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THE PAST AND
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REPRESENTATION
IN THE SPANISH
RAILWAYS

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Time without Labour: the past and historical representation in the Spanish railways¹

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic analysis of representations of the past in a key public sector – the Spanish railways. This sector has undergone a series of fundamental transformations in the recent past, primary among which has been opening the previously state-controlled monopoly up to competition. As part of a broader investigation of historical memory and its constitutive effects, I analyse railway historiography and museum displays as ethnographic objects. This analysis reveals the inner workings of forms of historical representation that, I argue, marginalize labour as a social and political actor. These forms of representation have been instrumental for pushing through a set of transformations that take the appearance of an inevitable process of modernization.

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A Very Brief History (by way of introduction)

For most of the 20th century, European railways were integrated national monopolies. A single state-owned company delivered what was considered an essential service. Overwhelmingly, national railway companies came to be identified with the railway itself. The case of Spain is no exception: “travelling with Renfe” and “travelling by train” became interchangeable, as the everyday functioning of the national railway and its organizational structure as a single, state-owned company fused into one. National companies, of course, did not represent the early forms of the organization of the railways, most of which began as private enterprises. The first wave of railway nationalizations dates back to the late 19th and the early 20th century, when massively indebted private companies proved unable to deliver a reliable public service and were reorganized as integrated public monopolies.

The integrated public monopoly as the dominant form of railway organizational structure came under assault in the 1980s. Following more than two decades of loss of market share and increasing indebtedness, the railways were prime targets of the aggressive pro-market policies of the 1980s. Railways, at the time, were in many respects just another public monopoly and networked industry that was coming under assault in the face of unquestioned belief in the merits of market competition. Not unlike airlines or electric companies, the railways came to stand in as a symbol for the failures of state management and the absence of competition.

While the critical wing of the discipline of anthropology is accustomed to questioning the ideologies underlying liberalization, mainstream academic and policy discourse is dominated by the belief that liberalization is a neutral policy formula emanating from the upper realms of transnational politics and differentially implemented on the national levels (see, for example, Bel 1996, Robledo and Redondo 2007). Behind the mainstream ideological consensus lies a different reality: major ideological shifts and political reorganizations preceded the EU’s liberalization policy, which in turn reflects shifting priorities and interests on the national and regional level. By 1991, when the first EU railway package (91/440/EC) laid out the conditions for the liberalization of freight, radical privatization processes had already been carried out in Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands (Beyer and Chabaliere 2009; Nash and Preston 2006). The EU policy aims to establish a single railway area spanning the EU, within which operators can freely compete to provide services. This is far from an established reality today. If significant advances have been made with regard to freight transportation, the liberalization of passenger services still looks very different across countries.

Railways, as commentators sympathetic to the liberalization agenda are often quick to notice, have been more resilient than other monopolistic industries when it comes to opening up to competition. Still, regardless of how we judge the degree of progress towards creating a single European railway area, significant advances have been made concerning the liberalization of railway services on the national level. Furthermore, whatever the objectives articulated and designated in the technocratic languages of EU railway policy, the process of liberalization varies greatly across countries, and meaningful differences mark the contemporary national railways across Europe. Nonetheless, for the last three decades we have witnessed an increasing pressure towards dismantling the national railway monopoly and reorganizing this service on a competitive basis. While this could be reasonably argued to be a Europe-wide phenomenon, it does not occur at

or across neatly differentiated geographical scales, nor does it have a straightforward meaning, although, as I will show, much of the analysis would have us believe otherwise.

Why the Spanish Railways?

This article is part of a broader attempt to capture what this very briefly described process looks like for the Spanish national railways. As part of the broader attempt to make sense of the liberalization of the Spanish railways, I develop an account of the different forms of understanding the past that inform it. Liberalization, understood as the introduction of competition in the railways, expresses itself as a conflict between different forms of understanding the past. This is not merely epiphenomenal or superstructural. The success of liberalization relies on the successful imposition of certain historical readings and the exclusion of others; likewise, resisting liberalization is also tied to particular historical interpretations. The relationship between liberalization and these historical readings is of course neither mechanistic nor narrowly ideological, and it is not possible to identify a one-to-one correspondence between the two. Rather, the case for competition as expressed in the process of liberalization draws on and advances ideas about the past that are embedded in broader regimes of historical representation. Revealing the interplay of silences and mentions that are the building blocks of these historical readings is a primary goal of this account. Understanding the way in which different ideas about the past play into contemporary conflicts about the future of the railways is another.

