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The Railway and Modernity

Time, Space, and the Machine Ensemble

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Preface

This collection of essays is an attempt to take the history of the railway out of railway history. All too frequently, in spite of the voluminous and often impressive scholarship on the railway, it has been examined in ways that have helped to disconnect it from the broader cultural history of modernity of which it has been such an important and even emblematic part. Conversely, where academic work has tried to connect the railway to its overarching historical context and to its cultural representations, as in the accounts of modernity within cultural studies, it has often seemed unsophisticated, if not irredeemably clichéd, because it has treated the railway as an unproblematic symbol of technological and social progress. This book therefore proposes that the railway should be reappraised neither exclusively as a transport system nor merely as some floating signifier for the spirit of modernity. The chapters that comprise it insist that the history of the railway is a rich and contradictory cultural experience that has taken place within a complex and developing network of social relations.

One of the startling features about much twentieth-century writing on the railway is the measure of its focus on economic dimensions and, even more overwhelmingly, on trains *per se*. The emphasis of so much writing on trains themselves, to take this phenomenon first, is in part related to various forms of nostalgia; but it also reflects the passing of vast bodies of railway records into the hands of public record authorities. As corporate institutions, most private railway companies generated huge arrays of official papers that have made the writing of railway history a highly feasible occupation.[1] The difficulty, though, is

1 The English publishing house of David and Charles was largely built upon the production of railway company histories. Another example is provided by Ian Allan. Both embraced railways in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

that the form of those institutions inevitably circumscribes the scholarly perspectives that can be obtained. It is no easy task to step outside the body of corporate decision-making or company operating systems.

The economic preoccupation has a number of explanations, but they can be usefully summarized with reference to W.W. Rostow's famous analysis of the stages of capitalist economic growth.[2] The railway and its construction made huge derived demands on materials, technology and men, such that it helped force the pace of (or at the very least sustain) expansion in most leading industrial sectors. Equally, it became a major focus of rentier investment. It also performed the legendary Smithian function of deepening and widening markets, embracing flows of agricultural and industrial goods on spatial scales hitherto unimaginable. The rise of Chicago as 'Nature's Metropolis' in the later nineteenth century, as a hub for the agricultural production of its western hinterland, makes the point eloquently.[3] In Europe, some inland coalfields found their market access enhanced ten-fold and more through the facility of rail communication. For Rostow, the railway was a key to unlocking the secrets of nineteenth-century economic success[4]. And its record arguably afforded clues for developing-world nations to follow suit in the twentieth century. In Europe and North America in the twentieth century, meanwhile, the economic problems of railway systems became a vivid mirror of their earlier success, the persistent efforts of governments to rejuvenate them becoming itself a quantum of their formerly pre-eminent economic role. Even under the revisionist gaze of the counterfactual and quantitative history of the 1960s, the economic preoccupations of most railway history survived to remain centre-stage. What altered was that the railway appeared less and less convincing as a *sine qua non* of nineteenth-century economic growth across the industrialized world. When researchers probed their statistical

2 Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

3 See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991).

4 Rostow's thesis was subsequently heavily contested on a number of counts; see the summary in Patrick O' Brien, *The New Economic History of the Railways* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

tools behind the vast array of superlatives, they saw the railway as merely one element in a vast array of contingent economic relations.[5]

Until about twenty years ago, therefore, the railway was studied and evaluated, as we have insisted, in a way that largely detached it from the society of which it was part. And this is the more surprising when one pauses to consider its presence in literature, in art, and in film. Nineteenth-century periodicals across Europe and in North America are littered with references to railways, not least among them medical and legal texts. In Britain the satirical magazine *Punch* found in the railway a perpetual source of copy from its very first issue in 1842. The illustrated papers, like *Harper's Weekly* in America and the *Illustrated London News* in Britain, presented the railway in a vast repertoire of images. In realist fiction, meanwhile, the railway structured plots and shaped narrative perspective. A whole species of writing, non-fictional as well as fictional, became popularly known as 'railway reading', tied as it was to the captive reading time that railway travel generated.[6] In art, the railway as subject embraced a range of styles from representative realism through impressionism and cubism to surrealism. And just as a writer like Dickens could register the railway both in its creativeness and its destructiveness, so painters portrayed its disasters as well as its triumphs.

