



International Conference

Railways and Speed

Two centuries of speed on the railways, thirty years of high-speed trains

14 -16 December 2011

International Union of Railways
16, rue Jean-Rey
75015 Paris

The conference is supported by:
SNCF, International Union of Railways, AFFI

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Calendar of events:

- Call for papers: 7 February 2011
- Deadline for submissions: 15 May 2011
- Speakers will be notified by June 1st, 2011.
- Deadline for submission of a paper to the *Revue d'histoire des chemins de fer*, which will publish the conference proceedings after a peer review process : March 1st, 2012



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Deadline for submissions: 15 May 2011

Please send to the conference secretary, by May 15, 2011:

- a one-page abstract of the proposed paper,
- mention of current position, institution (as they will appear in the conference program), full address
- a brief CV, current research and recent publications, (link to personal webpage where appropriate).

Speed on the railways is characterized by distinctive features, relating to techniques and associated organizational models implemented both on conventional lines and high-speed networks. Three lines of enquiry may be suggested here to analyze concepts and practices.

‘As fast as possible’: The continuous quest for speed in the railway world

Speed is a major component of the operation of lines and networks. In this respect, it offers a response to the intensification of traffic. We would like to consider the following points (but the list remains open).

In their perception of speed on the railways, historians have underlined traction techniques and devices used to ensure the stability of the trains, but these are only part of the techniques which railway speed requires. The history of land speed records for rail vehicles illustrates this approach.

Increasing speed is a major means for ensuring the smooth flow of traffic and improving line capacity. It is closely dependent on the design of routes (e.g. the problem of curves) and the infrastructural technology of tracks and fixed equipment.

Speed on the railways has always been perceived as a source of insecurity (perhaps through the kinetic energy). But it is, at the same time, a safety factor, as suggested by numerous debates between engineers.

Traction techniques have privileged speed in all forms of rail transport, but this effort should be studied in close relation to the load of rolling stock and the nature of the freight or service provided (postal services for example).

The following topics will therefore be given special attention:

- Science and the culture of railway engineers: the definition of the offer of speed.
- Overall innovation throughout the whole rail system: traction, tracks, operation, tariffs, logistics, passenger comfort. Which aspects of innovation are permanent, which are in renewal?
- International competition, the battle for speed records, industrial and commercial issues between 1930 and 1960 and between 1980 and the present day (chronology and comparisons).

The French high-speed system: change or continuity?

The history of the dialogue between the offer of speed and the demand for it opens the way for a history of speed considered as a product. Both freight and passenger transport are concerned.

The first – freight transport – has been less studied than the latter. Yet the subject is a very rich one: transport of fresh food products, live animals, the problem of punctual delivery, or ‘just-in-time’, which was a preoccupation from the beginnings of railway transport for all

kinds of goods and routes. It is worth noting that the history of tariff policies linked to speed is indicative of market requirements.

The traveller in a hurry (more frequent than the traveller who enjoys the somnolence caused by the train's movement) deserves our special attention. We might think of the figure of the 'businessman', who appeared in the early years of railway travel. To ensure the possibility of a round trip, within one day, to Paris, to the provincial capital or to the main town of the department, was one of the main concerns of railway operators. These mythical businessmen were the clients targeted by the fastest trains put into operation in the 1950s and 1960s, as advertisements of the time clearly show. But the desire for speed could also affect other, longer-term travellers such as tourists, journalists or university teachers (think of the widespread phenomenon in France of 'turboprofs', living in Paris but teaching in a provincial university). This question should be examined through real situations and case studies, such as night trains, connections from one Paris station to another, time spent waiting at stations or car parks.

First-class passengers are not the only ones to be considered. We should also look at overall 'speed policies' and their implementation, which depend on the nature of the journey and the traveller's class in terms of pricing, timetables and connections. The 'right to speed' for all passengers, which the promoters of the French TGV put forward, is the result of a long process of transformation of railway operators' views and social practices.

Other questions can be raised where the TGV is concerned:

- Historiography, in particular the work done under the aegis of the AHICF between 1990 and 1994. What interpretations can we offer of the history of high speeds in France, and elsewhere, from 1964 to the present day?
- What further developments of the TGV system are to be expected in France and abroad?

'As fast as necessary', or speed in perspective

The question of the relationships between speed, social behaviour and territorial planning comes naturally to mind. Such an analysis could call on a comparison between conventional and high-speed trains. It could cover the following areas:

- The perception of speed by the passenger and by the transporter: the nature of the demand for speed?
- The transformation of social practices in relation to speed (see, in particular, the surveys undertaken by the SNCF) in all fields of activity, whether professional or private. The experience of the suburbs should be addressed as well as longer train journeys, on the basis of a comparison with other means of transport and intermodal travel combining several types of transport.
- The role of speed in territorial planning has already been extensively studied. Nevertheless, the confrontation of the views of the railway operators and their achievements, the accurate analysis of actual facts, such as the effect of travel time reduction or basic interval timetables on the location of activities and urbanization processes, are still to be examined. Do the

qualities of urban development and travel speeds turn out to be antagonistic? Can speed and service (frequency of direct links) act in synergy or are they mutually exclusive? What is the role of specialization in traffic (lines used by one type of traffic) in this dialogue? What are the different models of service including speed or high speed that can be compared around the world?

What was the effect of express trains on the distribution of population throughout the country? What is the effect today of the TGV? Can we take stock of these developments? Has the centralized high-speed network marked the end of a densely connected network of routes? The transformation of the national network into a network which might be compared to that of the Paris Metropolitan is indeed a major change in the history of planning and development policies.

Finally, the relationships between railway speed and the issue of sustainable development should be studied in their evolution over time, particularly in view of the comparison of travel by rail, air and motorway. It raises the question of the cost of speed, beyond that of dedicated high-speed infrastructures and the history of how they were paid for.