Any anthropologist might at this point ask: “but why the Spanish railways?” To answer that question it is perhaps useful to break the question apart: why Spain and why the railways? The case for Spain is rather easy to establish. In the area of historical memory and politics of memory Spain stands out as both emblematic and uniquely controversial. Emblematic because the politics of memory that dominated the so-called peaceful transition from Francoism to democracy has been seen as a model to emulate by liberal and conservative elites across the continent. Uniquely controversial because no other European country has seen such a proliferation of debates surrounding the ways of recalling the recent past, with a simultaneous entrenchment of the institutional consensus as a “pact of silence” (Godicheau 2015; Gutierréz Molina 2007).

The broader project that the research presented here is part of is an attempt to understand how ideas about the past become operational and determining in concrete social settings: social settings that at first do not present themselves as battlegrounds between conflicting ideas about the past. Given my theoretical focus, the decision to study the railway sector was not arbitrary, but rather a deliberate choice. Historically the largest employer in Spain, the public railway company Renfe has undergone a massive transformation in the last 30 years, at the heart of which lies a new concept of the public company. However, unlike other industrial sectors that were targeted by the deindustrialization policy in the 1980s, such as the mining and steel industry, the railways are usually singled out as exemplary, a loyal metonym of the official discourse of Transition: the radical transformation of the railways was carried out in a relatively peaceful climate, and transformations were negotiated rather than imposed. So from the very beginning I turned my attention to the ways this transformation was situated in wider historical processes and the way this episode in the recent history of Spain was linked to broader representations of the recent past. The research I present here is only a small part of the ample investigation of how ideas about the past inform and condition transformations in a strategic public sector. It is, however, an essential part of

it: what I refer to as official historical representations, namely railway historiography and museum displays, offer an exemplary narrative that sustains the liberalization process as inevitable. At the heart of this narrative lies a representation of the past that is unilinear, impersonal, and predetermined: a techno-teleology from which labour, the actor that could challenge the dominant representations of the transformation of the railways as peaceful, has been evicted. The analysis of railway historiography and museum displays offers a good entry point into the inner resorts of this powerful representation of the past.

This analysis is closely connected with the anthropology of memory and class, which has oriented many of my initial research questions and provided tools for the analysis of the ethnographic material. However, as an analysis of historical memory that looks at a key public sector and a strategic infrastructure, this project is inevitably situated at the intersection of several research directions: the ethnography of infrastructure (Harvey and Knox 2015; Star 1999), the anthropology of labour and work (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Narotzky and Smith 2006), and the ethnographic analysis of political contestations (Barber et al. 2012; Narotzky 2015).

As part of the analysis of the represented past, this paper deals with those domains that have the explicit aim of delivering historical explanations about the railways: academic history and museum displays. While these are unconventional ethnographic objects, the primary purpose of this article is to establish their importance for a materialist anthropology of memory and an analysis of historical memory in the liberalization process. Before I take up a more detailed discussion of Spanish railway history, I establish the minimal chronological coordinates required for the analysis.

Renfe in Context

History, as Usually Told

The formal beginnings of Renfe (*Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles* – Spanish National Railway Network) are to be found in the years following the end of the Spanish Civil War.³ Renfe, which was officially created in 1941, is the institutional articulation of the 1939 *de facto* nationalization of the railways by the Francoist government. The 1941 nationalization of broad gauge rail, although it took place in the Spanish post-Civil War context is not unique to Spain, it happens in a European wide context of the conversion of the private railway assets into publicly owned ones, as heavily indebted private companies find themselves in the impossibility of providing a reliable public service. The controversial 1943 bailout is one of the main windows we have into understanding the specific features of this process in Spain and its importance in the context of the Francoist national economy. In the Spanish context, the public services provided by the railway were a secondary consideration; more important was the need for greater control over the railway as part of the economic project of an autarkic economy. This, in turn, must be understood in the context of the policies of economic nationalism and industrialization that go back

³ In this very brief introduction to the history of the Spanish railways following the creation of the integrated national company, Renfe, I follow the standard chronology and overarching historical narrative of what I consider to be the fundamental synthetic histories of the Spanish railways (Comín et al. 1998; Muñoz Rubio, Sanz Fernández and Vidal 1999). This standard historical and chronological sequence is in itself a form of naturalizing a set of ideas about the past which can be challenged. Although in setting up this chronology I aim to familiarize the reader with the main chronological markers of the twentieth century history of Renfe as reflected in the authoritative works of historical synthesis, it is important to note that the historical analysis of the past of the railways relies overwhelmingly on this standard sequence of historical progression. Most academic analyses work with it, rather than challenging it in any significant way.

to the second decade of the 20th century.⁴ Historical reference works covering the post-1939 history of the Spanish railways typically categorize the years up to 1959 (and often as late as 1964) as part of a period generally described as the autarkic years and characterized by underinvestment and inadequate service provision. Railway policy throughout these years does not manage to transform the severely degraded network, the latter a consequence of not only the war but also of the heavy disinvestment under the previous private ownership.

