

Dreams and Parables of Sustainable Mobilities

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Abstract

There is a myriad of ideas, often from companies and governments, on what sustainable mobilities should look like and how people should be engaging them. Yet top-down narratives do not always adequately reflect laypeople's mobilities on the ground, and so this article explores the idea of dreams as a way of subverting pre-existing imaginations and redistributing freedoms to move sustainably on one's own terms. Dreams as imaginative forms of inquiry could also expand epistemic frontiers to include voices that have hitherto been under-represented. Where personal dreams contest the status quo, the aim is not about dismissing the productive possibilities from experimental dreams of the technological elite. Instead, this discussion uses the rhetoric of parables as a way to caution against enterprises that expand too quickly without means of care to sustain operations. Thus, this article suggests the labors of repair and maintenance as future avenues of research for sustainable mobility.

Keywords: care, dreams, imaginations, labor, sustainable mobilities, parables

The Iron Man-esque dreams of driverless electric vehicles (EVs), automated charging kiosks, and self-navigating and communicating systems are here. Big tech companies and governments have their own visions of how these shiny new vehicles and infrastructures fit into and build their urban narratives of moving sustainably, for now and for the future. As grand master plans and CEO interviews tell us what the next move for sustainable mobility is, such as lofty aims for the “universal individual”¹ to use driverless Uber cars as the “next living room,”² we seemingly

become imagined publics and faceless commuters in the dreamscapes of the influential. But can we, as laypeople, dream about what we hope for sustainable transportation and infrastructures to look like? If and when we do dream, where can these dreams go? What do these dreams say about our conscious realities?

Following Daniel Sperling's work on "dream scenarios" of automated, shared, and electric vehicles,³ I put forward the notion of "dreams" as possible ontological and epistemological orientations towards future work on sustainable mobilities. Sustainable mobilities, here, refer to a broad spectrum of bodily, vehicular, and shared modalities of movement that are putatively non-/low-emitting in nature. In interrogating our personal dreams of low-carbon vehicles, shared movements, bodily rhythms, and geographies of sustainable transport, this article seeks to unveil an existential undercurrent in sustainable mobilities—flecks of what could have been but are not, thereby opening up new ways of thinking about mobility justice, politics of movements, imaginaries, and governance.

To the extent that personal dreams should be allowed space to come true, experimental dreams of the technocratic elite that might align with and even empower these personal dreams could present transformative change in non-/low-emitting mobility paradigms. Experimentations, and the failures that emerge from pilot runs and sandboxes, hold their value in the form of provisional navigation and sense-making of urban spaces and mobilities.⁴ As a "mechanism of explication that can make visible the unexpected friction," experimentation thus carves space for contingencies and iterations.⁵ Yet, as past dreams of the technological elite live and die in the likes of zealous shared mobility companies, such as Autolib' and Ofo, they become cautionary tales against reckless trials that exploit, dispossess, and exacerbate existing inequalities in cities.⁶ The very idea of experiments has then become a point of contention, not only in mobility

research, but also in wider scholarship on climate governance and urban studies.⁷ The question is, then, can we dream about the reprise or reinvigoration of past experiments in a way that takes seriously the shortfalls and means of care, labor, and repair? Can parables of failed projects be so stern that future dreams of sustainable mobilities become much more meditated?

In using the rhetoric of “parables,” inspired by Sean Johnston’s idea of “technological parables,”⁸ I consider the usefulness of semi-universal, retrospective lessons that emerge from the untethered technocratic ideals of the elite. Parables as revelatory insights that are non-deterministic but still hold certain pervasive truths about past mistakes could then remind and reiterate the foundations for enduring sustainable mobilities. With reference to shared electric vehicle and dockless bike-share services in cities, I contemplate the banal, taken-for-granted groundwork that was formerly missing or poorly executed in the hasty advancements of these shiny projects. Maintenance, repair, and the hard labor of sustaining sustainable mobilities come to the fore here. As such, this article suggests future research avenues in sustainable mobilities to feature the tribulations of past and present trials, and how failures can turn into parables that tether future experiments.

