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Why do we need utopias? - Malene Freudendal-Pedersen

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Malene Freudendal-Pedersen, an Associate Professor at Roskilde University in Denmark, discusses how utopias can play a practical role in achieving the longer-term objective of a more sustainable mobility.

Why do we need utopias?

Malène Freudendal-Peterson

I'm going to talk about good mobile lives and what it is that we need utopias for. Why do we need to work for utopias? What can they do when we're talking about how good mobile lives should be? It's a difficult question to talk about - good mobile lives - because it becomes very quickly very big, and to define something like that we are making closure around a concept that somebody might feel really offended about making closure about, in that way. And actually, when we talk about closure, that's one of David Harvey's big points when he talks about utopia in his book 'Spaces of hope' in 2006. He says that when we have ideas of the future, if we have utopias – which you could say that the good mobile life is – we need sometimes to make closure around these things. Because we have to be able or brave enough to say that 'this' is actually better than 'this'. It's not a both-end, it's an either/or and sometimes we need to have the courage to actually talk about the either/or and defining 'this is good' – 'this is actually not as good'.

The path-dependency trap

But nevertheless if you talk about the good life and if you talk about mobilities in this life, I think one of the basic things that we need to understand is that these ways we move around on a daily basis are not something that we reflect on that much as people, in our everyday life. We think about getting the kids to kindergarten, buying groceries, going to a yoga class, or a football class or a squash game or whatever. And also to be good at our work, to be good at what we do. The mobility that actually enables this is not something that we reflect on when we do it every day because if we did that, we actually wouldn't be able to do very much. That also means it's like brushing your teeth or doing all these things that we do every day. But it also means that when this is not something on a reflexive level, it means we have a tendency to do as we have always done. I often hear the claim that people aren't interested in the environment, that it doesn't mean anything to them, and I actually think that's not true. But I think the whole environmental issue, what's happening to the globe, the way we are living - how that affects the globe, it's a really hard-core thing to be acting on the basis of because it makes such big impacts on

lives. What can we actually do to handle this? And this also means that we do things in a very path-dependent way, we have specific ways of doing things that we have done. We have planned cities on the basis of the car for the last 100 years – it's really difficult not to do that anymore because this is how planners have been brought up to think, this is how politicians have been brought up to think, and in their everyday life when they want to get their everyday stuff to work, they bring that to work with them. They bring this whole puzzle of getting everything to work, they bring that with them. So, of course, maintaining these path dependencies about mobilities in everyday life is what happens, and that makes it difficult to move on from it.

Critical thinking about the future

But this is actually where utopias can do something for us. Because what utopias can do is that they can actually help us figure out what it is that we don't think works. Because by having an idea of how a future might look, we actually realise 'But I want it to be like 'this' because I actually don't like 'this'. So that's what I need to change'. So the utopian thought also enables critical thinking about our current situation, which is actually one of the important things about utopias – that we know that. I think that an example of that could be this thing that we're not able to lift our glance away from the everyday things and the path dependencies. In Copenhagen, they tried a lot of times to have congestion charging and the government we have now, when they were elected, one of their promises was actually to do congestion charging in Copenhagen. Copenhagen can't do it on its own - it has to be the government who does it because it's a tax, so it has to be done by the government and not by the municipality. So the government promised that when they were going to get elected they were going to do congestion charging. And they failed.

The risks of short-term thinking

There were a lot of good reasons for that, which is a lot about strategic thinking and politics and planning. But nevertheless one of the big mistakes they made was that the whole debate was about tomorrow. It was about how Arne wouldn't be able to get his kids to kindergarten tomorrow because suddenly there was going to be congestion charging and it would cost him a lot of money. There was nowhere in that whole debate – that quickly got into the wrong track in the media – where anybody was talking about 'in 10 years', just to have a short time perspective. The problem in Copenhagen is that car transport is increasing all the time. If we look at the way it's increasing now, then in 10 years there is going to be much more – I think it's 20% more – car transport and nobody thought about asking the question 'Do you want to have 20% more cars in the city in 10 years?' And my guess is that most people they would talk to would say 'No thank you' and then we have to do something else, because if we don't do this now, this is what is going to happen. If we don't do something we are going to have increased cars. But everything was about tomorrow, everything was about how everyday life tomorrow was going to be more complicated and things would be more expensive for somebody who had to do something and get their everyday life to work. And what I think is extremely interesting actually is that the politicians are so not aware of what it is they're doing when they talk about transport and mobilities. And the journalists, I'm not sure they do it on purpose, but they know immediately how to kill something because they start scaring people with how their everyday lives are going to change. That's just too much, because they don't put up anything instead - they only put constraints in. And then it dies immediately.

Making the city fit the society

And this is why utopias are so important. David Pinder says somewhere that utopias are also about saying 'what kind of city for what kind of society' is it that we actually want. We need to think about that. We need to plan the future. (Henri) Lefebvre said in the book he wrote that was translated in 1976 – 'The Survival of Capitalism' – he talks about 'the impossible possibles.' What he actually means by that is that we need to think about something that might seem impossible today, but the only way to actually make it possible in the future is to start talking about it. One of the examples if you want to take a

Danish context is that if you had said 100 years ago we would have a free school system, a free university system, a free social security system - you could go to hospital whenever you want, everybody would have said 'That's impossible, that's not going to happen'. But somebody actually believed in that idea and they fought for the opportunity for that idea to be possible. And that's what he's actually proclaiming in that book - that we need to look beyond the way we are doing things now and believe in things. Because formulating the idea, believing in the utopia, is actually a big part of making it happen and making it for real.

Choice means closure

What David Harvey did in the book 'Spaces of Hope' that I already talked about is that he talks about this thing about closure. That sometimes we have to decide for a specific future. It's really interesting in that book that he has a final chapter in that book – or it's an epilogue -where he goes to sleep and then he has the craziest nightmare because the utopia that he puts out there becomes real and all the unintended consequences of that utopia he suddenly realises when he's sleeping. And when he wakes up, sweating from that nightmare. What he's saying is that it's impossible to make any kind of vision for the future without having any kind of risk that some of the decisions might be bad decisions - but it's better than actually not doing anything. It's better than just maintaining those path dependencies that we've had for the last 100 years and that we can see actually don't work. If we don't have the courage to do anything different, we're just going to keep on reproducing something which is not good for the environment and is actually not good for our everyday lives or our way of being together. Because the kind of city created by too much car transport is not the city that people want to live in – which is one of the things that we need to think about. David Harvey in his book 'Spaces of hope' has this quote that I really love because what he says is that we need to have these visions of utopia because without these utopias we (can't) define which port we might want to sail to. If we don't have the utopias, we have no directions.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Associated Thematics :

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- Futures
- Representations

Policies

- Cities & Territories

Theories

- Concepts



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