: you travel around, not paying taxes, exploiting loopholes and work visas, playing border runs to stay in a place longer.”—Samuel

The mobilising of the self is therefore nuanced, entailing efforts to benefit the local community and heritage yet at the same time entailing apprehension about the detrimental unintended consequences; in other words, digital nomads' emancipatory means involve both giving and taking. Our empirical material here reveals reasoning and opinions about this giving and taking, not a measure of the total materialised economic effects nor a quantified assessment of the balance between giving and taking. However, understanding the mindset behind digital nomads' emancipatory means illuminates the distinctive nature of digital nomadism compared to emancipation in the nation-state. As we discuss next regarding the emancipatory ends of digital nomadism, the digital nomad's end goals are a bit more nuanced than simply economic outcomes. We therefore now turn our attention to those emancipatory ends (EE).

Financial Security (EE3)

As was the case with emancipation within the nation-state, digital nomadism involves emancipation towards financial security. In the empirical material presented above for UC3, digital nomads are seen also seek financial security in ways that the nation-state has failed, or has struggled, to provide (e.g. during recessions or due to job insecurity requiring ongoing 'wrestling'). In stark contrast with the conceptualisation of financial security in the nation-state, in the context of digital nomadism, this notion of financial security is a kind of self-assured security. As the digital nomad Alberto describes:

A fixed salary is, I think, one of the most destructive and negative things you could have. If you have this certainty, that for sure you have your 2,000 to 3,000 dollars at the end of the month, it's going to kill your will to grow, your will to do something better. The more creative things are coming from me when I'm in a difficult situation from an economic point of view because I need to find the solution to make it work. This is very powerful. A normal job makes you lazy.—Alberto

In this sense, digital nomads are—to borrow the term from Angela (cf. UC3), still “*wrestling*”, but not “*wrestling at the firm*”. Instead, they ‘wrestle’ directly on the open market for clients and value propositions, directing their creative and intellectual efforts towards securing their livelihood.

Juliet and William, a nomadic couple in their 50s, working as media-production consultants, reflected on their decades of experience doing so:

We both have had multiple, different kinds of careers, jobs, entrepreneurial-type projects. So we don't come from a background where we've had this kind of storybook, very simple description, one career that we invested in for 20 years. I ran a business that changed; I had to constantly keep learning. William had multiple types of jobs in his career.—Juliet

We sort of invested in skills, not in careers, if that makes sense. Which is typical of high-tech people these days, and of some of the other digital nomads we've run into. That's my impression. The people who are very successful have invested in skills, not necessarily even a lifestyle.—William

In that sense, the financial ‘security’ of digital nomadism is a precarious form of security, albeit made somewhat less precarious by the differences in purchasing power between currencies. As Luke, a coworking space operator working extensively with digital nomads, explains:

Everything in Western society is someone else's responsibility but everything here is your responsibility, so if you walk out there and [get injured], what are you going to do? Do you have the money to go to that hospital here? If you don't have the money, they won't operate on you ... so [as a digital nomad] why would you want to come to Asia? Well, one, it's cheap - so your runway is a lot longer.—Luke

The kind of financial ‘security’ that digital nomads strive towards may appear rather Sisyphean⁷; yet it is that which the digital nomads find more reassuring, and indeed meaningful (discussed next).

Meaningful Work (EE4)

We have seen—in the empirical material presented above (for example: Sandra, UC4; Matt, UC4)—that digital nomads particularly seek to construct meaning in their own, customised ways, rather than following templates from those around them that may not find relatable.

⁷ The literature on emancipatory entrepreneuring points out that emancipatory entrepreneuring does in practice resemble something Sisyphean (Laine & Kibler, 2022), requiring one to perpetually push proverbial boulders up mountains every day just to maintain the status quo. Yet, as that very literature on emancipatory entrepreneuring points out, philosophers like Camus would challenge us—and the digital nomads—to ‘imagine Sisyphus happy’ (Camus, 1955), constructing one's own meaning.

Such meaning is the product of what the digital nomad Sandra refers to as “inner work”:

This [digital nomad] lifestyle is very exciting, [yet] you realise, oh wait a minute, I'm still feeling disempowered ... then you start asking yourself the hard questions again ... you need to do your inner work and figure out what you really want to do in life and then take action.—Sandra

What Sandra logically reasons as the product of “inner work”, the digital nomad Samuel logically reasons as the product of his “design”:

Design is a way of thinking and a methodology that can be applied to any problem, any career, it's a way of problem-solving ... [digital nomadism] is the combination of balancing work, balancing the exercise, balancing the social, balancing everything and ultimately what would be the ideal life if there were zero constraints ... to design a sustainable balanced life.—Samuel

An illustrative example of how such meaningful work is logically reasoned and constructed is in the case of the digital nomad Angela. Angela explained to us her story and motivation like so:

My parents were living in Taipei, and I was born here, and then we moved to the States [USA] when I was two and a half years old ... [but] Taipei has never really felt like home for me: because I left when I was so young ... I wanted to see whether I could make it feel more like home for me. That's why I came here. I also wanted to study Mandarin too, like it's really hard for me to feel like this place is home if I'm illiterate, if I can't read or communicate that well, so that's why I wanted to come back ... I can definitely see, by the time I leave, Taipei will start to feel more like home than it has ever been.—Angela

In a follow-up interview, Angela reflected on her enhanced sense of personal identity:

I definitely am American first, but I'm also Asian-American ... there's a part of me that will always feel like America is my home, but at the same time, there's this international part of me now where I will always feel like I could potentially live in Asia and make that my home as well.—Angela

Angela's work is not itself necessarily easy or always enjoyable; she is the digital nomad who was mobilising herself by “lowballing jobs” (cf. EM4). Yet these “lowball” jobs enable to her to experience cultural immersion in Taiwan as an American citizen, without yet already being fluent in Mandarin as would be typically expected

if she wanted to move to Taiwan for work. For Angela, the emancipatory ends of seeing whether she could make a home for herself in Taipei was something that she had assertively logically reasoned out, acted on, mobilised into, and achieved.

