Against sustainable mobility: On the need for irony in sustainable mobility and the democratic need for transport studies
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Setting the scene

This dialogue about sustainable mobility starts with a discussion on the dialogue as a genre of scientific writing, it subsequently reflects on the concept of sustainable mobility and illustrates that there is no such thing as a homogeneous sustainable mobility discourse. The text argues that sustainable mobility primarily deals with questions of justice and goodness and establishes a link to social justice-inspired work. After some thoughts on irony, this contribution deals with the twofold role of transport studies. Firstly, researchers are in the position to make the normative nature of discussions on mobility more visible, and to reflect on the principles underlying transport policy. Secondly, they are able to make a profound analysis of the current transport system and its genesis.

Dialogue

Two researchers meet to discuss further their ongoing work on sustainable mobility. A enters B’s office, knocks on the open door and starts the conversation.

A  Good morning, what are you reading?
B  Hello, you’re already here, welcome. Well, I’m currently reading this book on the design of experiments. It’s a useful source if you want to conduct discrete choice experiments.
A  Let’s have a look, uhm... This part is written as a dialogue, interesting.
B  Indeed, each chapter starts with a real-life situation where the authors visit a company that faces a test problem. During their conversation the problem is sketched and some potential solutions are discussed. It’s an excellent way to illustrate that all this matrix algebra serves practical purposes. It also shows that the final chosen solution is the outcome of deliberation, and that some decisions taken during the research process are not as evident as suggested by the presentation of the final results in a standard research paper.
A  I agree, the way in which scientific work is presented isn’t neutral, but as Andrew Sayer remarked, “with only a few exceptions social scientists have paid surprisingly little attention to the fact that their knowledge is invariably presented in the form of texts”. Unfortunately, his appendix on academic writing does not discuss the dialogue.
B  Why should he have done this? Form isn’t neutral, but hey, I’m just reading a book about applied statistics. The dialogues are a plus, but why should we pay special attention to this aspect? I doubt that Plato would be lost in history if he had written in a different style.
A  I don’t know, but perhaps there is a more relevant question here: can we understand Plato’s work without paying attention to its style, the dialogue? As Feyerabend maintains, Plato deliberately chose the dialogue.
B  Feyerabend, the court jester of philosophy?
A jester, yes, but a brilliant one. And he has written some dialogues himself. Look what he said about Plato’s choice. I have it somewhere on my computer, wait a minute ... ah, here it is. According to Feyerabend, Plato ‘showed much greater freedom than modern philosophers who don’t even consider the problem, who get upset when serious matters are being presented in a disrespectful or in a dramatic way, and who at any rate are being controlled by editors with their own ideas about the proper shape of a philosophical (scientific, theological) sentence’.³

B There he is right. I remember the story of Akerlof who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001, but whose most influential paper, ‘the market for lemons’, was rejected several times by editors. He believes that one of the reasons for rejection was the readable style which was in contrast with the ‘solemnity of economic journals’.⁴ But coming back to the dialogue, what are you trying to say? That writing dialogues would improve the readability of academic journals?

A That’s a potential advantage, though not the essence.

B Then, what is the essential advantage of dialogues? There are other ways to link science to real life. Take for instance this book of Shaw and Docherty, each chapter starts with a story out of the life of the imaginary family Smith.⁵ The effects of transport policy on their lives is illustrated by descriptions of a business trip, their summer holiday and a family visit. The inclusion of dialogues wouldn’t be an improvement in terms of readability, relevance or exposition. And without denying his importance, it’s fair to state that the average work of Plato is not an easy read.

A Maybe, but as the book you’re reading on experiments illustrates, a dialogue can help to bridge ‘the gulf between ideas and life’.⁶ Note that Plato preferred oral over written dialogues, his ideal was a personal conversation and that’s why he considered the dialogue, if I may quote Feyerabend again, ‘the best medium for exploring difficult problems’.⁷ And that’s the essence, both Plato in the Phaedrus and Feyerabend see a conversation as a proper form to apply in the case of debatable things, in other words, when we deal with questions of justice and goodness.⁸

B Thanks for your philosophical reflections; can we now turn to the topic of this meeting?

