EUROPE'S RAIL MOBILITY FRACTURING AT BORDERS

by Richard F. Tolmach

Tony Judt, the polemicist on freedom and the politics of social change (1948-2010) was one of the believers in the power of rail technology to improve Europe, by uniting its peoples and lessening the class distinctions and environmental problems the motor age has produced.

High speed rail was supposed to usher in a new European age of trains, with seamless trips across borders making international travel easier. Just a few years after his death, the vision is turning sour. Major new segments of high speed rail are entering service, but the basic connectivity of Europe's train system is collapsing.

The anti-immigration movement is poised to compound this loss of connectivity. The recent victory of an anti-immigration initiative in Switzerland threatens to spread additional measures to actively constrain free travel throughout Europe's rail network. Switzerland today is a key strategic link between all western European Union (EU) nations, and things have the potential of getting much worse for travelers if visa and passport requirements are reimposed.

EASY ROAD, HARD BY RAIL

The connectivity problem is most severe today on France's Spanish border, which has become Europe's most impenetrable boundary by passenger rail, with fewer through trains than any other European frontier, despite billions of euros spent on standard gauge tracks ostensibly built to remove travel hurdles.

Ten years after construction started in 2004, the joint Spanish-French project for a Barcelona to Perpignan high speed line is complete, and standard gauge tracks run all the way from Paris to the south of Spain. The trains largely don't. Service across the border is even less convenient than before €5 billion was spent on high speed tracks through Barcelona and the Pyrenées.

In theory, the hourly pattern of Madrid-Barcelona trains could extend to Perpignan, where trains depart hourly to Montpellier and the rest of France. In practice, only five high speed trains cross the border daily each direction and only one serves Madrid, arriving and leaving in mid-afternoon.

That's compared to twelve French trains that should be able to access Barcelona and at least five that could easily reach Madrid. It's as if anti-immigration zealots are dictating the train schedule, having failed to close the highways. Trains over the border are also bunched into fleets, leaving six-hour daytime gaps in service each direction and thwarting all but two Madrid high speed connections in each direction.

Again, in theory, one should be able to leave Paris by late morning and arrive in Madrid for tapas, but travel is thwarted by the six-hour gap. One should also be able to leave Madrid at 8 AM for lunch in the south of France, but again a blockade of service north from Barcelona lasts from 10:24 AM until 4:20 PM.

The sad state of service is matched by dysfunctional sales and promotion of the new route. Direct trains started December 15, but sales of tickets were needlessly embargoed until days before the start, ruining Christmas season traffic. The confusing Renfe-SNCF brochure has major typos and hides its schedules among four different tables. No normal timetable for the route has been printed as yet.

Promotions have also been hobbled by delivery gaps and websites with dead links. For example, **voyages-sncf.com** promised discount train plus hotel trips to Barcelona in January, but after getting passengers to take the trouble to enter their data the site blocked all on-line bookings. As late as mid-February, on-line ticketing for Easter week, a peak travel period, was still blocked.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

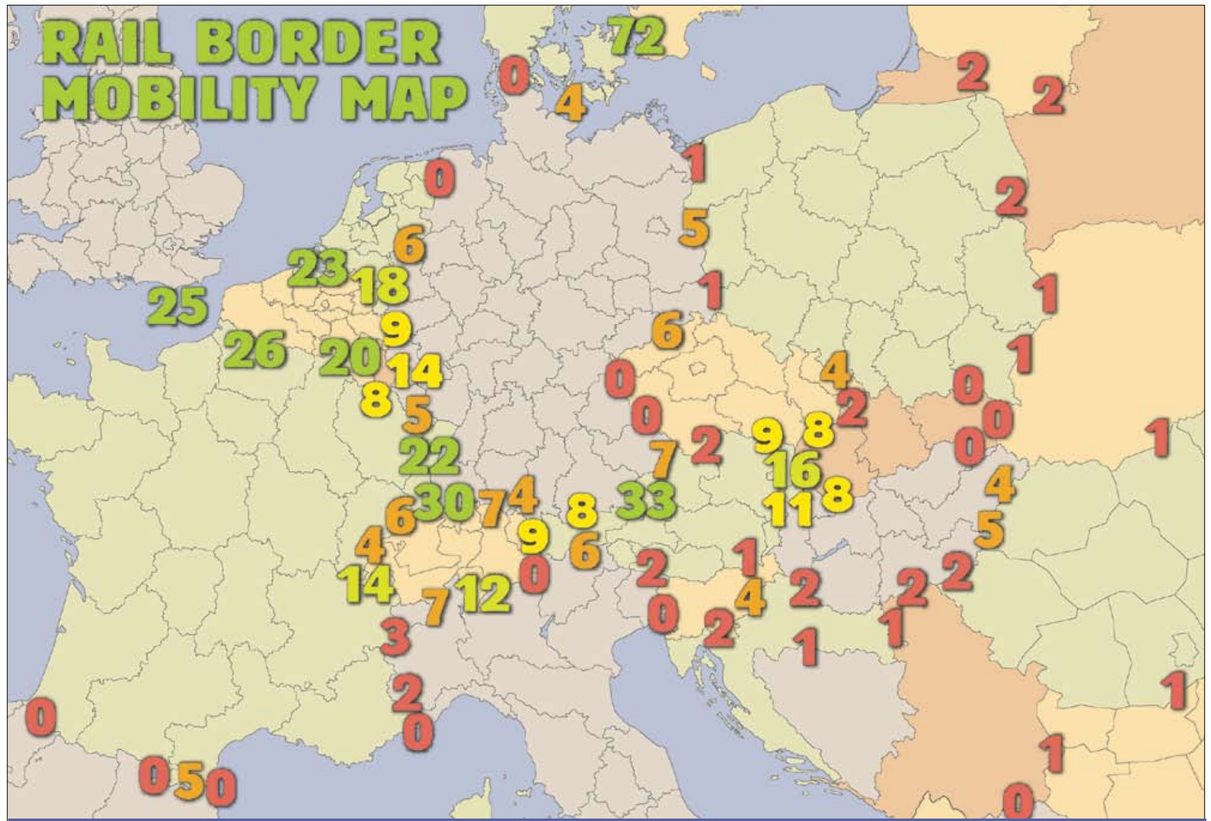
Kris de Decker, a pro-rail campaigner and publisher of **lowtechmagazine.com** views the service problem as a symptom of the fight between technologies. He says high speed rail is destroying the best alternative to airlines, the "low speed" conventional rail network.

