

# What could the Railway teach us about Progress?

Terrestrial trains and spiritual railway wagons

*Per-Anders Hillgren*

*is Professor at the School of Arts and Communication at Malmö University and has been working in the field of participatory design for 20 years. At present, he coordinates the research platform Collaborative Future-Making.*

## Abstract

Propelled by steel, charcoal and steam the railway once carried the story of progress and the rise of the developed modern society. While the orient express nurtured a vivid, mythical aura during more than a hundred years, it seems like future stories about the railway mainly gravitate around hyperloops and increased speed. How come the narratives around railways have become so futile? How come imaginaries about progress have got stuck? With the help of critical imagination and the method of design fiction, this article will set out on an imaginary journey to re-storying the future railway and discuss how this could help us rethink progress. Alternative paths will be explored that allow room for stories depicting train rides in slower paces and complex rhythms and materials, a rich melting pot for diverse and vivid sub-cultures, bottom up grass-root services, experimental sharing cultures, touring theater companies, maker movements, and new citizen-driven cooperatives.

**Keywords:** progress, railway, design fiction, critical imagination, terrestrial

## 1. Introduction

The notion of progress has had a central position in our globalized world and can be seen as the spiritual foundation of the Western modern society (Escobar 2017, Sbert 2019). Significantly propelled by Enlightenment thinking it offered a new dream and promises that could replace the salvation that Christianity previously had offered (Wagar 1967). While the understanding of progress has varied, transformed, and exists in multiple forms, from early ideas emphasizing a goal-oriented and linear movement towards human perfection, to a conceptualization stressing more open-ended processes mimicking evolution (Bowler 2021), it still carries the idea of some sort of continuous human betterment. This betterment is often connected to advances in science, technology, and economic growth.

At the same time different forms of critique of progress have been raised. For example, that all achieved betterments will be followed by a decline (Spengler 1991, Head 2016). Another issue relates to the complex value production associated with technological development, where new technology often become useful for some, but at the same time harmful for someone else (Bowler 2021). To understand progress as a general all-encompassing process of increased general value will therefore always be limited by the question of what is counted as value, by whom, for whom and whether it simultaneously reduce value for someone somewhere else (Wagar 1967).

Despite all this critique it's not obvious how to move beyond progress, especially in a way that can be understood as desirable for people. As Bruno Latour phrase it "however open to dispute the word "progressive" may be, it is highly unlikely that anyone can be mobilized by a call to "regress". With the "end of progress" the prospect of living less well than one's parents, the project of learning to shrivel up slowly is hardly going to electrify crowds" (Latour 2018, 49).

This article will elaborate on the notion of progress by using design fiction which is an established method in design research to probe, sketch and explore ideas (Bleecker 2022) and that both enable us to think about the future and to critique current practice (Blyth and Encinas 2018). Design fiction can be seen as a bit more

elaborated and detailed version of a thought experiment (that are common in both science and philosophy) but that brings forward experiential qualities to a larger extent (ibid) and elaborate on what interaction rituals these stories allow and disallow" (Bleecker 2022, 8). It can take different shapes; in its simplest form it consists of a written narrative exploring "what if" questions (ibid). More specifically this article will take the railway as a theme and offer a few alternative fictional stories that are written as blog posts from a fictive railway journalist. In line with the notion of critical imagination, these stories will not be oriented towards futuristic techno-optimism, rather they aim to challenge taken for granted assumptions or concepts and explore how things could be different in the present (Lindström et al 2021), in this case exploring the question: how could we imagine progress differently?

## 2. The railway as an example of progress

When the first public steam railway came to birth almost 200 years ago it got to symbolize industrialism and became the story of progress. Railway tracks were built across Europe and the world, bringing with it the standardization of time and globalization. The orient express nurtured a vivid, mythical aura during more than hundred years, that often far transgressed the literary depictions. A century later the plot in the railway story changed abruptly when cars, airplanes and marketization entered the scene. Suddenly the railway turned out to be a huge rigid inflexible technical system (Meijling 2004), Now, with the extreme predicament of climate change, what new stories could the railway tell us about future progress?