A You want to talk about sustainable mobility, isn’t it?

B Yes. So, can we forget about Plato for a minute?

A OK, but I’m afraid we will meet Plato again.

**Sustainable mobility**

B I’ve thought a bit about the point you made the last time we met. While we were discussing the definition of sustainable mobility, you claimed that the question ‘what is sustainable mobility’ should be replaced by the question ‘who is sustainable mobility’.⁹

A To be precise, I claimed that it is impossible to distinguish sharply between conceptual and sociological issues when debating sustainability.

B Well, I went through some papers and books on the topic and they confirm your
point of view. According to Enoch, there are two ‘transport tribes’. The first is the ‘supply side camp’ that advocates investments in infrastructure on the basis of their ‘predict and provide’ philosophy. This is the traditional domain of conventional transport engineers and economists. The sustainable mobility tribe on the other hand is rooted in urban planning and related disciplines. Their preferred strategies are Transportation Demand Management or mobility management. Enoch admits that this division in two camps is a bit simple, but he observed increased levels of polarisation between the two sides.

Nevertheless, even I know a couple of engineers who identify themselves with the ‘sustainable mobility camp’.

The existence of such converts does not contradict the existence of camps or tribes, on the contrary. But I agree that it’s not just a matter of opposing academic disciplines. In an iconic paper, Banister presents sustainable mobility as an alternative paradigm, perhaps ‘paradigm’ provides a better description than ‘tribe’. As long as it’s not seen as a scientific paradigm in the strict sense. But the fact that they present themselves as an alternative illustrates the importance of self-identification. We, the sustainable mobility camp, against them, the unsustainable lovers of concrete. However, I assume that the world is a bit more complex than that?

Indeed, I believe that a closer look at a couple of cases enables us to better understand the diversity of opinions regarding sustainable mobility. My plan was to use a search engine to discover which organisations self-identify with ‘sustainable mobility’, as websites are an easily accessible source of self-images.

But … ?

Even when I restrict the analysis to the URLs which contain the Dutch translation of ‘sustainable mobility’, ‘duurzame mobiliteit’, I end up with more than a thousand URLs. When grouping the URL’s per website, I obtained a sample of more than four hundred websites. But the quantity of sites isn’t my major concern, I’m uncertain about the data since it is virtually costless to create an URL which contains ‘sustainable mobility’ or a related term.

Can you circumvent the problem by having a closer look at the links to other websites? Take some typical websites and look whether these refer to the same sites, this approach might offer a more robust view of what is considered sustainable mobility.

Interesting suggestion, give me five minutes.

That gives me time to return these books to your faculty’s library. […]

Ah, you’re back.

I analysed ten websites so far and the results seem robust. Most of them have a link to the websites of the public transport operators, the cyclist federation and the sustainable mobility network, a network of civil society actors. Other popular sites include car sharing initiatives, the Federation for a Better Environment and the Flemish government. This can be considered the core of the Flemish network of sustainable mobility actors, we seem to move towards an ActorNetwork Theory type of analysis.
You can see this as an attempt to map the sustainable mobility actor-world. But ANT-scholars would include a more diverse set of actants, for them railway tracks, the daily passage of bicycle commuters in front of a government building as well as a traffic accident can be part of the network. Here, we just list some organisations on the basis of their websites as a pragmatic way to define ‘sustainable mobility’. It shows that alternatives to solo car use occupy a dominant position in this list. Sustainable mobility is thus a response against a car-dominated society.

Yes, but this anti-car opposition has come in many forms, Paterson discusses no less than seven varieties. A first strand focuses on technological solutions to green automobiles or to replace them by sometimes futuristic new transport technologies. Technological innovation is also proposed as a solution to problems of road safety, a second key issue in anti-car protest, next to emissions. Dependence on oil is a third problem addressed in sustainable mobility discourses, thereby emphasising the geopolitical consequences of the automobile system.