Churning our Personal Dreamscapes of Sustainable Mobility

The concept of a dream is ostensibly fluffy. Yet dreams do not run free of brute reality; while they overlay an imagined world of alternative prospects, dreams still contain a subconscious amalgamation of one’s woes and circumstances right here and right now. The well-known American dream exemplifies this—diaspora communities dream the promise of financial and ideological liberation in a foreign land from the constraints back home.⁹ Dreams, then, ascribe an existential sensibility between what is, and what could be and should be. At the same time, the

semantics of dreams evince a desire and yearning for something so purportedly out of reach that it remains just a dream. The apparent impossibility of some dreams and a subconscious sense of defeatism become crucial here in eliciting the latent politics and power asymmetries that cascade through our everyday movements. And not all dreams are the same. As Marissa Matsler and her colleagues aptly put it, one person's dream is another's nightmare, and dreams-come-true for some can have adverse effects on others.¹⁰

This section therefore attends to three points of discussion on how and why dreams enrich work on sustainable mobility. Firstly, dreams as a form of intimate ontology subvert top-down discourses of imagined mobility users and return agency to the imaginations of the people themselves. Next, beyond imaginations of what could be, asking why some dreams have hitherto remained as dreams reveals the underlying structural constraints that prevented these dreams from coming true. Lastly, where respective dreams come into conflict with one another, reconciling them then becomes pivotal in the principles of shared governance.

Subversive Dreams and Our Liberty to Imagine

There is an emerging body of research on EV user imaginaries—imagined laypersons (ILPs) and imagined publics who act as functional social constructs for automobile companies and governmental authorities to provisionally involve in future strategies of electric mobility.¹¹ In many instances, ILPs in advertisements, manifestos, and master plans must necessarily be framed as consumers and users of EVs, as if EVs are the only and requisite pathway to sustainable mobility transitions.¹² Where some of it is about pushing the profit frontiers of large automobile companies, thereby embroiling ILPs in the neoliberalistic logics of green capitalism, some of it is also about using EVs and their global traction as an instrument to legitimize top-

down mobility plans without duly considering infra(structural) incompatibilities with the current urban landscape.¹³ Therefore, to the determined decision-makers and salesmen, ILPs are rational consumers and universal individuals who have equal standing and identical lived experiences. Because they are all the same, they must then acquiesce and become EV users, whichever EV it may be, in the near future or in no time at all.¹⁴ And because they are all the same, they will use the EVs and perform their role as intended; any issues shall become a personal failure, and any sense of grievance towards these issues shall fall under their own remit of emotional management. At least until the next shinier, cooler EV comes out.

Alas, real laypersons are less spongy and pliable than that. From lifestyle differences to various anxieties over EV costs, maintenance, and safety, a myriad of studies on EV perceptions and normative barriers to EV uptake can testify that a real layperson embodies their own circumstances and desires and bears no resemblance to the blank slate that is the ILP.¹⁵ Yet, notwithstanding this multitude of insight, cognate research on why people are reticent about EVs is still mounted in underlying objectives of promoting EV uptake—specifically, who are going to be the early adopters of EVs, and who will be much harder to persuade and will need a different set of strategies to gain their acceptance? This pre-defined, EV-centric pathway overlooks the possibility of other modes of sustainable movements that may be more suitable for certain people, and even more so dismisses the liberty that people have to choose the kinds of mobilities they want for themselves.

Instead, could we ask about what kinds of rhythms, circulations, geographies, and materialities of sustainable mobilities people dream of? What do these dreams look like for people of different socio-cultural backgrounds, realities, and financial abilities? If they could have the liberty to choose, decide, and plan, what would their own sustainable mobility

dreamscapes manifest? And how would they feel, if these dreams were to come true? What kinds of affective atmospheres would transpire in these dreamscapes? Past dreams in the likes of Critical Mass and Reclaim the Streets in the 1990s have sought to stimulate alternative imaginaries of streets through a shared communal ideal. The palpable “car rage” towards cars that clog cities with pollutive emissions led to these street-reclaiming movements aimed to resist top-down, car-centric evolutions of roads.¹⁶ As a result, laypeople who were sick of cars dominating the roads sought to collectively redefine roads as shared spaces for non-/low-emitting forms of mobilities—walking, cycling, and affordable public transport. Pedestrian paradises in some Japanese cities—known as Hokōsha Tengoku, where roads are closed to lessen emissions and allow complete walkability—are even imbued with rich local culture of cosplay and music performances,¹⁷ thereby permitting playful rhythms and atmospheres of sustainable movement. Provocative as dreams may be, dreams as an imaginative lens for alternative forms of inquiry could then allow space for plurality in distribution and subvert pre-established expectations helmed by corporate and governmental institutions.