Future looking stories are amazingly poor. One example is the hyperloop, popularized by among others Elon Musk. It consists of a tube with significantly reduced air resistance that allows pods with people to travel at very high speed, propelled by either fans or electromagnetic propulsion systems. As a narrative, this proposal tries to maximize the dis-connection from earth. While inside the tube you don't know if you travel through a beautiful landscape or an industrial dumping ground. The tube could be long or short, distance doesn't matter. The only parameter is time, that ideally is reduced to a minimum. As stated in Elon Musk's white paper, it will be immune to weather and not disruptive to those along the route (Musk 2013).

Through the method of design fiction a few short fictional blog posts will now be shared. The first will invert the hyper-loop and go as long as possible in the other direction, trying to imagine a terrestrial railway fully integrated into the soil.

### 3.1 Railway blog post: The terrestrial train

The terrestrial train takes you from the northern Scandinavia to the south of Europe. The exact route differs depending on seasons. I am entering the train in Copenhagen for a journey to Lisbon in early spring. The terrestrial qualities become evident already when you enter the train. The interior design consists of a wide variety of different wood, wool, hemp, and tile plates that have been produced in different parts of Europe. This is a train made from soil! This is also a journey you should embark upon if you want to evoke your sensorial attention towards the earth, especially through eating amazing food.

Food and beverages are fully synchronized with the route and change according to the regional cuisines that the train passes through. Unlike the commodified local cuisine that you often find in the last-minute tourist shops in airports, the local connection is crafted with high sensitivity. This means that you won't get a curry wurst in Berlin. Rather you will be offered lesser-known local dishes that vary for each departure. For example, after a few hours of travel into Germany we got a small dish based on Milbenkäse. This is a red or black cheese fermented with help of cheese mites which is a local specialty of Saxony-Anhalt. It has got the reputation of being a foodie's train and yes, it is a bit more expensive than most train journeys, but not as much as you would expect. Organically artisan food costs more. However, the train allows both a distribution channel and awareness for the almost three hundred small local producers that are connected to it. This means that they can sell more and therefor also keep prices affordable.

The highlight of this journey is the small detours. One take place in the Loire wine valley where a regenerative farming network a few years ago took the initiative to refurbish an old railway side-track. Following this track for a few minutes takes you to a simple and small but very functional railway stop in the midst of the wine district. It's a quite odd feeling to get of a train on small wooden stairs in a rural farming landscape without a proper train platform

or a railway station. The train stops only for one hour, but here you get the opportunity to buy the most amazing locally made cheese, street food stylish meals from local farmers, and locally produced wine. When the train depart it does so in slow speed, and compared to most trains the windows can be fully opened. Together with the other passengers I enjoy my treasures while inhaling scents and listening to the crickets outside.

Another cool feature on this terrestrial journey is that some farmers have planted raspberries, plums, and apples along the track that you can pick directly from the window during a short stop. However, the most spectacular way this train connect itself to the soil happens when long telescopic sticks with strings of honey are brought to the ground. The purpose is to attract jet ants that slowly crawl onto the train. Why would you then want ants on the train you might think? It's a good reason. This ant has become a famous ingredient at the world-famous restaurant Noma. During my journey the catch was modest, and I only got to taste one. A bit odd, but quite tasty with a humble flavor of lemongrass.

A journey like this might sound a bit too romantic and it is not without its flaws. This time it arrived 3 hours later than expected. If you are in a hurry, then you should pick another train.

### **3.2 Railway blog post: Spiritual train wagons in a maker-space**

It has gone some decades since the makers-movement started, gathering enthusiasts that were eager to build, create, make, or repair things. These makers are often organized as local grassroot initiatives sharing knowledge and production equipment in maker spaces. A few years ago, one of these groups got hold of an old train wagon repair workshop in Paris and set out a vision to add more flavors to the often sterile train design. Since then, they have been quite known for their creative and radical design.

Some of them were retired engineers with a long career in the railway sector, while others were young students interested in up-cycling furniture or electronics and mechatronics. I got to visit their workshop and met with the founder Daphne Lambert. Since the start she and her colleagues they have been building fifteen different wagons and two more are under construction. It all started

when she met with Emile Fontaine who had been working with interior design at SNCF, the national French railway company.