With an obvious link to peak oil debates.

Indeed. Oil dependence and peak oil arguments found their way in the sustainable mobility literature, also in the work of urban planners who traditionally have a more local focus. How the car conquered and transformed urban space is a recurrent theme in the planning literature. The deterioration of public space is a fourth protest-inducing car-related problem discussed by Paterson. The last three are more normative in nature: the obsession of society with speed, the role of the car in the reproduction of inequalities in terms of gender, class and so on, and finally, the hyper-individualistic lifestyles associated with driving.

And why do you consider the latter approaches more normative than the discourse of the technocratic environmentalists? Despite the use of technical language and measurable indicators in many studies and reports, they contribute to a sustainable mobility myth-making process. The typical introduction of a sustainability paper, with all its references to sea level rising, tipping points and levels of CO₂ emissions, tells more about the beliefs and convictions of the authors than about the actual effects of human emissions of greenhouse gases.

I didn’t know that you are a climate sceptic.

I’m not. As far as I know, it seems very likely that carbon emissions will have a significant effect on climate, and that serious health problems are caused by other emissions such as particulate matter. But that’s not the main message of scientific papers which belong to what Baeten calls the orthodox sustainable transport vision.

No, their main message is that we should act. Their recommendations are prescriptive, you can call that ‘normative’.

They indeed say that tough decisions have to be made since business as usual is no longer an option. But their main message is that growth is not necessarily problematic, that society can be greened without affecting the structural characteristics. So far, there’s little evidence that so-called sustainable mobility strategies make a better place of this world.

Come on. Don’t be cynical, several promising developments can be observed. In Belgium, as an example, quite some indicators suggest that sustainability objectives
are slowly but surely achieved within the field of transport. With an average annual growth of 2.41% between 2000 and 2011, inland navigation in the Flemish region could make a nice report.\textsuperscript{19} In 2011, sulphur emissions from inland shipping, rail and road transport have practically disappeared, but twenty, or even only ten years ago, the situation was entirely different. When looking at Belgium’s federal home-to-work travel survey, we see that both public transport and bicycles have gained market share between 2005 and 2011.\textsuperscript{20} Also, national road traffic statistics show that the number of kilometres driven per car registered in Belgium is decreasing, while the number of train passengers increased by as much as 50% between 2001 and 2010.\textsuperscript{21}

A I agree, rail transport is on the rise and is considered by many a key element of sustainable mobility. Today, I came by train myself, but look what I found on their website when I checked the timetable. The most prominent feature is this advertisement.

B ‘Straight to Brussels Airport by train. Child’s play!’\textsuperscript{22}

A And a childlike drawing of a train circumventing a traffic jam. The rail track connects the train to the airplane. This advertisement tells you that rail is primarily seen as a travel alternative; this corresponds to the belief that the main function of public transport is to solve congestion on the road network. Moreover, it supports the view that taking a plane is a normal activity. Rail transport is heralded as one of the pillars of sustainable mobility, but promotes the most problematic mode of transport in terms of climate change impacts, the plane.

B And that’s only half of the story. To increase the accessibility of Brussels airport, a new railway connection was opened in 2012, the ‘Diabolo’. By the way, this was the first Public Private Partnership for the Belgian rail infrastructure provider and they won a European Rail Award for this project.\textsuperscript{23} However, the media labelled the PPP agreement as a ‘killer contract’ since the private investor can force the railway company to take over the investment when passenger numbers are lower than originally anticipated. Some estimate the cost at about one billion euro. This contract is the main reason why so many trains make use of the tunnel, and why increased priority is given to trains to the airport in the most recent timetable.\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps, the ‘straight to Brussels Airport by train’ advertisement should be seen in light of these discussions?

A Probably. But one thing is certain, advertisements offer an interesting entry point for transport research.

