Chapter 1
Past Futures: Innovation and the Railways of Nineteenth-Century London and Paris

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ABSTRACT

Innovation was central to developments in urban railway transport in nineteenth-century London and Paris. Innovation was often political, the result of an encounter between and across a range of actors, including railway entrepreneurs and their companies, railway engineers, civil engineers, architects, intellectuals, a range of authorities –local, municipal, metropolitan, regional and national –, and the rich mix of people affected by the opening of a new railway line. The chapter opens up the notion of innovation to issues that cover three different dimensions: the politics, the culture and the social concerns behind the building of railways. It shows how London and Paris coped, but also dealt with one of the most transformative forces of nineteenth-century Britain and France. An important part of that story relates to the different futures that were envisioned in the two cities, in response to specific concerns and determined by a particular set of conditions. This approach highlights the process of how innovations took place rather than the end result.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation was central to developments in urban railway transport in nineteenth-century London and Paris. Innovation was often political, the result of an encounter between and across a range of actors, including railway entrepreneurs and their companies, railway engineers, civil engineers, architects, intellectuals, a range of authorities –local, municipal, metropolitan, regional and national –, and the rich mix of people affected by the opening of a new railway line: shopkeepers whose business would be affected by the scale of the works; landlords who were forced to deal with the noise, the pollution, and the viaducts across their properties; tenants displaced without recourse to much else beyond their own means, the largest majority consisting of the poor.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0084-1.ch001
This rich and diverse mix of people and interests is very important. When we think about railway innovation, a common tendency is to think about which new technologies are now at our disposal: lighter and more spacious cars, new signaling instruments, automated doors, improved tracks, faster trains, and so on and so forth. Important as they are, however, these are only part of the kinds of innovation that are prompted by the very conceiving, planning, designing and building of railways. I believe this is a reality that is felt most acutely in cities. In nineteenth-century London and Paris, for example, innovations involved a range of topics:

- Using the underground spaces and cellars of market buildings
- Defining an area that railways would not cross
- Early trains for the working and poorer classes
- Collaboration between private companies and metropolitan authorities so that the building of a new railway line might be linked to street improvements
- New forms of governance, especially in terms of the degree to which London and Paris might use railways to direct their growth
- Concessionary fares for excursion trains on Sundays
- Conditions of employment in the context of municipal socialism, characteristic of developments in cities in Europe and North America at the turn of the 20th century

My aim in this contribution is twofold. I want to open up the very notion of innovation to issues that cover at least three different and inter-related dimensions: the politics, the culture and the social concerns behind the opening of new railway lines in nineteenth-century London and Paris. Secondly, I wish to show how the two cities coped, but also dealt with one of the most transformative forces of nineteenth-century Britain and France. An important part of that story relates to the different futures that were envisioned in the two cities, in response to specific concerns and determined by a particular set of conditions. This approach highlights the process of how innovations took place rather than the end result. My concern is, therefore, with the debates, ideas and challenges of getting to the object or point we call innovation, not the ready-packed model that we know circulates, widely and far.

LONDON AND PARIS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

There are important similarities and differences in relation to the transformation that London and Paris experienced during the nineteenth century. Key among them are population growth, in both cities largely fueled by immigration; changes in their administration which present us with a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the City of London and the metropolitan-wide authorities, the first of which was the Metropolitan Board of Works, created in 1855, succeeded in 1889 by the London County Council; and, on the other, the Paris municipal council, appointed by the Seine Prefect, in turn accountable to the national authorities which, throughout the nineteenth century, changed a number of times with three republics, two empires and an eighteenth-year long monarchy (Porter 2000; Jones 2004; White 2008; Marchand 1993). Administration was directly concerned with the limits and extent of the two cities’ built-up areas, in other words, up to which point did London and Paris extend. The contrast is again illuminating: Paris was a walled city up to after the First World War; an area called intra-muros was contained for a period of nearly two decades in-between the late-eighteenth-century wall of the Fermiers Généraux or Farmers
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