Wishful Dreams and the Reckoning of Control

Where subversive dreams present alternative imaginaries of movement, wishful dreams (stemming from wishful thinking) grant agential power specifically to those whose struggles have hitherto been unheard or sidelined in existing modes of sustainable transport. Wishful dreams evoke latent hopes for what could have been but is not, and they also mean that friction and immobility have persisted for long enough that one wishes to move out of the status quo. In the case of Rosa Parks and her famous bus boycott, her act of resisting bus segregation on the basis of race echoed deep-seated dreams of Black freedom and autonomy among other civil

rights activists like Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King. Her wishes of being able to move equally on public transportation therefore demand a reckoning of control amidst oppression and extreme power asymmetries.

For some, wishful dreams also mean that barriers to moving (smoothly and safely) are so strong and access to resources so weak that dreams remain on the backburner of their subconscious with little to no prospect for real change. A TikTok trend at the height of the pandemic in March 2020 saw people making videos of pseudo-phone conversations for passengers to play in Uber and Lyft rides.¹⁸ The TikTok videos simulated video phone calls, with the creator asking questions like “Where are you?” and “Can you send me your live location?”, to which women, or anybody else who feels unsafe in the ride, could pretend to reply accordingly in order to deter any dangerous motives from drivers. Creative as these palliatives may be, they reveal an uncomfortable truth that traveling in Uber and other forms of ridesharing is potentially dangerous for women and individuals who embody a more vulnerable positionality. And as much as women and vulnerable individuals may dream of being able to take an Uber without having to worry about their safety, these temporary solutions on TikTok meant to protect them are still a striking reminder of the systemic flaws that fail to construct safe environments for people to move around freely. The fact that these videos even exist and are lauded for being resourceful workarounds signifies an implicit sense of resignation towards wider systemic change.

As such, where structural barriers and issues of safety are concerned, especially in low-carbon forms of transport, how can we carve out safe, non-discriminatory spaces to recognize these (quiet) dreams that have hitherto remained unheard? Where everybody has a right to move and a right to dream of moving elsewhere, how can we identify and legitimize diverse

perspectives and, if needed, adequate spokespersons to represent the dreams of under-represented groups and individuals? These questions are not new. They situate within wider scholarship on mobility justice, specifically principles of recognition that acknowledge the gravity of voices and the micro-politics that could be mobilized to enact material-semiotic processes of change.¹⁹ They also align with a Lefebvrian notion of the “right to the city” as an integral part of a just and inclusive transition into low-carbon mobilities. Therefore, the point is not to reinvent the wheel; rather, the goal is to champion a shift in epistemological framing that sidesteps reductionist forms of egalitarianism. Framing people’s voices as dreams or wishes could take seriously the stakes of immobility and associated injustices of immobility,²⁰ no matter how small they may be and no matter who experienced them, thereby exposing uneven topographies of privilege and power in intimate, everyday movements. Using the idea of wishful dreams as an epistemic prompt could also open avenues for creative methodologies in the likes of storytelling, videographic journals on platforms like TikTok and Youtube, as well as other diaristic approaches that provide first-hand contexts, therefore allowing researchers to embed events of injustice within wider structures.²¹

Contesting Dreams and Making Peace

As we elicit subversive and wishful dreams to paint the alternative and unheard dreamscapes of sustainable mobilities, the indefinite nature of dreams also means that some people’s dreams are bound to come into conflict with the dreams of others. For one, the collective dreams of car-free neighborhoods in Brussels have led to friction among residents whose ties of kinship depend on the automobilities of family members and relatives. The regional mobility plan, “Good Move,” touts itself to be a four-year-long participatory project that involves multiple stakeholders,

including citizens themselves. As such, new traffic circulation plans in the Schaerbeek municipality that allow for non-/low-emitting mobilities, such as walking and cycling, are at once municipality-led and community-driven.²² At the same time, however, some residents in Schaerbeek who have stretched familial relations beyond the municipality found their dreams of maintaining kinship, typically via car-based automobilities, unheard amidst the new traffic circulation plans.²³ Hence, their daughters and sons from elsewhere teeter between being mobile users on roads outside of Schaerbeek and being undesired car drivers inside Schaerbeek. Plans to phase out car-based automobilities could create uneven topographies in freedoms to move, thereby causing a strain to the well-being of geographically dispersed families who wish to sustain emotional ties in the same place.

