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Train Time: Railroads and the Imminent Reshaping of the United States Landscape

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The publication of this book could not have come at a more appropriate time. A convergence of factors, particularly related to globalization, congestion and energy prices, has propelled a renewed interest about the role of rail in the North American transport system, both for passengers and freight. *Train Time* seeks to address this ambitious task with an abundance of facts and clever observations.

The introduction begins with the author underlining the end of an era characterized by car-dependent urbanization and cheap energy. The costs of maintaining such a system are becoming increasingly difficult to bear by governments, communities and individuals. Cars and trucks have fully claimed the North American transport landscape. Many road infrastructures are crumbling from overuse, lack of maintenance and an inability to keep up with traffic demands. The return of rail is the obvious alternative to this conundrum. However, this demands an assessment about the role that rail played in the past and the potential future impacts it may have on the American landscape.

As far as the majority of rail passengers services are concerned, the recent history is one of abandonment of lines, where the author uses the case of Greenbush, MA. The wilderness has taken over and removed many past signs of rail occupation leaving the occasional passerby wondering about a past no longer there, but which “*whispers*” to the present. Still, rail has many voices kept by avid adherents organized into historical rail societies and an array of publications. The author rightfully underlines that in spite of past changes, rail remains strongly embedded into the popular culture, which takes many forms. A salient example is Thomas the Tank Engine, a children’s series (videos and line of toys), which popularity can be puzzling since the technology and the landscape depicted has ceased to exist more than half a century ago. “*Whispers*” are also about the potential return of rail services in view of congestion and the growing difficulties to commute. Passenger services were actually much faster than any contemporary road service. Sometimes, it begs to wonder why such efficient services were abandoned in the first place, a question debated by the following chapter.

Technological changes commonly result in locational changes and new commercial opportunities. Lynchburg, Virginia as a classic example of what is commonly known as the bypass effect brought by a changing transport geography. In this particular case the town was impacted by changes that have taken place both for rail and air transportation. Lynchburg’s rail hub function, referred as a jewel along a “*necklace*”, ceased with the abandonment of many long distance rail services, mainly because of the convenience of air travel. Its locational advantage became mostly irrelevant. Lynchburg was also bypassed by interstate developments and subsequent attempts at establishing an airport were also

eventually by-passed by the inconvenience of the location in light of existing regional airports. The author underlines well in this chapter the impacts of a changing regional transport geography and wonders if locations such as Lynchburg will again be asserted with a resurgence of rail.

The processes that have “*sidetracked*” railway development may be repeated in the 21st century, this time roads will be the short-changed mode. Again, history is full of lessons avidly documented by the author. For instance, we can appreciate the importance of rail for the World War II effort, but paradoxically this prevented technological development and the diffusion of diesel locomotives (fuel shortages). Then, post-war regulations, lobbied by the highway, trucking and automobile industries, limited passenger train speeds and made passenger rail even less competitive. Yet, in light of rising costs and congestion a similar fate could impact highways with history coming full circle. The current state of disrepair of road infrastructure and hints at privatization certainly underline that roads could be sidetracked.

The author undertakes a fascinating description of rail as a “*resort*”, namely the train as vacation in itself and as a mean to reach resort areas. Railway companies successfully addressed this duality and many got involved in the hotel and resort development business. The author wonders if trains would again become a dual resort activity, more than the current niche role. Even more fascinating is the description of train travel as a luxury with ample descriptions of the impressive amenities, namely high cuisine, the passengers had access to. Today’s flying experience, even first class air, is in complete contradiction with what rail used to be. For this chapter the book essentially takes the form of a treatise in sociology with the notion of class and social interactions that were shaped and reflected by rail travel. Although the lavish luxuries of the past are unlikely to be seen again, in today’s environment many amenities can play to the advantage of rail. Acela, the fast rail service between Boston, New York and Washington, represents a modern version of improved amenities with better seating, comfort and on-board services than any counterparts.