Another angle to consider on the notion of “meaningful” work is that digital nomads' emancipatory ends may not only cover themselves but also those in the local communities that they appear to be at least in some way concerned for (cf. EM4). While digital nomads have, as outlined above (cf. EM4), logically reasoned and self-appraised in their own minds that their lifestyle is “*economic parasitism*” requiring atonement in the form of local charitable initiatives, their impact may be rather more nuanced. For example, Peter—a local programming teacher working out of a coworking space frequented by digital nomads in Taipei—described his stance towards the digital nomads like so:

[Digital nomads] make me feel something; it's not jealousy, it's like I look up to them because of their way of life ... growing up all these years here in Taiwan, I haven't travelled a lot outside ... they opened my eyes how the world could be, because to be honest, I haven't seen a lot.—Peter

While the focus of the analysis has up to this point primarily been about the reasoning process of the digital nomads, what Peter says here is rather revealing about the logical process of those whom the digital nomads encounter. Peter may not himself become a digital nomad, but he gains an awareness of the broader world not because he has had to travel the world, but because the world has chosen to travel to him in his homeland.

Similarly, we encountered Putra, an Indonesian man working in the team of staff operating a coworking space in Bali:

I'm 23 years old, I just finished my studies in Communication last year in Jakarta. After that I decided to move here because I cannot see myself working in the “cubicle”, the “corporate style”. ... I found [this coworking space] interesting because of the people and the community ... that's why I've decided to try to settle down here.—Putra

For Putra, the emancipatory project of digital nomadism as lived out by those around him feed back into his own emancipatory project still situated in the nation-state. Putra may not have left Indonesia, but he finds some form of emancipation from constricted location and jurisdiction (UC5) and rigid life trajectory (UC6)—again, as with the case of Peter, not by becoming a digital nomad or travelling the world himself, but by situating himself within the nation-state in such a way that the world comes to him.

Multiple Home Bases Around the World (EE5)

We have seen—in the empirical material presented above, for UC5—that digital nomads seek emancipation from constrained location and jurisdiction. While the matching emancipatory ends could be simply labelled with an antonym, something like ‘flexible’ location and jurisdiction, here we instead take the ‘in-vivo’ code identified from what we heard from the digital nomad Ashley (emphasis added):

I know a lot of people who love having their own place. They get a lot of security from having a house or an apartment. For me, that felt like it was tying me down: for instance, my apartment in New York, that was expensive; [and] living in the big city of New York is obviously very stressful, very high paced, everybody is very career-focused and I knew I wanted a more balanced life than that ... so I have this freedom now to go wherever I want and not be worried in the back of my mind about if my house is okay. ... I do hope to meet somebody to travel with me, like a life partner eventually, and that we'll make plans from there. I do think that it would be nice to have a home base eventually, possibly **multiple home bases around the world**. For example, we have a place in the US near my family and then maybe wherever he's from, and then maybe in Bali, a couple of different places because I do want to keep the travel life incorporated.—Ashley

Ashley's emancipatory ends, of multiple home bases around the world, is particularly striking in terms of how it is constructed. As Ashley herself identifies, the traditional nation-state reasoning process here would be to accumulate wealth (i.e. economic capital), build up a home base in one place, constrict yourself to it, and find your sense of security there. Her own alternative reasoning focuses on accumulating relationships (i.e. social capital, network capital), and hedge bets in *multiple home bases around the world*. While Ashley is of course only one particular digital nomad, her kind of reasoning can be seen in what other digital nomads are telling us, too. For example, the digital nomad Markus explains:

I'm originally from Estonia, but for the last seven years, I've been travelling a lot. My main places where I've been going: one is Bali, the other one is Chiang Mai. When I started travelling I just fell in love with Bali and I started doing some business there and I became friends with the locals and specifically with a local family ... and then I discovered Chiang Mai is a really convenient place to live and to work and stay because there is a huge digital nomad community ... even if I get married or whatever, I'd like to keep going to Bali and Chiang Mai because I already know some

people, I already know the place, and I fit in much faster.—Markus

Again, the analysis here may be primarily towards the reasoning of the digital nomads, but these digital nomads do not operate in isolation. We spoke to stakeholders situated in the jurisdictions where digital nomads are building up their networks of multiple home bases, anticipating some objection or resistance towards digital nomads seemingly “*exploiting loopholes*” as Samuel puts it (cf. EM4), and yet found reasoning on the part of those stakeholders in those jurisdictions that actually affirms what the digital nomads are doing. For example, we spoke with Marika, a representative of the Estonian government's e-residency program based in Tallinn. As Marika explained, Estonia's e-residency was originally envisioned primarily about registering location-independent businesses in Estonia as a kind of flag of convenience, yet incidentally became a catalyst for physical arrivals of digital nomads:

Estonia is just this very small geographical point on the world map. We have a long history, and we have a very strong culture and our own unique language. So we are very happy when people want to embrace [e-residency] ... in fact when e-residency was born, we didn't have an idea of [people actually physically coming to Estonia]. The first problem to tackle was to make it possible for people to collect their ID card in the Estonian embassy or representation outside. So actually through all of these nearly five years we have been, and we are still working towards this goal to make it possible to organise everything without ever setting foot in Estonia and to be able to do it all remotely ... we have noticed that this such this digital connection is somehow a little seed you have planted, and a bigger emotional connection will grow out of it.—Marika

What Marika says in her role with a nation-state's government, we also hear in what Raymond—a coworking space operator in Taipei—says of the role that he de facto takes on when he proactively engages with people abroad:

[I am] playing the ambassador to travel and tell people about Taiwan, about what we're doing here, to get more people to come ... most foreigners don't hear about Taiwan; they confuse it with Thailand ... by attracting experienced entrepreneurs from outside of Taiwan that naturally will have to work with the locals and hopefully infect them with their mindsets, you jump-start the whole process and activate the start-up innovation ecosystem.—Raymond

While these perspectives coming out of Tallinn and Taipei of course do not represent every jurisdiction in the world, they do reveal one kind of reasoning on the part of those

jurisdictions' stakeholders. Notably, this echoed notion of being a small and easily overlooked "*point on the world map*" reveals that a kind of symbiosis specifically between digital nomads and the jurisdictions that stand to benefit from what digital nomads can bring to their shores.