Where projects like Good Move strive for community participation and inclusion of voices, thereby safeguarding procedural justice, there may still be clashing ideals and visions of what sustainable mobilities look like within communities. How do we then make peace and allow space for negotiation and compromise? Governance thinkers would most likely agree that there is no hard and fast rule for reconciling different opinions from corresponding stakeholders.²⁴ Disparate dreams that belong to people who situate differently in social hierarchies may seem impossible to mediate, but can dreams become “emotional facilitators” towards constructing a shared governance logic?²⁵ Perhaps a suitable approach underscores constructionist methods of “catching” these dreams—interviews, focus group discussions, discourse analysis, and observations—and thereafter synthesizing nebulous dreams into operative codes to systematically tease out shared logics of ethics and dispositions. For example, operative codes in loose spectra of sociality (dis/trust), morality (right/wrong), and emotionality (dis/satisfaction) can be categorical springboards for identifying commonalities and divergences

in bottom-up discourse. Here, seemingly mundane acts of collecting, transcribing, and coding dreams become essential micro-practices that percolate into wider transformative change in sustainable mobility.

Technocratic Parables and the Return to Banal Care-ful Work

While personal dreams must come to the fore to subvert the mobility hegemon, the aim is not to completely antagonize or disregard any productive possibilities that might arise from technocratic dreams of the elite. In fact, what we regard today as de facto forms of sustainable transport, such as the bus and metro, grew from combined ambitions of governments, planners, and inventors to rethink connectivity beyond local scales. Even if some dreams failed to take off, there may be rhizomatic opportunities for unrealized technologies and operational logics to branch out elsewhere and come to different forms of fruition. For one, the rise and fall of Aramis, which was an experiment with Personal Rapid Transit in Paris, saw its technological remains, namely the variable-reluctance motor as a new mode of propulsion, being used to automate Line D of the Lyon Metro.²⁶

Thus, the intention here is to delineate why some ambitious projects failed so that future dreams could err on the side of caution. This section uses the rhetoric of “parables” to consider the kinds of retrospective lessons that may have some degree of universality to be heeded in future mobility dreams here, again, or elsewhere. With reference to free-floating electric car-sharing and bike-sharing services, this section therefore deliberates the significance of care, maintenance, and repair as universal lessons to be studied and applied in future sustainable mobilities.

Death of Icarian Enterprises and Their Reprises

At its core, parables are story-like teachings that pick apart moral dilemmas and caution against certain actions that might have undesired consequences. The old adage of Icarus is especially salient here. After being given wings made of wax and feathers to escape from Crete, Icarus was so intoxicated with the feeling of flight that he flew too close to the sun. As the wax in his wings melted, he fell into the sea and drowned, giving rise to the proverbial idiom, “Don’t fly too close to the sun.”

If Icarus was a modern-day entity, bike-share and car-share companies that rose too fast and crashed too hard come to mind. The death of “Icarian enterprises,” such as Autolib’ and Ofo, exemplifies a worrying trend in contemporary technocratic dreams—experimental mobility projects that grow at exponential scales without proper market research on the viability of these expansions and frameworks put in place to translate operational logics across scales. Ofo expanded its bike-sharing operations overseas just two years after it launched, without resolving the issues that already transpired back in China.²⁷ Where docklessness permitted greater autonomy among users to park wherever they want, abuse and improper parking of the shared bikes by irresponsible users meant that damaged and abandoned bikes were quickly cluttering pavements and hindering the mobility of other street users.²⁸ The Ofo bike slipped from an object of promising low-carbon mobility to an eyesore, an obstruction, and a wasteful product in the end that conflicts all sense of sustainability. It therefore came as no surprise that as Ofo expanded, the same problems precipitated elsewhere, and Ofo folded just a few years after its meteoric rise.

