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The Effective Fiction of Internationality

***Analyzing the Emergence of a European Railroad System in
the 1950s***



There is a long historiographic tradition of linking the history of railroads to the history of nation-state development. Therefore it is not an easy task to pick out the history of the internationalization of railroads as a central theme without regarding it as merely a remnant of the interaction between national railroad histories. The following considerations are an attempt to avoid just that by portraying the development of the internationalization of railroads and its level of expectations as an emerging field of action that can be accessed analytically for a history of technology cognizant of cultural studies.

Internationalization as increased pleasure

A picture might help to identify the most important issues: The wine had appealed to her and the meal, on which her fellow traveler to her left was just concentrating a little belatedly and with customary dispassion, had been better than expected. Just a couple of grapes for dessert, and perhaps she might not even bother to use the fruit knife. Viewing the passing landscape through the window instilled a sense of placidity in her. It was not happiness that she felt but rather a fleeting feeling of being in good hands, a sort of a temporary contentment and medially stimulated languor. The scenery – whose hallucinatory and optical abundance she did not need to understand – always had a calming effect and produced a finely dosed blend of void and timelessness. Already departed, certainly, but not yet arrived – an elegantly cushioned *u-topos*, which knew no hurry and yet emerged from maximum speed.



Illustration 1:
Adrien Holy, Nella Carrozza Ristorante (1955)

A frantic standstill so to speak that restored balance and allowed for differentiation. There was no doubt about it, the ambience radiated a grimly fascinating elegance and overrode the usual class differences in favor of a new one. It was not sufficient for a salon and yet, the *wagon restaurant* had its own qualities and its own scope for experiences, in which interiors and exteriors, the personal and the foreign redoubled, superimposed or refracted each other and at times were thrown back onto themselves: the landscape of the soul and the saturating

lake landscape as seen through the window – «soulscapes» and «lakescapes» if you will. The speedy fast train and its historic reminiscence as portrayed on the wall in the form of a steam locomotive, the habitual conventionalism of travelers and the discreet uniforms of waiters, the linguistic abundance of the menu and the limited kitchen supplies. It was this ensemble of reference cascades that for once should provide the experience of being nowhere, except between origin and destination. It was exactly this sort of pleasure and its programmed redoubling that the poster suggested: *nella carrozza-ristorante, doppio piacere*.

It cannot be determined where the painted scene took place. Only those who looked very carefully recognized the writing – placed there almost by accident – above the compartment door: FFS or *Ferrovie Federali Svizzere*. There are two interpretations of the sponsor's modesty: firstly, where the poster was actually hanging would make it sufficiently clear just who was capable of establishing such elegance on the entire railroad network. After all, discretion is a popular variant of distinction and imposture, even in advertising. The second interpretation is less negligible and slightly more sophisticated: the *carrozza-ristorante* depicted in Adrien Holy's color lithograph¹ (whose ambience served as publicity for the Swiss Federal Railways in 1955) primarily represented a dining car as such, in other words generalization, ideal type, iconographic *topos*. This quality detached it from national characteristics and transformed it into «railroad space» par excellence. Surprisingly, it was this very generalization that produced a differentiating effect: the Swiss Federal Railways or SBB communicated the elegance it could offer its travelers and it employed the *topos* of the internationalization of the railroad for that purpose.

Internationalization as deliberate relinquishment

It was this very *topos* that was adopted for the Trans Europ Express (TEE) program, which became operative two years later. The internationalization of the TEE project was made up of the national railways of Germany, Italy, Holland and Switzerland, and was later joined by the national railways of Belgium and Luxemburg, who too wanted to reap the benefits of the program, and became the European icon of internationalization par excellence.² It stood to reason that the TEE as an icon had more potential than Adrien Holy's lithographically denationalized utopia. Both the *wagon restaurant* and the TEE alike had to produce their internationalism on a symbolic as well as on an organizational, technological and political level. However, they chose entirely different strategies: the Swiss dining car intensified the symbolic complexity and produced an ideal type of internationalization through repeated superimposition of references. In order to produce the desired internationalization, the TEE program on the other hand, first sought to dramatically reduce the organizational complexity to a set of the least common denominators. Many simplifications were called for in order to overcome the technological obstacles that had so far stabilized national railways with their complex technical and administrative rules.