B Then you agree with Paterson, whom I referred to earlier, but his focus is on publicity for cars.\textsuperscript{25}

A And also in the case of public transport, what is not said is just as important as what is said. Publicity generally remains silent about the social role traditionally attributed to public transport. Prestigious railway projects and attempts to attract car users might come at the expense of captive rail-travellers, mainstream sustainable mobility discourse generally devotes little attention to the social dimension of sustainability.\textsuperscript{26}

B Despite this focus, public transport remains important for many users to be included in society.
A I agree, but when you talk about sustainable mobility, I’m afraid that more people think about the railway connection to the airport than about the diesel bus that enables an old woman to make her weekly visit to her sister.

B Which brings us back to the initial question: ‘What and who is sustainable mobility?’. Following your approach, it is, among other things, a railway company which aims to improve the accessibility of an airport. What about cycling? That’s far less controversial.

A I beg your pardon? I’m not against cycling, but the propaganda of many governments and universities portrays white, middle class, sporty, male employees as heroes if they cycle twenty or more kilometers to work on an expensive racing bike. Those who fulfil their environmental responsibility in a different way or aren’t able to cycle for whatever reason, they have failed.27 But let us now go back to the question what all sustainability measures have in common.

B Excellent idea, given that we still haven’t found a definition of sustainable mobility. However, it’s hard to find a common element in sustainable mobility indicators, there are more than a thousand of them.28 And the environmental or climate change dimension is not present in all of them. It’s also about liveability, poverty and economic viability.

A The common element is that for each indicator a higher value has either a positive or a negative normative connotation. That’s also what Neuman says, sustainability can be linked to ideas of resilience, carrying capacity and diversity, but remains basically ‘a Platonic idea, a category of the good’.29

B And so, we’re back to Plato. Happy?

A I hope it’s clear that sustainability, and sustainable mobility, is about questions of justice and goodness. Environmental degradation is just one side of the sustainable mobility coin, the other concerns the world we want to live in.

B Then ‘sustainable’ and ‘good’ are synonyms?

A At least in the past decades, it’s time and context specific. I wanted to stress that environmental debates are not just technocratic discussions, the unjust distribution of causes and effects in space, time and along class and gender dimensions is an important aspect of the debate. And, even more important, a negative approach to sustainability which narrowly focuses on emissions and negative impacts misses the essence: it’s all about the good life.

B Isn’t that the point of those paternalists who wrote ‘How much is enough’?30

A The Skidelskys? Yes, they too don’t shy away from morality. But can I make a last reference to Plato and his style?

B The dialogue? I can’t stop you.

A Aren’t debates and dialogues the preferred way to discuss difficult things?

B That’s what you said earlier.

A Isn’t the dialogue, and discussion as a social activity, not the core element of democracy, as is argued by Martha Nussbaum and others?31 Transport scientists are trained to write using technical language, but the Socratic ideal of discussion and dialogue is absent from many studies and courses on mobility.
B Correct, but the past hour I mainly heard cynical remarks from your side. A sham scientist who questions everything and all will contribute little to society. I'm sorry, but that's the truth.
A I know, but I considered it necessary to make my point.