Fluid Proximate Futures (EE6)

We have seen—in the empirical material presented above, for UC6—that digital nomads seek emancipation from rigid life trajectories. Again, whilst the matching emancipatory ends could be simply labelled with an antonym, something like 'fluid life trajectories', here we instead see that digital nomads do not actually project all the way to their complete life trajectories but instead only to proximate future timelines. Even when doing so, digital nomads do not commit to one particular future but indeed various possible futures.

The digital nomad Sebastian explains such a notion of fluid proximate futures by reference to stoic philosophy and proverbial North Stars:

I'm trying to go with the Stoics and saying like Stoicism and not think about things you have no control over. So I try to not plan so much ahead. I do have some aspirations of how I would like to be in some years, which is kind of being able to work remotely, to be the owner of my own time, and be able to live wherever I want. If it's [back home] in Berlin, fine. But if it is here [in Bali], also fine. But those are big aspirations, like North Stars that I am following.—Sebastian

Crucially, Sebastian is not saying that he makes no plans whatsoever, but that these plans are broadly conceived and broadly defined, not in terms of concrete events to occur but in terms of general characteristics of the kind of life he might hope to have in times to come. This kind of reasoning is particularly helpful during times of global crisis and uncertainty, as Juliet describes of how she and William coped with COVID-era travel restrictions:

I'm quite comfortable with this idea that we're going to let the times we're in and the various government policies dictate where we go next. It's such a narrow window now, and we're comfortable enough planning as we go, that the impact of this lifestyle for us is not really a negative. We're just here to roll with it and see what comes.—Juliet

Furthermore, as the digital nomad Alvaro explains, the reasoning for a digital nomad's self-imagined fluid proximate futures do not necessarily preclude the possibility of going back to the nation-state:

Sometimes people, because they start to do this, they feel then subconsciously that they have this obligation

to continue this, or continue something, because that's what they are. I don't feel any obligation; I'm doing this for fun; I do this because I enjoy it. So if at some point I feel like it's not bringing me that joy anymore, I can stop it at any time.—Alvaro

Yet this notion of reserving the right to return to the nation-state, whilst not limited to the usual trajectory in a particular place in a particular place, is where the emancipatory potential of digital nomadism is exceptionally visible. The digital nomad Leonard shared some historical context about his family's background:

I suppose it's what my wife calls 'Jewish refugee karma'—I'm of Jewish descent—the idea that you might have to run away with a suitcase, 'oh yeah, we have to change country now': I've always been a little bit like that, [but now] it's just the laptop in the rucksack, and off you go. It's like we're used to the idea that we could have to move anywhere.—Leonard

Leonard's reasoning reveals a hesitancy to place too much trust in any particular status quo, life circumstances or geopolitical configuration of nation-states. His expression here, "*Jewish refugee karma*", is a reminder of the fact that whilst specific catastrophes, emergencies, geopolitical tensions, conflict escalations and refugee crises cannot be precisely predicted, their apparent inevitability may provoke reasoning about the emancipatory project of digital nomadism like so: we may indeed need to get "*used to the idea that we could have to move anywhere*". This quote from Leonard does not necessarily mean that Leonard has no enduring sense of hometown or home country (comparable to the quote from Angela about how she feels that "*there's a part of me that will always feel like America is my home*"), but it does emphasise the fluidity with which digital nomads navigate the proximate possible futures; one can have a strong and comfortable sense of home even if that home may be unmoored from some grander notion of one's hometown or home country.

Discussion

Above, we have so unpacked and analysed the underlying reasoning process of the idealtypical emancipatory projects in the nation-state and in digital nomadism. Figure 4 juxtaposes these earlier ideal typical depictions overlaid on top of each to facilitate discussion of their similarities and differences. Note again that we are discussing idealtypes (abstracted, stylised archetype for theoretical discussion), not the average case (not every individual will think or act in accord in full with one of the idealtypes, of course).

