

1. Crossed Perspectives



Questioning transport Infrastructures

Between Mathias Emmerich (directeur général adjoint finances, achats et systèmes d'information de SNCF)

And Stephen Graham (Géographe - Urbaniste)

03 March 2014

From one side to another of the Channel, a British sociologist and a Board Member of the SNCF discuss the impact of public infrastructures on society, from an economic, politic and social perspective.

01. What's the purpose of building public transport infrastructure? Is it to meet people's travel needs? Combat social inequality? Promote democracy?



Mathias Emmerich

The first criteria should be to meet people's travel needs. However, there are other criteria, which means that the infrastructure we invest in are not always in tune with their social value or the needs expressed.

Does developing public transport infrastructure counter social inequality? Yes, if the investment policy improves transport in everyday life.

Does it promote democracy? I wouldn't go that far. I fear that as far as the French model is concerned, in any case, transport policy has at times tended to favor cronyism more than democracy.

The greatest need for transport in the world today is in mega-cities.

The mega-cities in North countries - Paris, London, New York, etc. - were all built over the course of a century. Complex rail networks, underground train systems and stations were all built.

The dynamics in major cities in South countries have been quite different. In just 20 years, in some cases, we have seen the emergence of cities of 10, 15, 20 million inhabitants built around the car, neglecting public transport. Whole worlds have been created - in Sao Paulo, Djakarta, Mexico City, major Chinese cities, etc. - that are unbearable in terms of pollution, noise and traffic jams.

In this respect, what has happened in such areas shows that building public transport infrastructure is a means of combating social inequalities as, in these megacities of the South, the poor living on the outskirts can hardly afford expensive, insufferable trips by car.



Stephen Graham

There are multiple reasons to have a very robust, well-managed and well-funded public transport system. Clearly, social inequality is a fundamental issue. If you entirely distribute mobility via the market, you're going to marginalise – or ghettoise – huge swathes of the population. Without their own private vehicles they won't be able to access labour markets, services and, ultimately, democratic participation. Inhabiting a space together sustains the idea of a democratic public society, while a society that splits people off into the private capsules of their cars often struggles to sustain that idea. Just to be visibly present with other citizens of the city in the same place is important.

However, there are not just a social, political and democratic questions here.

Public transport is also fundamental to the economies of cities. It's far less costly to move a million people or more by public rather than private transport – in terms of land use, pollution and the time wasted in congestion. A final point is that the degree of public transport in cities relates very closely to the quality of life, the landscape and the atmosphere. Mass car use often helps to trigger more urban sprawl, more rushes to the periphery of the city and more catastrophic problems of air pollution – which is fast becoming a major killer in countries like China and India.



M. E

I largely agree with the analysis regarding infrastructure for mass transit, i.e. daily travel, especially in large cities.

Even though this was not my initial reaction, I find the idea that the possibility of sharing the same living space is a key aspect of “living together” in a democratic public space interesting.

I think it would be interesting to broaden this idea to include new modes of public transport, such as the use of private assets for collective transport, notably intra-urban carpooling.

What impact would this have on the development of new social links, transport economics and economic public order (fiscal and social)?

02. How would you assess this issue in Europe, specifically in the UK and France?



Mathias Emmerich

From 1970-2000, in France, the focus was on developing the High-speed rail network, which is a wonderful transport tool but is not destined to serve the masses— even if it has more than 100 million passengers a year. The TGV largely remains a tool designed for the upper middle class.

Moreover, it started by building the most useful and most profitable lines. But now, the larger the network becomes, the more the infrastructure’s marginal efficiency decreases, for both the network’s manager and the transporter. The new lines scheduled for 2016-2017 (Brittany – the Loire Valley, the Atlantic coast of southern Europe and the 2nd phase of the TGV East), along with the projects between France and Italy, and France and Spain, are no longer relevant in terms of transport economics. We are in a world of symbols, desires and myths (the unification and pacification of Europe by high speed travel). These are not projects that meet an immediate social need. They are, however, extremely expensive.

At the same time, our politicians have been/were reluctant to invest in the Transilien network in the Paris region, for example, so that passengers could travel in satisfactory conditions. We have stopped investing in this network. And yet, doing so is ultra-relevant in terms of social democracy. Meanwhile, tens of billions of euros are being spent on systems that serve no purpose, like the Lyon-Turin line.