Irony

B Well, what do we need, apart from dialogue and discussion, to make transport policy more fair, just and, ...uhm... sustainable? What's the alternative for your cynicism?
A Irony.
B Irony???
A Yes, irony is the cure for cynicism. Let us follow Jessop on this and consider transport policy as governance as reflexive self-organisation. Transport policy making cannot be equated to hierarchical coordination in which the state implements a policy package to achieve fixed goals, neither is it an example of pure market exchange. And what is a crucial characteristic of governance and thus transport policy?
B Complexity? Opacity?
A Yes, but in the first place, failure. Markets and states are prone to failure as well, just like governance.
B Hey, you conceive failure as an absolute category, it's more realistic to see the spectrum between failure and success as a large grey area.
A Correct, but take for example urban planning in Belgium, virtually all commentators agree that the attempts to preserve open space have failed. It took decades to establish a legal framework, and even after the 1962 law was there, it took until the end of the 1970s to establish zoning plans. Moreover, these plans and the legislation have even facilitated sprawl and ribbon development.
B Yes, but house prices were kept low, homeownership is still a possibility for many households and the land use of each plot of land is known. It wasn't an absolute failure.
A But you have to admit that you consider land use planning in Belgium a failure. At least, that's what you've told me several times. There are several reasons for that; goal-displacements are likely to occur during the establishment of a bureaucratic apparatus and also for technical reasons, and the basic outline of a large-scale plan is hard to change while the world changes unpredictably. Society is not engineerable, isn't it?
B There are some limitations, and if I understand you well, I have to take an ironic stance towards governance failure.
A At the private level, irony means that you continuously put into question the way you conceive the world and the way you currently think about things. At the more public level, irony is also about giving up certainty, and the ironic position involves proceeding as if success were possible while recognising the inevitability of failure.
This optimism explains why it is also called romantic irony, which stands in contrast to the paralysing pessimism of the intelligence.\(^{35}\)

B Pff... that's stating the obvious: we must be both critical and enthusiastic. Is that how we will solve transport problems?

A No, being an ironist is a cure for cynicism. And irony is not obvious, I can't see the irony in all these prescriptive sustainable mobility studies which claim to know what we should, or shouldn't, do. But to answer your question, besides romantic public irony Jessop emphasises two other general principles of governance.

B And these are?

A Variety and reflexivity. Variety, or not putting all your eggs in one basket, is needed to retain flexibility in a complex and changing world. Reflexivity is about learning, but especially about the adoption of a satisficing approach. Reflexivity entails asking the question: 'which outcome is acceptable'.

B ... instead of designing a transport utopia. But should we focus on the outcome anyway? What's more important: the quality of the decision or the decision making process itself?

A Good question, given that society isn't engineerable, how decisions are taken seems to be more important.\(^{36}\) As a consequence, sustainable mobility is primarily a question of participation and democracy.

Science

B This brings us to the existential question of why democracy needs transport studies?\(^{37}\)

A A first role for scientists is helping to make the normative nature of discussions on mobility more visible, and to reflect on the principles underlying transport policy.

B For this, the most useful body of research seems what Farrington named 'the new narrative of accessibility'.\(^{38}\) This literature builds on work in the 1970s\(^{39}\) and focuses on social inclusion and the ethical dimension of transport\(^{40}\). The core idea is that access to activities and facilities is essential to participate fully in society. Access barriers can be financial or organisational in nature, but the focus of accessibility scholars is on the transport dimension. What I particularly like is their practical focus, the literature pays attention to job accessibility, access to food stores, libraries, social activities and so on. It's not an ivory tower literature, but a field of research with close ties to policy making, in particular to accessibility planning policies.\(^{41}\) Such policies and studies pay attention to the daily lives of people, to the real impact of the decline of bus services, and to the transport or accessibility needs of people. To my opinion the accessibility literature tends to focus on more essential questions than studies that search for the most effective and efficient way to reduce the number of cars on our roads.\(^{42}\)

A I understand you prefer to divert from mainstream discourse where the concept of demand, and not need, takes a central position.

B Yes, for accessibility scholars the just distribution of accessibility is based on
the concept of need, hence, actual demand and willingness-to-pay are of minor importance. That is why the option value is considered important, even if you seldom travel by bus, the availability of an alternative or the possibility to travel have some value of their own. But to be honest, I struggle a bit with the concept of need. I do understand that the need to travel is a derived need – you need mobility in order to reach something else such as a hospital or a job location – but how much transport do we actually need? What is the basic level of accessibility someone needs to participate in society?