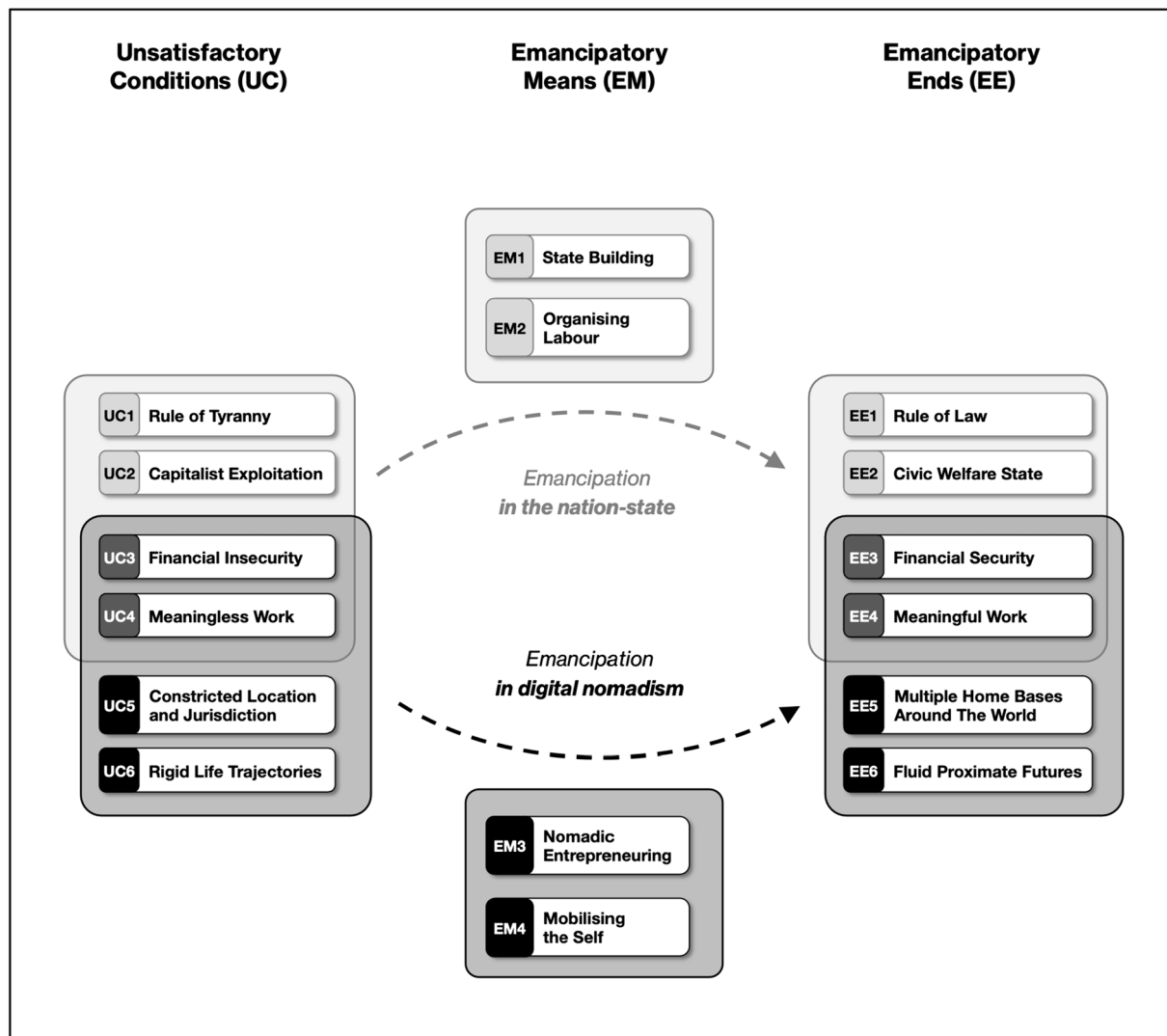


Fig. 4 Conceptual models of emancipation in the nation-state vs that in digital nomadism

Similarities Between the Idealtypes

Despite some clear differences, or even contradictions, between emancipatory projects in the nation-state and digital nomadism, a significant overlap exists between them as Fig. 4 illustrates.

Most fundamentally, both types of emancipatory projects are forms of emancipation in that they aim to transform the status quo for social actors striving for greater self-realisation. The reasoning process adheres to the general tripartite structure of emancipation: Unsatisfactory conditions (the challenges people wish to surmount), emancipatory means (the actions undertaken), and emancipatory ends (the desired outcomes) introduced earlier.

Both types of emancipatory projects seek to address financial insecurity and aspire to achieve financial security. They share the ideal of overcoming financial challenges

that arise when income generation ceases, particularly in old age. In the conventional concept of emancipation, this is sought through social institutions at the nation-state level (e.g. pensions). In digital nomadism, the solution is pursued through financial literacy, generating sufficient (ideally passive) income, and self-investment to build up a capital stock.

Furthermore, both types of emancipation seek to address the meaninglessness of work. Traditional emancipation identifies the issue in the alienation from labour, often with workers being unable to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Fairer distribution of work outcomes, along with worker empowerment and rights in the workplace, are envisioned solutions within the nation-state context. In contrast, digital nomadism focuses on integrating work and life into a coherent, personalised whole, prioritising experience and learning over income. In this model, consumption is less important

than the intrinsic value derived from work, including the ability to travel.

Yet fundamental differences are also found between emancipatory projects in the nation-state and in digital nomadism – in the details of the reasoning process as well as underlying assumptions and implied ethical stances.

Differences Between the Idealtypes

The assumptions and ethical stances of the two idealtypes differ.

Fundamentally, as argued outlined earlier, the reasoning assumed in emancipation in the nation-state aligns closely with modernism. The efforts of state building (EM1) and organising labour (EM2) and towards rule of law (EE1) and a civic welfare state (EE2) reflect modernist and Enlightenment ideals.

Correspondingly, the ethical stance of emancipation in the nation-state aligns with a modernist ethos. Their concern for societal progress and the notion that any advantages are “*merely privilege extended unless enjoyed by one and all*” (Cloud & Feyh, 2015) align with Modernist ideals such as Kant’s categorical imperative (Kant, 1785), Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’ conceptualisation of justice (Rawls, 1971), Cohen’s egalitarian ethics (Cohen, 1989), and Habermas’ discourse ethics (Habermas, 1990). According to this ethical stance, if emancipation in the nation-state is eroding or failing, it is up to each of us to do our fair share to do our part to save it. Habermas, ‘the last Modernist’ (Burrell, 1994), puts it this way:

Why should the citizens who have formed a political community not be allowed to criticize essential structures of their ‘ethical’—i.e. economic, social and political—life as unjust from a moral point of view and to change them as democratic co-legislators? ... The welfare states that emerged during the second half of the 20th century, on the one hand, must satisfy the interest of broad strata of society in the legal and material preconditions of their private and public autonomy from the perspective of political and social justice; on the other hand, they depend in turn on the solidarity of their citizens to ensure that majority decisions are accepted by the outvoted minorities and electoral decisions are not based exclusively on short-term self-interest. A sufficient proportion—moreover, a representative proportion—of citizens must be willing to play the role of democratic co-legislators in a way that is also oriented to the common good.” (Habermas, 2021, pp. 546–550)

In contrast, the empirical material suggests that emancipation in digital nomadism adopts a postmodernist ethos. By “postmodernist”, we refer to what could be called

postmodernist positions in a broad sense—that is, encompassing proto-postmodernism (Brown, 1995), anti-modernism (Burrell, 1988) and ‘poststructuralism linked to post-modern ethos’ (Fox, 2003, p. vii). We see a lived reality of postmodernist visions and metaphors like Deleuze and Guattari’s *Nomadology* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) in which digital nomads are individual living and breathing instantiations of the abstract *noma*; they are thus antithetical to the spirit of the nation-state, the *polis*, a manifestation of modernity. They continue to engage with the polis in patterns of territorialisation and deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986), epitomised by their hesitancy to commit to only one particular home base (EE5) or only one possible future trajectory (EE6). Digital nomads are going beyond simply rejecting an imposed home base and trajectory in favour of a self-selected home base and trajectory, they appear to reject the very notion of locking yourself into any one option. In that sense, they reject an assumption of modern societies and their institutions: settled living. The nation-state, even as a welfare state, not simply a solution but also a restriction.