De Decker observes that start of new high speed rail links is always accompanied by "elimination of a slightly slower, but much more affordable, alternative route, forcing passengers to use the new and more expensive product, or abandon the train altogether."

Five years ago de Decker promised his readers he would stop flying. "Since then, I have been travelling across Europe almost exclusively by train … some 70,000 km of long-distance travel. I went as far north as Helsinki, as far south as Málaga, and as far east as Budapest. Europe has the most amazing railway network in the world."

"However, every year, it becomes harder to keep my promise, and the advance of the high speed train is to blame," says de Decker, who blames prohibitively expensive fares and more strenuous travel conditions as through expresses are eliminated in favor of shorter high speed rail links.

De Decker says high speed rail doesn't deserve its claimed green credentials. "According to the International Union of Railways, the high speed train 'plays a key role in a stage of sustainable development and combating climate change.'"



NUMBER OF DAILY BORDER CROSSINGS BY PASSENGER TRAINS (EACH DIRECTION)*

*** Numbers disregard trains that cross borders to end at de-facto border stations which lack major commerce and serve primarily as transfer points, e.g.: Latour de Carol and Ventimiglia.**

"As a regular long-distance train traveller in Europe, I have to say that the opposite is true," says de Decker. Business people may switch from planes to high speed rail, but higher rail pricing means "the majority of Europeans are pushed into cars, coaches and low-cost airplanes."

As an example, De Decker cites the troubled 2012 roll-out of Fyra by NS Hispeed, a Netherlands Railways subsidiary. Fyra replaced conventional Amsterdam-Brussels trains, which served more population centers including Den Haag, the Dutch capital.

The high speed trains chosen turned out to be technically flawed, and couldn't be safely operated, so conventional trains now run on the high speed line bypassing Den Haag, but still cost over $50 for a 125 mile trip. The only alternative, Thalys, is even more expensive at $105. When the price of a 250 mile round trip is so much more than a tank of gasoline, it is hard to make the case that the train is preferable.

The multi-billion euro project has delivered neither higher ridership nor better service for the Netherlands. Today, it is more expensive than ever to travel between the capitals of Netherlands, Belgium, and France, and rail has a smaller market share than before. This service failure has alienated key rail supporters in some of Europe's most environmentally sensitive markets.

CUTS ALL ACROSS THE MAP

The worst recent network losses are three Talgo hotel trains emanating from Barcelona, the Joan Miro to Paris (ended in December), as well as the Pau Casals to Zürich and the Salvador Dalí to Milano (killed a year ago). Removal of the trains was due to alleged technical problems with 1990's Talgo equipment, but passengers were better served by the more luxurious trains which offered full dining service.

Overnight rail travelers to Paris are now faced with spartan 1970's trains with up to 6 beds per room, expected to need no food or liquor, and to put up with a long transfer at the border. Traffic on the more popular hotel trains has simply been lost to airlines.

The problem began years before with decisions to eradicate international express trains. The past decade has seen the demise of almost every long-distance train in Western Europe, as anti-immigration politics joined EU "reform" of international train services to result in near-complete removal of through trains linking Italy with France and Germany. Those who used to depend on these trains for casual travel across Europe now find themselves at the mercy of travel agents promoting air trips.

BUSES AND AIR INTRUDE

The French National Railway (SNCF) has started a fleet of buses to replace low price rail fares once provided by international express trains. iDBUS, a brand allied with its low-cost iDTGV now occupies the Paris-Amsterdam, Paris-Brussels, Paris-London, Lyon-Milano and Lyon-Barcelona routes, offering €9 to €45 trips to those who have been priced off Thalys, Eurostar and trains now selling for up to €180. About 25 percent of bus runs replaced overnight trains.