Rail as a mail service provider is also part of the agenda, both past and present. The first “*express*” mail services were introduced by the railroads with a surprising level of efficiency and geographical coverage, on which many communities depended. The author rightfully underlines that the emergence of major retailers (e.g. Sears or J.C. Penney) was dominantly based on a catalog order service and that could rely on rail to deliver parcels to customers. Early just-in-time distribution systems were strongly coordinated by rail, but like passenger services the system collapsed by the 1960s. The author discusses to what extent this form of rail based distribution system may reemerge, a process seriously considered by major parcel shippers in the selection of their terminals (e.g. Willow Springs in Chicago for UPS).

It is no secret that freight dominates rail operations and is seeing renewed developments, as evidenced by the improvement of the Meridian Speedway linking more efficiently eastern and western rail systems, as well as with Mexico. This is part of a long evolution where different means and technologies competed for the setting of intermodal rail, mainly TOFC (trailer on flat-car) and COFC (container on flat-car). The author underlines well the challenges and limitations that freight distribution is facing, particularly double-stacking which bought some time for the rail companies in view of surging long

distance “*fast freight*” demands. The next phase is focusing on double (or triple) tracking and possibly the electrification of specific corridors. Once in place, rail freight will be much better placed to answer North American freight mobility needs and more efficiently compete with road. The importance of this process cannot be underlined enough for the role of rail in North American freight distribution.

While in the past road became an alternative to rail, the situation has flipped since rail becomes an alternative to cope with the fast degradation of the interstate highway system. This relationship is however not as straightforward, namely for “*bulk*” agricultural commodities that in the Midwest are trucked to increasingly distant grain elevators or other specialized rail terminals. The author underlines that such a trend is mainly the outcome of more efficient bulk rail freight services, particularly unit trains, which resulted in more trucks damaging local roads ill-prepared to deal with such traffic. Coal is also a large market for rail transportation, particularly after the Clean Air Act of 1970 that required low-sulfur coal for power plants, coming mostly in unit trains from the Wyoming region instead of from the more traditional Appalachian market. The prevalence of unit trains underlines the problem of grade crossings, which if replaced by overpasses, open new opportunities for more efficient rail services, both for passengers and freight. A higher separation between rail and road systems remains a challenge.

The chapter “*transfer*” is a bit more complex to assess as it discusses attempts at integration of long distance commuter rail with transit systems in New York, underground rail freight services in Chicago and the regulation of the trucking industry. Still, the author underlines the challenges of passengers and freight rail terminals as key elements of the interface between cities and regional, national and global transport systems. With suburbanization and global supply chains, the challenge of reintegrating rail with urban areas is enduring. Urban transit is likely to be a key element.

Automation has much to contribute to improving rail systems as it is a relatively simple task but impeded by unions and regulations. The author then abruptly switches to public transit, particularly light rail and trolley systems. The emergence and disappearance of streetcars from the majority of American cities is a salient example of an urban transport system falling victim to congestion and suburbanization. With few existing systems before the 1970s, the controversial return of urban light rail, which the author cautions about, often does not service the effective demand, but tends to be limited to a few areas. It thus represents in many cases a failure to reintegrate rail with urbanization.

In *Train Time* the author masterfully present several key dimensions of past and future rail development and this with much detailed evidence. It may be focusing a bit too much on passenger rail issues, but this emphasis is very understandable considering how much this mode has regressed and the market potential it represents for the future; in today’s market rail freight is already spoken for. This accessible book is a must for readers wishing to understand the relationships between rail, the spatial structure and the shape of things to come. No particular background is required except a level of enthusiasm, which is easily conveyed by the author’s writing style. It is certainly difficult and almost impossible after reading the book to disagree that railroads are back in force in the North American landscape. What remains to be seen is the nature and extent of this comeback. Will the sequel of the rail story be better than the original? The book gives a variety of pertinent hints that it will be so. It represents a much

welcomed addition to the paucity of research about the redefinition of the role of rail transportation in North America. The whisper has become a shout.

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