Correspondingly, the ethical stance of emancipation in digital nomadism aligns with a postmodernist ethos. As we have seen in the empirical material, digital nomads describe their personal philosophies in terms that closely resemble postmodernist reasoning. For example, “*persistence and tenacity*” (cf. Emily, EM3) and “*your will to grow, your will to do something better*” (cf. Alberto, EE3) closely resemble Nietzsche’s concept of the ‘will to power’ (Nietzsche, 1885) even if they may not quote Nietzsche’s by name here. Likewise, the assertion that “*everything here is your responsibility*” (cf. Luke, EE3) closely resembles Sartre’s notion of freedom as being a condemnation to total responsibility (Sartre, 1946). Even the digital nomads’ statements for why they care about sustainability (cf. Samuel, EE4) and community (cf. Evelyn, EM4) more closely resemble Foucault’s postmodernist care-of-the-self virtue ethics (Foucault, 1984) than it does Kant’s categorical imperative, Rawls’ veil of ignorance, Cohen’s egalitarian ethics or Habermas’ discourse ethics. Following our idealtypical form of analysis, we are not claiming that every individual digital nomad explicitly adopts, endorses and advocates for postmodernist philosophy; however, the ethos expressed by the digital nomads is so removed from that of a modernist ethos and so aligned to that of a postmodernist ethos such that it is not possible to overlook this difference.

The contradiction between emancipation in the nation-state and emancipation in digital nomadism therefore appears difficult to reconcile in terms of their ethical orientations, based on the tension between a modernist ethos and a postmodernist ethos. The nation-state exhibits concern for the masses, advocating for emancipatory actions such as The Internationale’s “*freedom is merely privilege extended*” (from Cloud & Feyh, 2015), or the UN’s aspiration for a

“path of peace, prosperity, and opportunity for all” (United Nations [UN], 2020, p. 2), which pursue laudable but lofty ideals for the collective. Meanwhile, digital nomads construct their own microemancipations (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). These entail personal sacrifices and mobilisations, precisely so that one’s privilege can be extended. The United Nations can aspire towards peace and prosperity for humanity in general but cannot make specific promises to individuals to see those actually happening to them during their lifetime (or ever).

In summary, as shown in Table 2, we can conclude that the ideal of emancipation in the nation-state is fundamentally macro, collective, modernist, and assumes settled living. In contrast, emancipation in digital nomadism is micro, individual, postmodernist, and based on unsettled (nomadic, mobile) living.

Relationship Between Emancipation Types

The two types of emancipation are related, not independent. In Fig. 4, we see that the conceptual model of emancipation in digital nomadism is visually depicted as being overlaid on top of the conceptual model of emancipation in the nation-state; this visual aspect of the depiction is intentional. In addition to the overlap in unsatisfactory conditions (UC3, UC4) and emancipatory ends (EE3, EE4), digital nomadism is built “on top of” the nation-state context.

Digital nomads are never truly outside of the nation-state: they are, instead, deeply entangled in the geopolitics of passports, policies, taxation and currencies—of the nation-state in which they were born, the nation-state that issued their passport(s), the nation-state that currently hosts them, and the nation-state that will host them next, all at once (see also Aroles et al., 2022; Cook, 2022; Mancinelli, 2020). Further, digital nomads, therefore, have the nation-state as a conceptual and practical “fallback option” – such as when some nomads during the COVID-19 pandemic particularly found themselves “flying back to the welfare state” (Holleran, 2022, p. 837) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even outside of such crises and emergencies, digital nomads are engaging with the infrastructures laid down by nation-states, engaging with communities situated in nation-states (Lee et al., 2019), and operating within the logics of capitalist market economies that, despite globalisation, exist at least to some degree most nation-states (Aroles et al., 2020).

The existing literature, largely focusing on the digital nomads, conceptualises this entanglement of digital nomadism with nation-states as a kind of renegotiation or breaking and of the social contract between citizen and state, as digital nomads consider themselves ‘self-managing exiles’ (Cook, 2022). Our study contributes by drawing attention to the perspective on these matters from within the nation-states. When considering our themes of ‘meaningful work’ (EE4)

Table 2 Contrasting the idealtypes of ‘Emancipation’ in the nation-state vs in ‘Emancipation’ digital nomadism

	‘Emancipation’ in the nation-state	‘Emancipation’ in digital nomadism
Level of emancipatory change	Macro change: The concept of emancipation in the nation-state is broad and encompasses a collective group of people. It may involve political or social movements aimed at achieving freedom, equality or rights for a large population	Micro change: The concept of emancipation in digital nomadism is more focused on the individual (or family, groups of friends) rather than the collective (or class, society), it focuses on personal freedom and self-realisation
Emancipatory actor	Collective: A collective endeavour where groups or communities work together to achieve common societal goals. Agency and responsibility lay with the collective	Individual: Individuals pursue their own paths and lifestyles to free themselves from the constraints of traditional societal norms or structures. Agency and responsibility lay with the individual
Ethical stance (and underlying philosophy)	Modernist: Aligned with modern values and ideologies, rooted in ideas of citizenship, democracy, and the rule of law	‘Postmodernist’: Implies a rejection of some aspects of modernity, if not conducive to a more flexible, individualistic and unconventional way of life
Fundamental mode of life	Settled: Assumes a settled way of life, where individuals have fixed residences and stable social structures	Un-settled (mobile, nomadic): Based on with a mobile and nomadic lifestyle, or latent position of “location independence”
Reference framework	Nation-state (<i>polis</i>)	Post-nation-state (global, <i>noma</i> , <i>cosmo-polis</i>)

and 'multiple home basis around the world' (EE5) thematic codes related to the emancipatory projects in digital nomadism, we see that digital nomads are not simply detached exiles but yet also, perhaps paradoxically, deeply attached. In many (not all) instances, nomads are welcomed for their potential to contribute to local economies and entrepreneurial ecosystem (Jiwasiddi et al., 2024).

Such attachment in both directions therefore draws attention to the ways in which the nation-state and digital nomadism not only encounter overlap in their emancipatory projects, but indeed, mutually participate in each other's emancipatory projects. In this regard, they have the potential to be symbiotic.

On the one hand, the emancipatory project in the nation-state has the potential to benefit digital nomadism. They work towards, among others, the emancipatory ends of rule of law (EE1) and strong civic welfare state institutions (EE2) that digital nomads encounter when they visit a destination with trustworthy institutions, social cohesion, reliable infrastructure. It is telling that Sebastian, describing the "attractive" and "paradise" image of Bali, first speaks of its "*location for digital nomads or people who are working remotely and there's a lot of structure for that*", and only thereafter discusses the natural beauty of "*South-East Asia in winter*" (Sebastian, UC5). Such conditions are greatly conducive to the emancipatory ends of multiple home bases around the world (EE5), and furthermore they enable the fluid proximate futures (EE6) to be feasible at all—one can be fluid in future planning only to the extent that "flying back to the welfare state" (Holleran, 2022, p. 837) during times of crisis remains even plausible as an option. Nobody wants to fly back to a collapsed or failed state.

