

Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20127]

Proposed title of the session

New Perspectives on the Economic Impact of Canals and Railways

Abstract

There is little doubt that transportation improvements have had a major impact in every society over the last 300 years, but the magnitude of change and the unforeseen or unintended consequences of transport improvements are still in doubt. The social savings literature pioneered by Robert Fogel and Albert Fishlow dramatically concluded that railways were not indispensable to American and British economic growth in the nineteenth century. For nearly forty years there has been little evidence to overturn this view, but recently scholars have begun to revisit the contribution of railways and other important transport improvements like canals and roads. In some cases, their findings suggest transport innovations generated larger social savings than previous thought. Perhaps more importantly they have shown that transport innovations had external effects on innovation and education and also had long-run effects on urban development.

This new perspective on the economic impact of canals and railways is partly associated with methodological advances. The use of Geographic Information Software (GIS) has allowed scholars to measure access to transport in a more disaggregated manner, say at the town or province level. Transport access can then be related to dis-aggregated economic outcomes, like town size, adoption of technologies, occupation structure, education levels, and so on. There is also the possibility of looking at the retarding development effects of transport innovations in less populated towns or in neighboring areas where transport infrastructures were not improved. The recent literature has also explored the effects of railways in non-western societies like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Railways appear to be more 'revolutionary' as pre-existing technologies tended to be worse than in western countries. Lastly, the literature has started to explore the interaction between transport networks and resource endowments. The issue here is whether transport networks helped to develop natural resources like coal and whether this differed from improving access to growing cities.

The proposed session will bring together researchers who study the effects large-scale transport innovations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The focus will be on railways but canal, road, and port infrastructure are also considered. One goal is to examine the effects of transport in different economic environments (i.e. developed and less developed economics, industrial and primary exporting economies). Another goal is to promote new methodologies especially GIS. A third goal is to examine short-term and long-term effects, and to go beyond social savings by studying the external effects of railways.

I. Corresponding Session Organiser

Mr. Dan Bogart (University of California, Irvine [United States of America])

II. Co-Organiser(s)

1. Corresponding Organiser.
2. Mr. Xavier Duran (University of the Andes [Colombia])
3. Mr. Alfonso Herranz-Loncan (University of Barcelona [Spain])

III. Expected Participant(s)

1. same as correspondent.
2. 1. Jedwab Remi (George Washington University [United States of America])
3. 2. Alex Moradi (University of Sussex [United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland])
4. 3. Christian Hung (Vanderbilt University [United States of America])
5. 4. Elisabeth Perlman (Boston University [United States of America])
6. 5. Johan Fourie (Stellenbosch University [South Africa])
7. 6. Theresa Gutberlet (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute [United States of America])
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