

# **Lock-in as make-believe**

Exploring the role of myth in the lock-in of high mobility systems

by

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## ABSTRACT

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All human practices are, ultimately, set and defined by limits; be they social, economic, physical, or environmental. Yet even in the face of such realities, practices which transgress the confines of possibility remain remarkably obdurate. This thesis addresses the issue of one such practice, i.e. the escalation of personal mobility across time and space which pushes above and beyond systemic boundaries.

By so doing, the thesis revolves around the central concept of lock-in, akin to the concept of path-dependence of which the social sciences are more familiar. Lock-in, the process by which systems acquire momentum through the alignment of actors, materialities, and practices with vested interest in system preservation and growth, is deeply dependent on societal acceptance. Yet while widely recognised, social aspects of lock-in remain disfavoured to technological and material explanatory approaches. The aim of this thesis is therefore to explore a component of the lock-in process which has been, in spite of its overlapping features and explanatory potential, mostly or entirely overlooked: myth.

Myth is an emplotted, depoliticised, and naturalised story which serves to justify beliefs and to guide practice. As such, its role lock-in processes is to legitimise path choices based on the taken-for-granted, i.e. unquestioned beliefs of 'good' and 'bad' – not true or false – path alternatives. Myth, in this sense, is therefore not synonymous to a lie or misconception, but to an unquestioned belief that is held in common by its adherents and that exerts influence over the way they chose to live their lives.

The thesis addresses both the theoretical and empirical use of the concept of myth within geographical research, stating that defined as a naturalised story which guides everyday practices, and by extension the creation of place, it may be useful to a wide range of issues addressing place-perception interconnections. These include the importance of language, everyday and unreflected practices, and, as has been the topic of this thesis, the mystery of inertia.

The empirical part explores how a myth promoting mobility as a necessary and endless path to economic growth helps to create and sustain lock-in into a high and ever expanding mobility system. Focus lies on the city of Malmö in the Öresund Region; a city which, following the industrial collapse of the 1980s, has undergone major transformations based on strategies of high regional mobility. The thesis concludes that the myth of prosperity through mobility helps to sustain and reinforce two mutually supporting types of lock-in: institutional – the administrative framework or 'rule of thumb' that guides mobility policy – and infrastructural – the material enactment of myth. By maintaining allegiance to the myth of prosperity through mobility, the only viable option for addressing mounting mobility side-effects is a mobility shift to 'sustainable' modes of transport. Alternative paths which would limit mobility can thus be rejected, assuring continued loyalty to the myth and to ever increasing levels of mobility.

**Keywords:** myth, lock-in, mobility, conceptual advancements in geography, Malmö, Öresund Region

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