These, importantly, are also the years during which the share of railway traffic out of the total traffic declines dramatically. If in 1952 the market quota of the rail was 52%, by 1960 it had dropped to 25% (Comín et al. 1998: 93), and while the number of passengers or transported units does not decline in absolute terms, the railways were failing to capture any of the new demand for transport. The question of labour usually features as a question of costs; seen as partly responsible for the lack of sustainability of the system, the workforce appears mostly as expressed in the figures that account for the cost of its reproduction. The fact that the workforce reaches its historical peak during this period is usually made into evidence of the overall inefficiency of the system. The formal end of the autarkic period is most often listed as 1964, and marked by the enactment of the new Railway Statute, although a precursor to this can already be found in 1957–1959, when changes deemed necessary for a greater opening up to the market of the railways were put in place. The outline of this policy at the national level is to be found in the 1959 Stabilization Plan (*Plan de Estabilización*). The configuration of the institutional transformations that would correspond to the railway sector are laid out in the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) report in 1962, in the footsteps of which follows the Ten-Year Modernization Plan (*Plan Decenal de Modernización – PDM*); a revised version of this plan was created for the period 1972–1975.

The decade following the 1964 Railway Statute is usually described, in contrast to the previous years, as a decade of modernization. The significant investments made into traction systems are seen as the delayed benefits of Spain's exit from economic isolation. This is essentially the history of the railways during the period of *desarrollismo*⁵, although the canonical works of railway history make little if any reference to this broader economic context and its political and ideological articulation. The question of modernization is discussed almost exclusively in terms of the railways, and its broader dynamics are barely touched upon. The standard narratives establish the modernization efforts and their results as important to overcoming the poor state of the network – a fundamental problem of the railways during the autarkic years. However, when seen together, the years between 1950 and 1975 remain characterized by the dramatic decline in the market share of railway transportation from 60% to 10%. The immediate other to the “decade of modernization” is the autarkic period. But the full significance of the modernization process and the true alternative to the Francoist railways, the dominant historical narratives would have us believe, would emerge in the 1980s, and this is set up against the continuous and agentless process of decline that marks the postwar history of the railways.

The year 1984, when the first management contract (*contrato-programa*) goes into effect, is commonly described as the moment that marks a definitive break with the previous managerial model, representing the final dismissal of the paternalist model that had characterized the

⁴ For an insightful discussion about the nationalization of the railways and the 1943 bailout of the private companies see Miguel Muñoz Rubio, *Renfe (1941–1991): Medio Siglo de Ferrocarril Público* (1995).

⁵ *Desarrollismo*, roughly translatable as developmentalism, is the most common term through which the post-autarkic phase of Francoism is identified, typically identified with the decade of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s.

companies from their inception. According to the commanding description of the authors of *150 años de historia de los ferrocarriles españoles*,

“We can consider this moment, despite the fact that many of its proposals were not put into practice until much later, as the year in which the railway company lost the paternalist character that had characterized railway companies since their emergence in the middle of the 20th century.” (Comín et al. 1998: 167)

Many of the announced changes were carried out during the following decade. The 1987 Law on the Organization of Terrestrial Transport (*Ley de Ordenación del Transporte Terrestre* – LOTT, 1987) and the 1987 Railway Transportation Plan (*Plan de Transporte Ferroviario* – PTF), together with the long awaited 1994 Railway Statute, are consistent with the managerial policy and the commercial orientation of the first management contract. The 1990s see a continuation of changes set in motion in the 1980s. The resolutely commercial orientation, as manifested in organizational restructuring and a new focus on the client, together with the technological revolution manifest in the modernization of suburban rail and the arrival of high-speed rail (HSR), are the defining features of the 1980s and the 1990s. These, of course, are marked as achievements in the face of the railways’ battles against constantly rising deficits and an ossified company structure. Importantly, the 1980s and 1990s are also defined by the intensification of efforts to secure the managerial autonomy of the company against excessive state intervention.