If one looks beyond the economists' statistical columns and the company minutes, therefore, it quickly becomes apparent that the railway existed in a life-world that found record in a vast spectrum of artistic, social and mental practices. It was embedded in the routines of everyday life, but it also played on human consciousness. Ultimately, it fulfilled a part in being. Recently, there has begun to be some recognition of such themes, particularly if one is prepared to cast the net widely across the disciplinary divides. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's pioneering work, *The Railway Journey* (1977), offers a key example.

5 For America, see Robert William Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964); for Britain, see Gary R. Hawke, *Railways and Economic Growth in England and Wales 1840–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

6 See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp.189–90.

Grounded in European traditions of critical sociology, it affords a rich exploration of the industrialization of consciousness. Schivelbusch positioned the 'machine ensemble' of the railway at centre-stage in this process, and insisted that understanding its role could provide a key to the learned behaviours of industrial society. John Stilgoe's *Metropolitan Corridor* (1983), for its part, designates the portion of the American built environment that evolved along railroad rights-of-way over the fifty years after 1880. Not only did this involve an unprecedented arrangement of space, but a whole new style of living. The corridor formed a conduit of modernization. But the way Stilgoe recovers his subject is through a penetrating examination of its visual images and not through the dusty papers of extinct railroad companies. In *The Railway Station: A Social History* (1986), by Jeffrey Richards and John MacKenzie, to take another important example, the station is presented both as key force of order, regulation and discipline in society, but also as a new focus for violence, crime and immorality.[7] The book thus alights on the central contradiction that the present volume seeks to elaborate.

For Britain, Michael Freeman and Ian Carter have both recently explored key aspects of the railway's cultural relations under modernity.[8] According to Freeman, the railway functioned as a remarkably powerful cultural metaphor, deeply embedded in the society and practices of which it was part, whether the newly-emerging science of geology or the circulatory scheme of capital that Marx so intricately delineated in *Das Kapital*. Meanwhile, *The Journal of Transport History*, published by Manchester University Press, has lately revealed a growing sensitivity towards the railway as part of lived practice, as a vital constituent of emergent social relations in the modern era. Issues of gender, of propaganda, and of ideology, have emerged to lend whole new perspectives to transport history. Even at the edges of the disciplinary canvas, the railway seems to be acquiring new forms. Rande Kostal's *Law*

7 Jeffrey Richards and John M. MacKenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.94.

8 Michael Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

and English Railway Capitalism (1994), for example, has demonstrated how the law affected and was influenced by railway expansion in ways that defy customary political and economic interpretations. Kostal records a powerful dialectical exchange between the world's first steam railway companies and an ancient, largely unreformed system of law and lawyering, forming a 'double helix of interactivity'.[9]

The present volume seeks to build on these trends by drawing together a variety of authors, from different disciplinary backgrounds and intellectual traditions, to attempt to convey something of the depth and contrary dimensions of the railway's cultural history. All of the contributors presuppose the idea that the railway has been one of the cardinal projects of modernity, especially in its characteristic reconfigurations of the relations of time and space; but in varying ways all of them also touch on some of its inherent contradictions, its incongruities. These were inescapably part of sets of dialectical forces that could assign satanic imagery to the technology and the social relations of the railway at one moment and could view them in utopian anticipation at the next. To appropriate Marx's celebrated description of capitalist modernity, the railway has historically been 'like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world which he has called up by his spells'.[10]

9 Rande W. Kostal, *Law and English Railway Capitalism,* 1825–1875 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.8

10 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.226.