Following Bruno Latour’s notion of “immutable mobiles,” which refers to things that maintain their socio-material shape no matter where and how they get reproduced or transported,

the universality of immutable mobiles is held by the assemblages that sustain them.²⁹ In other words, a shared bike preserves its characteristics and function as a shared bike insofar as there are monitoring, maintenance, enforcement, and repair measures put in place to protect the integrity of its utility. While rogue user practices do not necessarily obliterate the shared bike's socio-materiality, the absence of counteracting forces to sustain responsibility and care for the shared bike will cause it to fall apart. The entire network of shared bikes, supporting mobile applications, and QR codes for un/locking of bikes could be seen as technical "delegates" that "translate" human dreams of low-carbon mobility into non-human material forms partly devoid of human participation.³⁰ Yet, as Latour asserts, delegating to a non-human entity creates precarity and risk of that non-human entity mutating into something else altogether. Thus, without the labor of sustaining the Ofo shared bike as a shared bike and not as an obstruction or an inoperable tool, the entire bike-share network, or any similar form of vehicle-sharing network for that matter, will inevitably collapse in on itself, and even more so when it expands too far and wide to the point of uncontrollability.

Notwithstanding their failures, these Icarian enterprises persist in their dreams through reprises or offshoots—Autolib', for one, kick-started offshoot shared EV operations in the likes of BlueIndy in Indianapolis and BlueSG in Singapore. BlueIndy suffered from similar problems as Autolib', where the shared EVs often slip into glitchy objects that were hard to operate, as well as dirty, unkempt spaces that were off-putting to the next driver. While BlueIndy was eventually led to its own demise, BlueSG is still up and running with a recent expansion in its shared EV fleet.³¹ As the EVs that once belonged to Autolib' and BlueIndy end up in scrapyards, their failures must become stern parables for BlueSG and future iterations to follow. Lessons of care and responsibility, banal as they may be, cannot be overstated.

Sisyphean Tasks and the Sai Kang Warriors

There is a locally known term in Singapore—“sai kang”—that literally means “shit job” in the Hokkien dialect, and denotes the Sisyphean, menial tasks at work that one is often reluctant to do but that are necessary to complete for the benefit of others. Sai kang warriors, which is a colloquial term that became popularized in the military, therefore sarcastically refers to the workers who have to tackle the seemingly insurmountable mound of chores. Sai kang warriors can theoretically be anyone, but they have a rather implicit connotation of being underpaid, relatively low-skilled, and overworked. As such, the idea of sai kang warriors tends to conjure imageries of janitorial and reparative workers who do the labor-intensive and hard work of servicing and maintenance. In contrast to David Graeber’s idea of “bullshit jobs,”³² which describes jobs that are highly respected, highly paid, and highly pointless, and would therefore not make a difference if they went away, the absence of sai kang warriors would be keenly felt immediately, if not over time. The 2022 strikes undertaken by cleaning workers in Edinburgh left the streets cluttered with waste and rubbish,³³ thereby testifying to the importance of janitorial and reparative labor in the upkeep of order in cities and urban infrastructures.³⁴

In the context of Icarian mobility enterprises, then, the anaemic presence of repair technicians and workers in Ofo, against the overwhelming number of damaged bikes that accumulate in bike graveyards, meant that the spoilt bikes would no longer be able to serve their function as vehicles of sustainable mobility.³⁵ The question remains: why was the labor force for Ofo’s bike repair insufficient? What can be done to reinstate the necessary work in a way that is both productive for the continuity of shared mobility operations, and equitable for those who work behind the scenes? For one, greater attention must be given towards the possible injustices

experienced by sai kang warriors and employees who are involved in reparative, “care-ful” work.³⁶ In scholarship on sustainable mobilities, more needs to be done to expose unethical modus operandi in the form of cost-cutting practices and low wages, alongside wider systemic barriers and employment laws that prevent the protection of these workers in (and who sustain) sustainable mobility enterprises. Only in this way can the parable of this—and other—failed projects in sustainable mobility get not only a new, but a better lease of life.

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