Yet, in the same manner, the emancipatory project of digital nomadism has the potential to benefit nation-states. They involve the emancipatory means of nomadic entrepre-
neuring (EM3) and mobilising the self (EM4) which produce a cohort of typically high skilled entrepreneurial citizens who have the potential to accrue social capital with people in other locations and jurisdictions all around the world (EE5) and are willing to be flexible with future planning (EE6). Such conditions are greatly conducive to the economic prosperity of a well-built state (EM1) by enhancing the human capital and social capital that supports innovation, international trade, international relations, and thus ultimately financial security (EM3) and meaningful work opportunities (EM4) for citizens. We see examples in the stories visible in our empirical material: the pro-social efforts made by Evelyn (EM4) and Luke (EM4); the digital nomad Mathieu recruiting workers for a company registered in Estonia (Mathieu, UC5) that exemplifies what the Estonian government's e-residency representatives hope to achieve (cf. Marika, EE5); the entrepreneurial will to innovate described by Markus (EM3), Ross (EM3) and Alberto (EE3) and inspiring

locals like Putra in Bali (EE4) and Peter in Taipei (EE4), that exemplifies exactly what Raymond hopes for Taiwan's innovation ecosystem (cf. Raymond, EE5); the inboard investments from digital nomads into Tunisian labour (Fadi, EM3); the self-designed cross-cultural exchange pursued by Angela (EE4); and the self-investment in skills and safety net described by Juliet and William (EE3) and Luke (EM4) that go far beyond the hopes of nation-states to reduce reliance on welfare payments and move to some model of 'mutual obligation' (Humpage, 2007).

So, emancipation in the nation-state and emancipation in digital nomadism are not merely running in parallel as if isolated into different universes: they are deeply entangled and indeed even potentially symbiotic. Of course, potential for symbiosis is not the same as evidence for this potential actually being realised. It is possible for digital nomads to disrupt the functioning of the civic welfare state; and it is likewise possible for government policies to be unfriendly to digital nomads. However, potential for symbiosis also should not be overlooked, particularly with respect to future directions for both theory and practice.

Does Digital Nomadism Generate Real Emancipation?

This study was motivated by the first part of the question posed by Hunter-Pazzara (2022): "*An unanswered question, suited for further research, is whether this pursuit of freedom actually generates a real emancipation*" (Hunter-Pazzara, 2022, p. 184, emphasis added). Our answer is: yes, it does in a pluralistic conceptualisation of emancipation, but paradoxically, the emancipation generated by digital nomadism is, in some ways, both more "real" than that of the nation-state and, in other ways, not "real" enough.

On the one hand, the emancipation generated by digital nomadism is, for the digital nomads to whom we have spoken, clearly more 'real' than that of the nation-state, in the sense of 'real' as 'concrete experience' rather than as 'abstract ideal'. Digital nomads experience 'real' financial security (EE3) and 'real' meaningful work (EE4) in ways they did not previously consider achievable in their pre-nomadic days living as 'settlers' or regular citizens in nation-states. They in addition set up 'real' multiple home bases around the world (EE5) and can 'really' live fluidly in a way that would not be feasible if living according to the constricted location and jurisdiction (UC5) and rigid life trajectories (UC6) required when living a settled life in the nation-state.

On the other hand, the emancipation generated by digital nomadism is 'not real', in the sense of 'real' as 'sufficient'. The emancipatory project of digital nomadism is only micro-emancipation, thus being an emancipatory microproject (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). It is not a substitute for

the emancipatory project in nation-states, lest we fall into the trap of “emancipatory myopia” (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). This warning does not mean that digital nomadism cannot be beneficial to emancipation in the nation-state in a symbiotic manner, but it does prompt us to be critical of any utopianism. This can be found in some of the nomadic literature, for example, the concept of a “digital nomad nation” (Bozzi, 2020) in which one might conceive of a future in which *everyone* is a digital nomad.

This study is further motivated by the second part of the question posed by Hunter-Pazzara (2022): “*whether this pursuit of freedom actually generates a real emancipation or something more oppressive*” (Hunter-Pazzara, 2022, p. 184, emphasis added). Our answer is: it potentially could. Digital nomadism appears as an extension of capitalist logic rather than as an alternative (see Aroles et al., 2020) and our empirical material corroborates this claim. Akin to corporate globalisation, the globalisation of digital workers carries the risk of entrenching inequalities and oppressions, for example, by hiring gig labour (see Markus, EM3) or self-exploitation (see Angela, EM3), creating a different corporate ladder or rat race with oneself as one’s worst boss and directly exposed to global market forces. At the same time, emancipation in the nation-state (socialist, communist, or otherwise) has produced results that many—notably the digital nomads that we have spoken to—find unsatisfactory or disappointing (especially in the manner outlined in UC5 and UC6). Digital nomadism could therefore be seen as an individualistic, realistic take emancipation, positioned ‘on top of’ capitalism (not ‘instead of’ capitalism or even ‘in full resistance against’ capitalism yet also not ‘in full compliance with’ capitalism). would accept the entrepreneurial and market aspects of capitalism, but not its materialistic ends and its tendency to hinder human flourishing. The emancipatory project of digital nomadism aligns with the postmodernist ethical stance—being not concerned with grand ideals about being “*willing to play the role of democratic co-legislators in a way that is also oriented to the common good*” (Habermas, 2021, p. 550)—but instead, arguably, Nietzschean, a liberated life for oneself, maybe one’s family and friends, in the ‘here and now’ because the option has appeared in the realm of possibilities (e.g. through the emergence of the Internet). Digital nomads, therefore, may not be so beholden to modernist ethical sensibilities towards communicative rationality, collective action and some abstract ‘goodness’ in either a deontological or a teleological sense. This does not mean that digital nomads are automatically “unethical”: they are only so if the analyst chooses to insist on an (idealistic) norm of ‘everyone must be free, or nobody should be free’. This norm, however, for others and notably for digital nomads themselves, is highly unethical (see digital nomad Matt: “*this model is so immoral and unethical, it’s unbelievable*”) in that digital workers who desire to be nomads

to a settler standard that has not, likely cannot and surely will not, during their lifetime, be achieved. This generally forces digital nomads “back in line” with the world order of settlers because the digital nomad model contradicts the latter’s way of life.