A It’s a question without an answer, I’m afraid. Perhaps it helps us to see the accessibility discourse in a welfare state context. Some basic needs are undisputed, think of food, shelter and clothing, but discussions about needs cannot be distinguished from the process of needs interpretation. When we claim that we need a bus service or a safe bicycle route, we claim a right, a right to be guaranteed by the state. Transport, in other words, is seen as a social policy problem.

B Hmm … I don’t know… If accessibility needs are everything claimed to be needs…

A That’s excessive relativism, some claims have more validity than others. I just wanted to make clear that there is no objective list of accessibility needs, independent of context and interpretation. Conventional transport planning, however, is permeated with means-end rationality and suggestions of certainty. But again, ethical questions, such as the just distribution of transport, have no answer but require public discussion and debate.

B So, it remains useful to measure how many persons have limited access to hospitals, food stores and schools?

A Of course, investigating the problem is a good thing, and I prefer a problem definition based on access over one based on vehicle counts. But figures will not automatically tell you what to do, but they help in building an alternative imaginary. The accessibility discourse seems compatible with the imaginary of the grounded city.

B The grounded city?

A Just give me a second to find the manifesto… here it is.

B ‘How to build a fairer city’. Looks interesting.

A The authors of this manifesto propose the grounded city as an alternative to the competitive city. For them, fairness is about ‘access to the foundational goods and services that all citizens should enjoy’, and sustainable transport is needed to guarantee this access.

B Interesting, and I agree that accessibility planning and the grounded city offer a positive project, but so far we ignored the downside of mobility: pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, traffic safety, resource depletion, …

A …which brings us to the environmental justice dimension of social justice inspired approaches. Some groups and neighbourhoods get a disproportionate share of the burdens of transport.

B You focus on the distribution of the environmental burden, shouldn’t we take the absolute levels of emissions into account too? The emissions of fifty people making one trip or one person making fifty trips are equal, but it matters whether fifty or five
hundred trips are made. Reducing the need to travel is a relevant issue. A How much travel is enough?, to paraphrase the Skidelsky family. The challenge is to develop a society where less transport is needed ... B ... while guaranteeing access to foundational goods for everyone. Proximity seems key to achieve this goal. Less transport is needed when services, facilities and other destinations are located in proximity to origins and other destinations. That’s why the ‘city is the most sustainable urban form’. A It is, for urbanites living an urban lifestyle. I’m not sure whether such a lifestyle can be considered sustainable. Urbanites living in cities tend to drive less kilometres by car, but this is compensated by their airplane addiction. Even if we offer the spatial conditions for sustainable living, there is no guarantee that citizens will show the desired behaviour. B ‘Desired behaviour”? Well, this sounds a bit ... I don’t know ... you make me worry about the freedom left in our accessibility-based ideal. We haven’t dealt with questions of freedom yet. A And these are important questions to address. But why would the level of freedom be lower in a system based on proximity than in the present car-dominated system? B Well, most people automatically link cars to freedom ... A But I presume that more people are able to travel autonomously using transit, by walking or cycling. Think of children, the elderly and green widows. We’ve lost a lot of freedom with the rise of the car. The idea that thousands of years of human evolution had one telos, one goal: becoming the world’s freest animal, the human car driver, is a fiction. Think also of traffic cameras, toll gates, police controls ... B The shrinking radius of autonomous travel by children is another well-known example. While grandfather was ‘allowed to walk one mile to the woods’, his grandson is only ‘allowed to walk 300 yards to the end of his street’. Indeed, there are reasons to doubt that becoming mass consumers of mobility has made us more free. What can I say, we still live in a capitalist society which is expansive in nature. Growth and consumption are the order of the day, whether we like it or not. A Accordingly, a second role for science, besides debating the moral dimension of mobility, is a profound analysis of the current transport system. B And of how the present situation came about. The car cannot be isolated from its role during the Fordist growth cycle where suburbanisation, mass consumption, increasing incomes and individualisation went hand in hand with the increasing popularity of the car as consumption item and status symbol. The rise of the system of automobility and the associated car culture is well- described, but still relevant since such self-organising systems create the conditions for their own self-expansion. A Interesting, but let me add a critical remark to this interpretation. By presenting automobility as a self-organising system, the role of agency and politics remains underexposed. The promotion of automobility is also the result of deliberate attempts to change society in a particular direction. The outcome is rarely what it was meant to be, but strategies have effects, alternative paths were possible and some relative small networks of people have been influential. Presenting the
history of transport policy as a mere cultural history misses the agency dimension and the fact that the introduction and rise of the car involved struggle and immense investments.57