Both Daphne and Emile were quite fond of trains and together they realized that the new production facilities that had emerged within maker spaces such as 3d printers, laser cutters and milling machines would allow a very flexible and more artisan approach to modify and build train wagons. "It's quite amazing how boring, poor, and expressionless most train designs are. Like airports they often look the same with sterile anonymous materials. We wanted to do something people would remember," she tells me when we are strolling around in the workshop.

When more travelers turned to night trains instead of flying around in Europe, Daphne and Emile also saw a potential to design wagons with specific purposes. For example, when the EU commission launched the cultural boost program to support cultural exchange across Europe, this both allowed culture workers to travel for free on the railway, but also opportunities to earn money during train journeys. This gave them the idea to create a "theater wagon" with a quite flexible stage and props that easily could be reconfigured to allow theater, stand-up comedy, or musical performances. Many new cultural formats also started to emerge that took advantage of the train journey.

I have had the pleasure to travel with one of these wagons a couple of times and my first experience was especially amusing. It all started when two people in my coupe started a dialogue about their relationship that dragged your attention, and quickly became very tense. Gradually you started to realize that this probably was a part of a performance. When one of the persons ran away and the other one desperately asked you to come along and help her, and you suddenly ended up in the theater wagon, then you were already immersed in the play. Daphne tells me that their theater wagons often also have been used by live action role play groups that book a whole train to enact their plays.

We are now entering one of the wagons in the maker-space workshop. It looks different than anything I ever have seen, curved shapes, inviting materials, real moss, and stones on large part of the floor, light wood materials such as birch, and bronze gongs that are hanging from the ceiling. It almost looks like a Japanese Zen Garden, and we need to take off our shoes when we enter into it. Ac-

According to Daphne, this is their second “spiritual wagon”. These wagons have not been built on request from any religious community. Rather Daphne and Emile realized that there was a need for a more meditative break for many passengers during long trips. And they have been very popular among business travelers.

The other wagon in their workshop is a “soundscape wagon”, created to allow unique experiences of music. Together with a small experimental musical ensemble they are constructing a whole wagon where acoustic qualities are in the center. “In many ways, the whole wagon can be seen as an instrument” she tells me while she is banging with a stick on different spots on the wall which reveals quite surprising sounds. She explains that the collaborating ensemble will create musical pieces along different routes and they have already signed a contract with a record label that will release an album next year.

The next project after these two will be a wagon with a huge kitchen that allow passengers to take food courses during their trip. Their idea is that one or two famous chefs will share their skills, but also that passengers can exchange their own recipes.

### **3.3 Railway blog post: The Railway Mothers and Edu-Rail**

I am now the owner of my own railway company! Something I couldn’t imagine a few months ago. I have to admit that I am not the only owner, but rather one of many. The Railway Mothers, Europe’s first cooperative railway operator, came to birth as a spin off from the Climate Activist Mothers. I had my first journey a few weeks ago and got to talk with Valeria Rodríguez who was active in the start of the cooperative. She describes how the idea emerged from conflicting interests within their community.

“On one hand we were mothers with a wish to provide our children with opportunities to travel and see the world. On the other hand, we had a strong commitment to reduce CO2 emissions. We realized that we had to do something” she tells me when we drink coffee in the extensive lounge area on their train from Barcelona to Stockholm.

She and some others had been working at Mondragon, a huge Spanish federation of cooperatives and brought that spirit with them into the railway sector. They started with crowdfunding and set up a social media platform to build a community. Initially, they

chartered one train each summer to travel from Spain to Scandinavia. When the community became bigger, they could charter more trains and develop a flexible and agile approach in how to plan routes and journeys. Today they have departures from different parts of Europe every week. Owners must work with on board services on the train or maintenance two days a year.

The train is, not surprisingly, centered around the family. To provide facilities needed by a family they have bought a couple of specially designed wagons. One is specially designed to allow play, sports, and physical activities. Something that comes in handy when you have kids with you on a long journey. They also have a special wagon suited for school and learning activities. Valeria tells me that something they didn't expect was the significant role senior people would have on their trains. Both grandparents and childless elderly have joined as volunteers. Something that have reduced their costs significantly.