Overall, digital nomadism appears to achieve emancipatory ends and self-realisation for the digital nomads themselves. For local communities and citizens of nation-states, in general, the activities of digital nomads could be a model of the global distribution of knowledge and spending; a trigger of social envy; or an instance of privilege, exploitation and oppression. This depends on the specific contextual situation, the regulations in place (e.g. the existing, or non-existence of, global taxation and visa schemes) and the aspects one chooses to bring to the fore (e.g. the “brain drain” of the originating nation is the “knowledge influx” of the host nation, etc.). The impacts of digital nomadism, an option only now available to workers (in contrast to corporations that have long enjoyed globalisation), are multiple, ambivalent and changing.

Contributions, Limitations and Future Directions

The main contribution of this study is to address the question of whether digital nomadism leads to genuine emancipation or potentially fosters oppression, that is, the question posed by Hunter-Pazzara (2022). As discussed above, our study’s response is twofold: digital nomadism has the potential to produce emancipation that is both more and less tangible than that experienced within the nation-state, and it can be both liberating and oppressive at the same time. This answer enhances our understanding of digital nomadism as an exemplar of micro-emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) or as a very specific emancipatory project if allowing for a pluralist view of emancipation (Haderer, 2021).

Beyond the specific differences in the alignment of emancipatory projects with ethical stances—namely, modernist and postmodernist ethics—the intellectual exercise in this study reveals the alignment of the emancipation of the nation-state with modernist logic and ethics and the alignment of digital nomadism with postmodernist logic and ethics in key aspects. This helps to clarify how the ethics of new businesses, organisations and work practices, such as digital nomadism, can be assessed and on what grounds or with reference to which set of underlying philosophical assumptions and values.

Beyond this study’s topic, namely, digital nomadism, the tripartite model of emancipatory projects introduced here has the potential for analysis in various scenarios. Our approach, which involves examining reasoning processes through the lens of the tripartite model encompassing unsatisfactory conditions, emancipatory means and emancipatory ends, offers a contextually agnostic and broadly applicable

framework, setting it apart from existing specialised models that focus on either emancipatory projects or micro-emancipation and that emphasise specific chosen values (Huault et al., 2012; Thomson, 2020). We propose that our study's tripartite model, drawing from fundamental dichotomies established in prior literature (Agnoli, 2002; Berlin, 1969; Blühdorn, 2022; Laine & Kibler, 2022) along with our demonstration of its application, can assist scholars grappling with the challenge of conceptualising and articulating the emancipatory potential in emerging phenomena. This meta-model, in line with Haderer (2021), of what we call "emancipatory projects" can be used to examine the different nature of emancipatory measures and whether contradiction or symbiosis is found between these micro-projects and 'the' overall emancipatory project (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992).

Finally, our answer has incidentally led to an encounter with the concept of emancipatory entrepreneuring (Rindova et al., 2009). Our empirical material demonstrates the applicability of this concept to a nomadic setting—that is, as nomadic entrepreneuring—which differs from the implied nation-state setting of previous work on emancipatory entrepreneuring (Laine & Kibler, 2022; Rindova et al., 2009) and business ethics (Haugh & Talwar, 2014; Pergelova et al., 2021).

Our study's contributions are summarised as follows: first, this is an interpretive and exploratory study intended to reveal characteristics, patterns and categories in a qualitative fashion. It is not a quantitative macroeconomic analysis, nor does it test hypotheses posited about correlations or causalities. Second, but relatedly, the study is an analysis of the corpus of data outlined above, that is, an analysis of what interviewees said and a model of their reasoning. A model of how digital nomads reason (towards the future) is not the same as a model of (past) empirical impacts.

Future research should focus on assessing the real impacts of digital nomadism on various stakeholder groups as these impacts evolve over time. In fact, members of our research team are currently conducting ethnographic studies to investigate the concrete effects of digital nomadism on local communities in South-East Asia. In addition, other research methods, such as longitudinal surveys and statistical analyses of macroeconomic data, hold promise for further exploration in the future. Likewise, as seen in examples such as the tension between digital nomads' 'giving' and 'taking' and the tension between 'location independence' and 'home bases', theoretical approaches such as paradox (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and

individuation (Simondon, 1964; Stiegler, 2012) strike as being particularly concretely relevant for future research to explore further beyond what is feasible within the scope of this study. Nonetheless, whilst the plans and aspirations of digital nomads may shift in response to actual outcomes and historical developments, this study significantly contributes to a better understanding of the rationale and ethical perspectives surrounding emancipation in digital nomadism.

Conclusion

In this paper, the juxtaposition of emancipation within the nation-state against that in digital nomadism provides an opportunity to reflect on the fundamental assumptions of what 'emancipation' really means. Emancipation in the nation-state operates under a modernist ethos, advocating for a collective welfare state, the rule of law and financial security for all, resonating with historical Enlightenment principles subtly embedded in the societal fabric of nation-states and our settler culture. Conversely, emancipation in digital nomadism operates under a postmodernist ethos, often drawing from postmodernist philosophies and ideals and exhibiting a pronounced detachment from any singular societal trajectory or locale. Despite the clear dichotomy in their reasoning processes and ethical stances, a nuanced intersection exists. This convergence lies not in their theoretical underpinnings but in their mutual reliance and potential for symbiosis: the nation-state's structural offerings enable the digital nomad's fluidity, whilst the digital nomad's entrepreneurial agility could invigorate economic dynamism as an emergent mode of modernity. Nonetheless, whilst digital nomadism offers tangible emancipation to the individual, it must be wary of not devolving into a mere extension of capitalist hegemony at the direct expense of other stakeholders. This dialogue between modernist and postmodernist ethical stances and ethos, between the concerns of the collective and the concerns of the individual, forms a complex narrative, inviting stakeholders on both sides to engage with these perspectives.