B But the picture isn’t complete without taking into account the cultural dimension. You can’t understand the success of the car if you can’t explain why and how millions of households took the decision to obtain a car and how this transport technology has entered the daily lives of people. This involved the development of particular lifestyles compatible with the automobile system. And I agree, marketing, government policy and power have shaped car-oriented lifestyles, but some ways of life are easier to promote than others.58

A I don’t know, many a small thing ...

B ... has been made large by the right kind of advertising. Do you want to say that ridiculous car-oriented lifestyles have been successfully promoted: households who spend half of their incomes on luxury cars, get dressed in clothes full of logos of car manufacturers, spend their free time in their garages, ...

A I was just joking. But seriously now, isn’t it interesting to see how particular technologies, such as cars and planes, have shaped society?

B It is. A discussion of the history of the twentieth century wouldn’t be complete without paying attention to the role of the car. And isolating mobility from broader social contexts ...

A ... would be a travesty. This argument is applicable to the success of the automobility system, but also to the success of a particular variant of the sustainable mobility discourse. Would public transport and cycling be actively promoted in London if the advanced producer services weren’t complaining about the city’s transport infrastructure?59 Can we not see sustainable mobility policy in New York as an elite project that goes hand in hand with gentrification and exclusion?60

B Probably not, but I still support local initiatives which promote cycling, transit, traffic calming and a more local economy.

A You’re right to do so. Please, don’t become a passive, cynical intellectual, but it would be too naïve to think that without altering the structure of society, compact, transit-oriented cities would solve the environmental crisis, and would be free of domination and exploitation.

B If I understand you well, I have to see the irony of my position.

A Uhm ... yes, among other things.

B And what about policy advice? Can we, as scientists, advise governments to implement sustainable mobility measures? We can play a role in improving the transport system, can’t we? Doing research isn’t just a hobby; researchers can help policy makers by summarising scientific evidence and by formulating policy recommendations.

A Yes and no, it depends what you mean by ‘summarising’. Is this a consensus-building activity?

B To a certain extent ...

A But we concluded that there is no such thing as a homogeneous discourse on sustainable mobility.
B No ...
A Neither should this be a goal ...
B ... since the public debate you want to encourage requires diversity?
A Exactly, and when scientific work crosses the wall between Science and the State, it should be clear that recommendations are never of a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ nature.
B A wall? Do you really want to work in a kind of ivory tower? I learned a lot from non-academics, we have no monopoly on knowledge.
A I agree, but the wall between Science and the State is needed to provide a free environment for scientists, remember that science needs methodological anarchism and disrespect for established conventions. Off course, researchers should leave this protected environment from time to time, and then it’s up to society to decide what to do with the findings. A consensus text is of no use for the subsequent broad societal debate. By this I mean a real debate, not one dominated by a limited number of powerful actors.
B Nevertheless, it’s logical that scientists who investigate a problem form an opinion and actively participate in public debates as responsible citizens. And that’s a good thing.
A You’re right, as long as scientific findings don’t kill the debate. But you have to go to your meeting and I want to go to the toyshop around the corner to buy a toy car for my godchild’s anniversary.
B A toy car, isn’t that ironic?
A ...
REFERENCES

37. As the careful reader will note, this is a clear reference to Nussbaum’s ‘Why Democracy Needs the Humanities.’
42. the ‘new narrative of accessibility’ is thus here considered the ‘final vocabulary’, to use Rorty’s term (op. cit.).