I can't stop thinking about the strong male dominance in the railway sector. Still, historically women have had important roles that are forgotten today, for example as crossing keepers.

This initiative will hopefully put women in a more central position in the rail sector.

Now, I will share my experience of another memorable journey I did recently with a new actor in the railway world. It's been a year since Edu-Rail started, a collaboration between 200 of Europe's universities that grows very quickly. Two features make their trains a popular option. One is that the wagons in a flexible way can be re-configured. A coupe or sleeping compartment can easily be rearranged into a workshop or seminar room. They also have special wagons that can be used for different purposes for example as chemistry or electronic labs. The other cool feature is how journeys are booked. It's common that a research group book a large coupe to be able to work together during a journey. However, they also offer a match-making function where different academic disciplines can come together and work on societal challenges. Professionals from different parts of society can also join these multi-disciplinary teams. This is also how I booked my trip. I joined a theme on "energy democracy" where a group of twenty people elaborated on legal, economical, technical, social, political aspects of how energy production could become more de-centralized, democratized



and grassroot oriented. By allowing opportunities to work on the train Edu-Rail has propelled a significant transition among business travel towards more climate friendly railway transport. It's also influencing how research and innovation practices evolve. For example, different funding bodies in Europe have aligned some calls to these train departures and research conferences have become integrated with the journey to and from the actual location.

#### 4. Discussion

How can we understand progress and betterment in our society? What kind of stories fuel the imaginaries of positive change we can hope for? As Latour state we don't want to regress, and the de-growth movement struggles to engage us (Latour 2018).

However, as demonstrated through the fictional blog posts it's possible to imagine processes of change and increased value in our society that follow another route than the modernist and techno-optimist path of continuous economic growth.

Whereas the dominant stories about the railway mainly gravitate around hyperloops, hovering super high-tech magnetic systems, and increased speed. None of the proposed initiatives in the blog posts require any new, advanced, or costly technology. Rather they can be seen as examples of Gaia storytelling that provide a "deep sense of belonging and rootedness in communities, places and nature's life cycles" (Jørgensen et al. 2021).

As Latour claims, attachment and belonging are central to mobilize care for our planet. However, our belonging needs to reach beyond our local birthplace or place of living. He states that "the Local is much too narrow, too shrunken, to accommodate the multiplicity of beings belonging to the terrestrial world" (Latour 2018, 54). At the same time the planet 'as a whole' is too large to evoke a sense of belonging. Latour instead suggest the term Terrestrial that is bound up to the earth and to land but aligns with no borders. Instead of closing itself off, it opens itself up. The story of the Terrestrial train aimed to elaborate on how such a belonging could be nurtured by connecting us to a diversity of local culture and soil.

This is a stark contrast to the techno-optimist idea of the hyper-loop, which is not just disconnected from the soil, it's also remarkably thin "story wise" (you go into the pod and go out again as soon as possible). With the help of design fiction and critical

imagination the stories elaborated here rather aims to thicken futures (Jönsson, Lindström and Ståhl 2021), by being rich in story generating elements, a way of worlding the world (Haraway 2016).

The limitation of these fictional stories is that they will not be enough to evaluate the ideas that are elaborated. On the other hand, they build on trends and technologies that already are established and that have grown recently. For example, connecting many local food producers to a train could be seen as an example of service design or social innovation. The maker movement have become quite established and allow new opportunities for grass root industrial production. Social media and crowdfunding could support grass root activist groups like the railway mothers. The specific ideas in the fictional stories as such are all viable but their specificities are not the most important. However, what is more important is that they can help us to challenge dominant modernist narratives of techno-optimism and re-story the notion of progress (Blyth and Encinas 2018). This is what the stories are meant to do. All build on collaborative and relational approaches and can help us to understand that we can reduce flying and we don't necessary need hyper-loops, and yet, we can continue to thrive and flourish with surprising new opportunities that add value to our lives. This might also provide us with hope in the sense of an ability to hold and sustain more meaningful forms of action and relationality in the world (Jackson 2019).

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