Concurrently, the international expresses that used to serve Prague from Zürich, München, Frankfurt and Stüttgart also vanished, replaced by Nürnberg-Prague buses in Deutsche Bahn colors labelled "IC Bus." Operator of the Prague buses for DB is the Czech company Student Agency, a bus and train operator. Similar IC buses have replaced Berlin-Wroclaw-Katowice-Kraków expresses in Poland. Most of the remaining trains over the Polish border are daytime or nighttime runs to Warsaw.

A new generation of budget airlines is also expanding aggressively into 500-700 mile markets. Vueling, a budget brand of Iberian occupies a Barcelona hub and offers advance tickets to Prague, Berlin, Dusseldorf, and Amsterdam for as little as €99. It also competes with Renfe on Madrid-Barcelona trips, with advance pricing of €29 to €37 versus €59 for AVE trains.

In the East, the Budapest upstart Wizz Air has also broken into new markets, again with bargain flights as low as €69 to western markets from Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

A POLICY OF HURDLES?

At the same time as France has lost most of its southern connections, Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria lost their direct train service to the West. With no more Orient Express through either Bucharest or Belgrade, travelers have to make multiple hotel stays on the way. The same thing is true in much of Western Europe. Only Austria among EU members seems to have retained most of its former overnight runs.

Liberalization of track access was supposed to lead to international competition by private operators. Initially, there was great hope, but many of those opportunities have been thwarted by hurdles to entry, threatened litigation and poison pill service strategies on existing routes.

Germany's Deutsche Bahn, which seems to still value longer-distance traffic, has outlasted legal attempts to block its ICE equipment from the Chunnel and now plans to launch the longest regular high speed corridors so far to access London. DB has already launched a €59 promotion from most German cities to build traffic. Its own ICE trains to London direct from Amsterdam and Frankfurt will soon begin competing with EuroStar offerings, perhaps later in 2014 according to some sources.

France's SNCF has aimed its new offers exclusively at domestic markets linking to Paris. Ouigo, an alternate SNCF brand only available on-line in France offers €10 fares between the Paris Disneyland stop and a half-dozen stations south of Lyon, some €50 cheaper than regular fares.

iDTGV offers prices as cheap as €29 on over a dozen city pairs linking Paris with places like Strasbourg, St. Jean de Luz, or Perpignan. This is great for French citizens but the trains are not available to international travelers, because iDTGV on-line purchase requires a French credit card. You also cannot buy iDTGV tickets in stations. Americans must use the RailEurope sales channel and pay a 50 percent premium.

WHICH CARRIERS STILL WANT THROUGH TRAFFIC?

Many out-of-touch U.S. parents are still buying Eurailpasses for their graduating offspring, but there is a practical problem for kids trying to use a network with so many gaps in service. I recently observed this in Barcelona, where a station agent at Sants simply refused to make any reservation for two young travelers who wanted to go to Italy. "Impossible," he told them. "Where do you really want to go?"

A current southern French joke has to do with a local having to chase from his small town to Perpignan, Montpellier, Lyon, and finally Paris to find an ticket agent who will sell him a train ticket to Peking, but for the trip back being asked in China if he wants the ticket to the uphill or downhill stop in his small town. The details in the joke are a bit cracked, but people here repeat it because they recognize the staff behavior.

The great exceptions to the shortage of detailed and accurate information about international services have been Deutsche Bahn (db.de) and the Austrian Federal Railways (oebb.at) which both feature on-line search engines that can provide full schedule services throughout Europe.

Perhaps this is because the high speed rail gospel that long-distance service is outdated has been less accepted in Germany and Austria, but it also goes along with more respect for passenger needs. The solicitude of Austria's ÖBB is a welcome contrast with attitudes seen in the south:

With the ÖBB EuroNight trains (EN), you travel comfortably over night, and thus save precious time and expensive hotel costs. During the ride at night, you rest in the sleeping, couchette or seated cars – as you wish. In the morning, you reach your destination well rested and relaxed – directly in the city centre. Ideal for city trips, holiday travels and day excursions. Our friendly team on the train is there for you around the clock and provides for safety, peace and quiet, and good services, in order to make your journey as pleasant as possible.

RAIL & SOCIETY

If we lose the railways we shall not just have lost a valuable practical asset whose replacement or recovery would be intolerably expensive. We shall have acknowledged that we have forgotten how to live collectively. If we throw away the railway stations and the lines leading to them—as we began to do in the 1950s and 1960s—we shall be throwing away our memory of how to live the confident civic life. It is not by chance that Margaret Thatcher—who famously declared that "there is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women, and there are families"—made a point of never traveling by train. If we cannot spend our collective resources on trains and travel contentedly in them it is not because we have joined gated communities and need nothing but private cars to move between them. It will be because we have become gated individuals who don't know how to share public space to common advantage. The implications of such a loss would far transcend the demise of one system of transport among others. It would mean we had done with modern life.

TONY JUDT, 2011

(from Bring Back the Rails! published January 2011 in the NY Review of Books)