For years, the United Kingdom allowed its rail system to fall into disrepair. Today, it is reinvesting substantially, via a €40 billion plan that focuses much more on daily commuting rather than high-speed travel. At the same time, France is investing heavily in a system that initially was intelligent, but which is increasingly less so – as it affects markets that are increasingly less relevant.



Stephen Graham

There are very interesting contrasts between these two countries – very different governmental systems and traditions of infrastructure provision, and different ideas of privatisation. As well as full state ownership of national monopolies (as with the national rail system), the French system sustains a lot of large, public-private infrastructure providers, especially in the utilities and water local public transport sectors. These operate with the state on a basis of very detailed regulations and contracts for whole systems. It can be very successful because it allows you to sustain long-term infrastructure systems as a single whole.

The problem with the British system is that it developed from a very radical ideology of markets during the Thatcherite privatisation era and was obsessed with large varieties of providers all competing for the same uses. Yet anyone who understands how markets work and the geography of infrastructure knows that's not really tenable for public transport. In many cases, there is poor regulation. Subsidies to keep socially-oriented services can be high but don't have effective results. The dogma against UK state provision means that often you have the strange situation where UK infrastructure is provided by state infrastructure organisations of non UK states.

There can also be problems of confusion and over-complexity where a the provision fails to cohere as an overall system from the user's point of view (in terms of information, cross-ticketing, and legibility). Outside London, bus operators compete with each other for the same users and don't integrate with rail transport. It's also hard to get the best train information.

With the French system, even where there is private provision, the focus tends, within the constraints of EU competition law, to emphasise single monopolistic systems that operate in a coherent, planned and legible way – based on social, ecological and urban planning objectives. It's not just about rates of returns and shareholder demands.



M. E

As it is presented above, I feel that the distinction between the state-regulated monopoly in France and the excesses of an unbridled, free-market approach in Britain is somewhat black-and-white.

The French duo of the State and the national rail operator is not without tension or conflict. State decisions are sometimes taken to the detriment of the public operator, either when undue burdens are placed upon it, or when arbitrary decisions are imposed on it without consideration.

Conversely, the Department of Transport in Britain has, over time, gained genuine proficiency and recognition as transport organizer, and the competitive mechanisms it has implemented may, in fact, prove transparent, fair and therefore democratic.

03. What should be the priorities of public authorities today –national or local – on the question of public infrastructure?



Mathias Emmerich

The major challenge for railway sector in the future will be revamping existing lines. In France, this has already been done where it was easiest to do so, i.e. outside the Paris region. The authorities plan to reinvest heavily in the Paris region, but the situation is extremely alarming, in terms of reliability, conformity and its ability to maintain frequency.

So now, we're going to tackle the 'big' one — the Paris region. The concern is that the works will disrupt the lives of people who already think that public transport is getting worse and worse, although the objective is clearly the opposite. This situation could last for years.



Stephen Graham

There are huge challenges ahead. Climate change and re-engineering systems to minimise their production of greenhouse gas emissions is one. Then there's the challenge of austerity and social equality that is often entrenching and deepening in societies. How do mobility and public transport systems interact with that and help to address the increasing sense of marginalisation felt by certain groups – whether they be ethnic, social or demographic groups?

Added to that, the nature of cities is changing and we are now seeing the development of multi-centred or 'networked' cities across whole regions. Often, it's not so easy to deliver transport for these geographies because public transport was originally set up as a radial system of commuting into centres. So there's a need to build networks and to innovate with technologies for these multi-centred, wide-scale urban regions. It's a huge challenge because many new peripheral urban environments are quite low density and don't easily support economical public transport.

More broadly, there's a need to think about the role of public subsidies – that are increasingly coming under pressure from austerity regimes – without rushing into a knee-jerk, 'market is God' paradigm.



M. E

It seems to me that one possible response to these new challenges is to have a tariff structure for drivers that reflects the actual cost of use of public space (roads and car parks) in the megacities. In Europe dozens of cities have implemented such measures, thereby generating new sources of revenue to finance public transport infrastructure and services. However, the return on these investments is of these infrastructures and services is steadily decreasing, as cities expand and become less dense.

The question of how fair these measures are socially and how acceptable they are to the public arises when alternative public transport solutions are not immediately available.



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