The TEE had to make use of various special procedures. Firstly, the relapse of earlier TEE trains into the age of thermodynamics is especially noticeable, as the obstacles to interoperability posed by the use of four different traction systems could until 1961 only be overcome by diesel-powered engines. Secondly, the international TEE transportation system was a system of complexity reduction, also in terms of economics. Internationalization was only achieved by abandoning degrees of freedom. Abandonment not only meant doing without an elegant electrical traction system but also giving up the possibility to compose the trains according to requirements. Fixed car compositions, however, effaced those waiting

¹ Adrien Holy, *Nella carrozza-ristorante, doppio piacere*, color lithograph, SBB-Infothek, Plakatsammlung, Bern. Compare with von Arx, Heinz (ed.): *Der Kluge reist im Zuge. 100 Jahre SBB. Offizielles Jahrbuch*, Zurich, 2001, 127.

² Zellweger, Christian: *TEE - Ikone der Luxuszüge*, Zurich 2003, especially 12-15.

periods that on long stretches turned the fiction of uninterrupted flow of transport into an unattainable illusion. But on the other hand, fixed compositions demanded the renouncement of optimal allocations of transport capacities and therefore led to higher operating costs.

And thirdly, TEE operations transferred flexibility to their environment, with the customs authorities for instance who had to be convinced that for the sake of internationalization they carry out their national duties en route, thereby fluidizing border crossings in terms of place and time. Fourthly, the fare structure was dramatically simplified also: the TEE ran daily, but only with one class - the European luxury class. By paying a standard luxury consumption charge passengers were in a position to prove their (albeit temporary) eligibility for that class.

Fifthly and finally, the increased elegance of the TEE design pertained to a symbolism of internationalization, which in a technical way produced modern elegance that emancipated the TEE from distinct national technological styles, in the same way as the operating concept overrode the complexity and fine structure of national railroad systems. Yet, it was exactly this internationalization increased by design that connected the emerging European railroad system TEE to those forms of symbolically generated internationalization that had been evoked in Holy's poster³.

Internationalization and level of expectations

The TEE serves as an example of what has been called «emergence» in systems theory. To cite Luhmann: «Systems of a higher (emergent) order can be of lower complexity than systems of a lower order, as they themselves can determine the unit and number of elements of which they consist. In other words, in their self-complexity they are not dependent on the reality substructure.» At the same time, this means «the necessary, respectively the sufficient complexity of a system is not "materially" predetermined but can be determined separately for every level of system formation with regard to the relevant environment. Emergence therefore, is not just accumulation of complexity but interruption and restart of the construction of complexity.»⁴

It is important to establish that emergence is neither a restart without pre-condition nor is it based on the dynamism of systems. Especially in the case of large-scale systems the formation of new system levels is dependent on technological, economic, administrative, legal and symbolic connectivity, and therefore it is subject to an historic path-dependence⁵. Emergent system formation at the same time represents an act of interruption, a decision act with a view to the future, according to preferences whose structures have by no means to be congruent with those expectations that had led to the preceding system formation processes. That way entirely heterogeneous motivations and preconditions can lead to astonishingly homogenous interests and results.

There is no need to squeeze these reflections into a systems theory corset if one is to use them for the subject of the internationalization of railroads because these reflections point to an analytical approach that runs counter to a literature of railroad history that features its actual operations on standardized tracking and with fixed schedules. On the level of research

³ Mertens, Maurice: TEE. Trans Europ Express, Düsseldorf 1987; Zellweger 2003 (as ref. 13); for the popularizing combination of TEE and dining car see Nial, Diane: Swiss Meals on Wheels, Littlestone-on-Sea 1993.

⁴ Luhmann, Niklas: Soziale Systeme. Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, 43.

⁵ The term "path-dependence" was mainly coined by Paul A. David: "A path-dependent sequence of economic changes is one of which important influences upon the eventual outcome can be exerted by temporally remote events, including happenings dominated by chance elements rather than systematic forces." (1985)

strategy, the notion of emergence allows the combination of two aspects. It combines the cultural history of railroads (as proposed by Wolfgang Schivelbusch⁶ already decades ago, but so far never rigorously pursued) with questions that shed light on the technological, economic and political dimensions of the development of international railroad systems and their social conditions of usage.