Appendix A. Digital Nomad Destinations

See Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 Selection of digital nomad destinations for our study

Destination	Reason	Digital Nomad Arrivals per Month
Bali (Indonesia)	This location is culturally significant in the global digital nomad community (Green, 2020; Haking, 2018; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021)	2,084–5,184
Taipei (Taiwan)	This location attracts digital nomads interested in engaging with the Sinosphere (Satterstrom, 2019)	1,634
Tallinn (Estonia)	This location is notable for the Estonian e-residency program (Blue, 2020)	434
Helsinki (Finland)	This location is known for its deep historical ties and cooperation with Estonia on matters related to e-residency technologies (Heller, 2017)	350

Data for *Digital Nomad Arrivals per Month* is sourced from *nomadlist.com* (nomadlist.com, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e): 12-month moving average as of December 2019. Data for Bali (Indonesia) constitute the combined data for Ubud and Canggu

Table 4 List of interviewees

ID	Pseudonym	Gender, Age Group and Origin	Profession	Fieldwork Trip	Interview Duration (h:mm:ss)	Transcript Length (words)
1	Putra Lesmana	Male, 20s, Indonesia	Coworking space staff	Bali, 2018	1:21:30	9,762
2	Alberto Caporale	Male, 30s, Italy	Digital nomad: digital business consultant	Bali, 2018	<i>(Joint interview with the above.)</i>	<i>(Joint interview with the above.)</i>
3	Sandra Davidson	Female, 40s, USA	Digital nomad: personal relationships coach	Bali, 2018	1:33:54	14,584
4	Matt Thornleigh	Male, 40s, USA	Digital nomad: entrepreneur and teacher at international school	Bali, 2018	0:20:38	7,250
5	Evelyn Hawkins	Female, 30s, UK	Digital nomad: digital marketing consultant	Bali, 2018	0:37:13	6,994
6	Claudia Richardson	Female, 30s, UK	Digital nomad: digital marketing consultant	Bali, 2018	<i>(Joint interview with the above.)</i>	<i>(Joint interview with the above.)</i>
7	Ross Howard	Male, 30s, Australia	Digital nomad: international finance consultant	Bali, 2018	0:49:11	7,163
8	Luke Edward	Male, 40s, Australia	Coworking space operator	Bali, 2018	1:24:59	11,638
9	Ashley Swift	Female, 30s, USA	Digital nomad: architectural graphics consultant	Bali, 2018	0:55:06	8,261
10	Raymond Hsieh	Male, 40s, Taiwan	Coworking space operator	Taipei, 2018	0:19:40	2,555
11	Peter Chiang	Male, 20s, Taiwan	Programming teacher at coworking space	Taipei, 2018	0:18:58	2,266
12	Angela Ming	Female, 30s, Taiwan and USA	Digital nomad: business consultant	Taipei, 2018: Follow-up, 2020	1:05:29 1:21:44	8,946 9,660
13	Catherine Valeryevich	Female, 20s, USA	Digital nomad: leadership role in pro-social organisation	Helsinki, 2019	0:44:05	6,878
14	Suoma Kukkonen	Female, 30s, Finland	Coworking space operator	Helsinki, 2019	0:43:33	6,316
15	Fadi Jafri	Male, 40s, Tunisia	Coworking space operator	Helsinki, 2019	0:37:04	4,325
16	Juliet Hamilton	Female, 50s, USA	Digital nomad: media production consultant	Helsinki, 2019	0:49:00	6,889
17	William Schneider	Male, 50s, USA	Digital nomad: media production consultant	Helsinki, 2019	<i>(Joint interview with the above.)</i>	<i>(Joint interview with the above.)</i>
18	Mathieu Beaumont	Male, 20s, France	Digital nomad: software developer	Tallinn, 2019	0:35:22	5,846
19	Markus Põld	Male, 30s, Estonia	Digital nomad: e-commerce "dropshipping" retailer	Tallinn, 2019	0:55:51	5,795
20	Leonard Marsh	Male, 30s, UK	Digital nomad: translator	Tallinn, 2019	0:16:44	2,305
21	Marika Vaher	Female, 30s, Estonia	Estonian government representative	Tallinn, 2019	0:58:53	7,209
22	Alvaro Fernandes	Male, 40s, Portugal	Digital nomad: software developer	Tallinn, 2019	1:21:41	10,628
23	Emily Sterling	Female, 20s, Australia	Digital nomad: digital marketing consultant	Bali, 2019	1:07:07	9,020
24	Samuel Purcell	Male, 30s, Canada	Digital nomad: user experience designer	Bali, 2019	0:29:45	3,358

Table 4 (continued)

ID	Pseudonym	Gender, Age Group and Origin	Profession	Fieldwork Trip	Interview Duration (h:mm:ss)	Transcript Length (words)
25	Sebastian Javier	Male, 30s, Germany and Brazil	Digital nomad: architect and software developer	Bali, 2019	1:01:18	8,710

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Pre-Formulated Broad Topics

- General introduction to the interviewee, e.g. “can you please tell us a bit about who you are?”
- How the interviewee found themselves in their current place in life.
- Interviewee’s general understanding of/attitude towards digital nomadism.
- Interviewee’s professional work/role and how they found themselves in this particular work/role.
- Interviewee’s sense of ‘home’ and hopes for the future.

Examples of Follow-Up/Emergent Topics

- Digital nomad relationships with clients, e.g. “You mentioned freelancing work. How do you find your clients?”
- Digital nomad relationships with subcontractors, e.g. “You mentioned hiring people to work for you. How do you find people to hire?”
- Conceptualisation of “investment”, e.g. “You have been using this word “investment” to characterise your choices as a digital nomad. What do you mean by this? “
- Intimate personal relationships, e.g. “You mentioned that you are married. Does your [spouse/partner/etc.] travel with you?”
- Overcoming difficulties, problems, challenges, e.g. “You mentioned that you experienced some [“problems”/ “difficulties”/ “challenges”] with [some project/task/ system in which you were involved]. What kind of problems/ difficulties/challenges were these?”
- National borders and visa situations, e.g. “When you travelled to [some location that you have travelled to previously], what was the visa situation/what kind of visa were you able to get?”
- Jurisdictional differences, e.g. “You mentioned being affected by [geographically and politically specific issues, e.g. European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law, changing border restrictions due to COVID-19, etc.]. How have you been managing that?”

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Declarations

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Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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