

Myths and teleology and trains, oh my!

The more I look at humankind from this airy and beautifully lonely vantage point, the more I come to understand two things. One is that we are a relentlessly teleological species, and the second is that everything we believe in is a myth. Everything. These two assertions are not unrelated, and they are not just tangential to the human condition. They are, to a large extent, what make us human.

Teleology is a concept in philosophy which means, basically, reasoning toward a pre-determined belief. It is deciding what you know is true and working backward to justify its truth. There has been a lot of teleology on display during the current pandemic. Many times I have read that this crisis has changed or will change the way we think about the world, but what I have noticed is that the person saying or writing this actually means not that *his* thinking will change, thank you very much, but that *yours* should. Whatever beliefs we had going into the pandemic are probably very close to the beliefs we have coming out of it, just more so. We incorporated a world-wide crisis into our own belief system, we whipped it and gerrymandered it to make sure it supports just what we want it to support.

Humans are also myth-makers. It is how we model the world so that we can deal with it. What political systems we have, what religions we practice, what social constructs and institutions we make, all are based on myths. That is not to say these myths are bad or that they do not reflect objective reality. Myths such as the divine right of kings, democracy, human rights, money, family, capitalism and socialism are all constructs around which we build societies. As long as we all generally accept the premises of a myth it will work, though some myths are closer to the truth, and therefore work better, than others. Even in the realm of what we like to think of as objective disciplines, myth is regnant. Math and science are myths that model physical reality as closely as possible but they are *not* reality themselves.

How myth making and teleology interact I will leave to the imagination of the reader.

Understanding these two related points is, according to my own peculiar myth making, key to successfully promoting a rail infrastructure, as we attempt to do here at Rails, Inc.

Let's be honest. Most if not all rail enthusiasts are that way because they just *love* trains. It wouldn't matter if rail systems offered not one benefit to humanity, rail enthusiasts would push for trains because, well, they're *trains*, dammit. No other explanation needed.

This does not mean that there are no benefits to trains. I would hardly be writing this blog piece for an organization named Rails, Inc. if I did not believe that rail does not have an important place in the transportation mix of the United States. But it doesn't hurt the cause at all to admit that we are reasoning teleologically – that we promote rail because we like rail. It does mean that rail enthusiasts should relentlessly check their priors and make sure any purported benefit of rail transportation is backed up by facts, and then be willing to change their arguments if they aren't, or if the data turns out to run a different track than we are on.

Rail advocates should also be very careful not to demonize anyone for their opposition to rail. These people reason teleologically just as the rail enthusiast does, but incredibly, they don't have any special affinity for trains. Some people love airplanes, some love cars, some love container ships (when they don't get themselves stuck in the Suez Canal), some don't see why anyone would go anywhere on anything but a motorcycle, some don't see why anyone needs to go anywhere, period. After all, we have Zoom and Amazon, don't we?

These unfortunate folks and others who do not see the engineer's lantern, so to speak, will be more prone to scrutinize the arguments of rail advocates than your ordinary sane lover of trains. That means that rail supporters must remember that the ones they need to convince are not their fellow enthusiasts, but the unenlightened. In other words, make sure you are not preaching to the choir.

And going right along with that, rail enthusiasts should be extremely careful about

falling into the myth world of partisan politics. Progressives and liberals may be the most vocal contingent for rail transportation, but there is a large pro-rail sentiment out there from conservatives and libertarians. Many of them used to put their engineer hats on and run their model trains, too. If rail advocacy is allowed to become intertwined with the goals of just one side of the great American divide, then the very nature of polarizing politics will drive those on the other side away. One could argue that has already begun to happen.

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