As the two examples above clearly illustrate, the problem of internationalization can be approximated historically and analytically from two directions. Firstly, the emergence of an international railroad system can be approached from a bottom-up perspective, i.e. from the national railways perspective. Secondly, the story can be told from a trans-European top-down perspective. This goes even further: it is only the combination of both approaches which makes clear in what way for instance the symbolic intensification «from below» (*wagon restaurant*) and the operational and technological simplification «from above» (TEE) have interacted to produce entirely new action-patterns⁷. In order to make this evident, the same examples can be used for the convergence of national and European forms of internationalization (crucial for providing the experiential frame and the level of expectations for collective protagonists).

Internationalization as «connecting» intimacy

Still sticking to the example of Adrien Holy's color lithograph, internationalization – from the national perspective of the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) – results from the detachment of starting point and final destination: the «lakescape» blurs into a projection screen for the «soulcape». Simultaneously, journey time frees itself from its linearity between departure and arrival, restructured by culinary and contemplative pleasures. This is the first half of «doppio piacere» which the passenger can enjoy in the context of a national railway company geared to a travel culture focused on internationalization. The state-owned enterprise ascribes to itself the imperturbable qualities of discrete devoutness as well as those of being a powerful and competent service provider that sends its natural, quasi life-world (*Lebenswelt*) representative on a journey in the figure of a waiter. In 1955, the SBB, as a well-established state-owned railway, were and wanted to be in a position to only subtly and discreetly hint at all national, technological and organizational references, since they expertly controlled them. The benefit not only lay in a pleasure doubled but also in the self-assurance for the traveler and the railway company who both used the *u-topos* of luxurious distinction to confirm their existence. Offering internationalization was a clear sign of the SBB's self-confidence and belief in their own ability. The choice was aimed at self-confident passengers who had emancipated themselves from such restrictions as origin and destination, landscape and language, place and time, thereby crossing national borders in a certain sense as free individuals.

This version of a national railroad culture emancipating itself from national references constituted an indispensable interface to the internationalization of the TEE. It could be used to establish connection capabilities by the same multinational consortium that negotiated the concept of a trans-European luxury train. The protocols for the hand-shaking of a Swiss internationalization and a pan-European internationalization agreement were fully developed, when in the mid-1950s, the parties involved (using strategies of relinquishment and complexity reduction) agreed on the lowest common denominator for TEE standards.

⁶ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang: *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise: Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Munich, Vienna 1977.

⁷ Basically the opposite interaction is also conceivable for the emergence of internationalization in railroad traffic (symbolic intensification from the top in combination with adjustments on a operational and technological level from below). This is reminiscent of the local effects of a symbolically intensified liberalization policy by supranational organizations.

However, one is not to underestimate the translatability of the «national internationalization» into a «European internationalization», which in the framework of the TEE program had been put to the acid test. Like no other train, the TEE succeeded in turning overall travel time and the length of the run into a continuum of place and time. The fixed compositions treated their reality substructure, i.e. the railroad network of partner companies simply as a non-stop European railroad network. Even the custodians of sovereignty concerned with economic policies for the individual countries had to observe operational autonomy. Obviously, such demands could only be enforced when the multilaterally negotiated cooperation agreement was regarded as a supranational task, thereby suspending – as a trial – the politically generated borders of interoperability and sovereignty of the nation state. It was no walkover for the TEE to use the rigid individualisms of national technological styles and operating concepts developed for over more than a century in a way that generated added service value. It was, therefore, all the more important to win over customers who had long been familiar with national characteristics, of an international way of traveling, and who now expected to be treated as a transnational elite also in trans-European space.



Illustration 2:
TEE Wagon Restaurant (1961)

Therefore, the operators had to concentrate their efforts on producing the elitist distinguishing features that were already associated with a sufficient degree of familiarity. This had to be achieved by combining the technological elegance of the interiors with the culinary subtlety of the *wagon restaurant*. Irrespective of the direction from which the subject of internationalization is approached, one thing is clear: the use of projections and fictions in the game revolving around the internationalization of railroads promised substantial gains. That is why they have become increasingly action-relevant.

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