

CROSSED PERSPECTIVES

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Imagined mobilities



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An American anthropologist and a French historian debate the significance of elected officials, transport professionals and users' imaginaries on their choices and on decision making.

01. To what extent imaginaries guide or oppose rationality in the functioning of our societies?



It's very tempting to pit imaginaries against rationality. Yet, in all likelihood, the two concepts are probably closer than we think, as the case of railways shows. Various forms of rationality (economic, geographic, historical) are used to justify projects.

However, the choice of arguments is itself a reflection of imaginaries that claim, for example, that economic profitability must be a deciding factor. Arguments can also be used to mask



As a matter of fact, and not just conjecture, we live in multiple realities: The reality of the workplace, the reality of the classroom, the reality of intimate conversations among friends, the reality of family celebrations. Each of these is its own reality, meaning that it consists of a finite province of meaning and has its own tension of consciousness: whether the heightened alertness among intimates, the dulled sensibilities of repetitive work routines, or the expectations of appropriation in

what decision-makers consider to be ulterior motives, as they are solely based on imaginaries linked to technical systems and territories. In this way, the economic rationality argument can simply be superimposed over the image of modernity the new infrastructure offers.

I would add that economic rationality is just one more form of imagination. When one examines different econometric models, one discovers that often they need "adjustments" in the form of "market imperfections" or "externalities: to conform to observed reality. Often "rationality" is better understood in the Freudian sense of "rationalization," that is, a defense mechanism.

expectations of prevention in political arenas.

L'imaginaire is its own finite province of meaning - bounded by certain master symbols, revealed in for the possibilities it suggests, yet never confused (except by the most naïve) with empirical reality. Yet even more so, the imaginary prefigures other realities -- if something is "not imaginable," people can actually shut it out of their consciousness. Sigmund Freud called this defense mechanism "denial."

Allen's idea of different realities - of which imaginaries is but one of the components - is a stimulating one. It provides a counterpoint to overly rationalistic approaches that claim that each person's reality can be projected onto a single focal point. However, while it's important to distinguish between empirical reality and the reality of imaginaries, we mustn't see them as totally disconnected. There is an ebb and flow between them, whether explicit or unconscious.

02. What role do imaginaries play in physical and virtual mobilities?

Because it's based on a relationship with time and space, mobility is a medium for projections of time and space at different scales, both individually and collectively. This is true starting from the construction

There are two answers to this, the historical and the contemporary. Historically, new forms of mobility have been the stuff of dreams, until they were actually built: Leonardo da Vinci

and starting from the construction stages on an infrastructure. Projects must provide a narrative and image of a territory, and of how it will transform mobility practices there.

We can also read the imaginaries of mobile people through their modal choices, which merge with their own personal value systems. The challenge is recognizing the role of these imaginaries in contexts that are heavily influenced by actors and arguments that claim to be rational. If collective imaginaries do exist, why don't they have a clear role in decision-making, like traffic forecasts?

Part of the imaginary is the stories that we tell, and narratives are critical for both virtual and physical mobilities: before the fact to anticipate where we are going, and after the fact to explain where we went. Narrative has the unique ability to compress time and space into a comprehensible token.

imagined human flight four hundred years before Blériot and the Wright brothers accomplished it; Michel Nadar landed on the moon, in the pages of Jules Verne's *De la Terre à la Lune*, one hundred years before Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin actually set foot there.

Even in our daily lives we always imagine mobility before we accomplish it: whether commuting to work, we think about the traffic ahead; visiting family, we try to imagine the joyous reception; and in a pilgrimage to a holy shrine, the pilgrim will utter a prayer before beginning the voyage. Some mobilities such as tourism, stretch our imagination, which is a major part of their enjoyment; others provide a "reality check," to see if our thoughts about a distant event were real, or just dreaming.

Allen gives a good explanation of the projection aspect, which is a feature of all mobility, whether exceptional or mundane.

Another important point is that mobility isn't just about the journey being made, but what can be made of the journey. A kind of potential mobility serves as a basis for our relationship with the place we live. It's comforting to know we can make this or that trip, even if we never actually make it.

03. What are the main factors behind the production of imaginaries? In particular, how are they influenced by national frameworks?

Imaginaries are the product of a combination of individual elements and collective dynamics. They are influenced as much by individual experiences as by collective representations, based on shared memories and narratives. People project the images that have been superimposed on their memories, ideals, fears and aspirations onto objects, technical ones in this case.

But the dynamics of imaginaries are also forged by society. In this respect, and in the case of mobilities, the national dimension can be crucial, insofar as some systems are highly collective and strongly linked to a territory's construction. Such was the case of the railway in France, one of the vectors of nation building in the 19th century.

A nation is one particular form of social grouping. Nation-states are modern inventions, as described by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. Transportation systems are always an integral part of national self-definition, and as state projects they are a critical part of nation-building.

Imaginaries have a symbolic constitution. Symbol systems have an analogical or metaphorical coherence, which no one confuses with literal fact, even if they cannot really articulate the difference. Symbol systems are organized around a few "key symbols," "root metaphors," or "master narratives," which order and give coherence to the entire system.

For imaginaries of mobility, the nation is one of the master narratives. Nations are what the historian Benedict Anderson called "imagined communities," creating a sense of kin-ship and fellow-ship among millions of people separated by hundreds or thousands of miles. Associated with the rise of mass-distributed print publications and the eclipse of religious imaginaries since the 16th century, the nation became a dominant trope for many different forms of mobility: whether the Trans-continental Railway, uniting the American continent, the automobile as an instantiation of the "American Dream" and American identity, or human flight as national transcendence.

Mobilities in the sense of transportation and communication infrastructures are pursued around the world as means of uniting the nation, of turning the imagination into fact.

Narratives of mobility often are uniquely national: for Americans.

uniquely national territories, mobility is a symbol of freedom, whereas for the French, mobility can be a symbol of sophistication. As with any other translation of poetry, one has to be attentive to the nuances: the music of the imaginary is probably more important than the facts it pretends to convey.

It's interesting to note that the nation - like the railway - is firmly entrenched in both French and American visions that underlie a rhetoric on territories and the founding of both countries. It is especially noteworthy given that the two countries were formed at very different historical timeframes and involved very different territorial scales.

Yet, while their narratives themselves differ, both are nevertheless based on a complex interplay between what the railway conveyed physically and what it conveyed symbolically.

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