The successful reorganization of Renfe into distinct business areas, a process that begins under Renfe’s aggressively modernizing president Julián García Valverde, would be perfected under Mercè Sala, the first female president of the company. Taken together, the period of these two presidencies mark a rupture with the pre-1980s paternalist corporate model. The first decade of the 21st century saw the historic division of the national company into two: Renfe Operadora and Adif, a service provider and an infrastructure manager. This is most often presented as an adaptation to EU requirements. The 2000s are also the decade of HSR expansion. The thrill of HSR is indissolubly related to the late 1980s and 1990s. But the most significant expansion of the Spanish HSR network so far happened in the 2000s; in the early part of this decade the bulk of what is today Europe’s longest HSR network was built.

Authoritative histories of the Spanish railways do not cover the period that formally corresponds to the liberalization years. The most recent comprehensive histories stop at the year 1998. The reflection of the problem of liberalization in Spanish railway history after this year must be reconstructed from more minor works. However, even in the earlier works, core questions related to the liberalization process are extensively dealt with, even if indirectly or without recourse to the language of liberalization the main comprehensive histories of the Spanish railways. The problem of introducing competition into an industry facing collapse is an implicit or explicit preoccupation across these works. The vision of change that they put forward is one built around the image of a “railway with a future.” Today’s railway, the railway of HSR and modern suburban rail, one trying to establish a niche for itself and establish its competitive advantages in an intermodal transportation paradigm, is a railway radically different from that prior to the 1980s.

Although it is generally not mentioned explicitly, this image of the railway is implicitly contrasted with its predecessor: the underfunded, non-competitive and anachronistic company targeted by generations of reforms initiated in the 1980s. In the image of the “railway with a

future” what survives is also the memory of the “railway without a future”, a railway that was struggling to stay afloat following decades of dropping market shares, underinvestment, and ever-increasing deficits. The organizing terms and the main framing devices used in works of railway history are decline and modernization. The chronology borrows the established taxonomies of Spanish history. These are fully naturalized and remain the organizing categories even when they do not seem to correspond to the transformations of the railways. A depoliticized reliance on the standard points of rupture in postwar Spanish history produces a railway history that is told in terms of the autarkic years, the Francoist modernization years, Transition and democracy. But these temporal markers are often stripped of their political meaning and reduced to nothing but a rigid chronology that poorly captures the transformations specific to the railways. This produces a particular tension, in as much as such a chronology can be invested with meaning only through a political reading that recovers the structural transformations of Spanish society throughout this period, a task for which dominant railway history seems insufficiently equipped. It is through this particular contradiction that railway history produces stock images evoking the Transition, but assigns virtually no content to it, more or less glossing over it as a rather uneventful era.

Liberalization

As previously observed, the history of the liberalization process must be pieced together from secondary works. Liberalization, for most commentators, is part of the process of establishing a single European railway area. In this reading, Spain’s actions can be understood as an extension of EU railway policy, and tracing Spanish developments is essentially a matter of following the government’s compliance to the supranational legal framework. The division of the national railway company into Renfe Operadora and Adif in 2005 represented the national response to the European policy of vertical unbundling. The institutional separation of the service provider and infrastructure manager was one of several possible types of institutional responses to the EU demand (see Robledo and Redondo 2007).

Spain’s national solution is the outcome of a set of EU level legislative acts that have as an objective the liberalization of the railways. Known as the “railway packages”, these bundles of legislative acts (there have been four to date), were passed in the years 2001, 2004, 2007, and 2015 and represent gradual steps in the process of introducing competition in the railways. All of them can be traced back to the 2001 white paper “European transport policy for 2010”. Domestically, the 2003 Railway Sector Law (*Ley del Sector Ferroviario*) is one of the first and most important pieces of legislation aimed at implementing EU directives. It led to the first division of the national company. In 2014 Renfe Operadora was further divided into four companies: passenger, freight, production and maintenance, and rolling stock lease. In the same year, the narrow gauge company FEVE was integrated into Renfe and Adif; the latter was in turn divided into Adif and Adif-Alta Velocidad (High Speed). Today, Spain has effectively liberalized its freight services, international passenger transportation, and tourist routes, and it is in the process of liberalizing domestic passenger services. Many commentators are quick to decry the slow pace of this last process. Although there are plans to open passenger lines to competition starting with Madrid–Levante, it has been postponed several times, and the plans for 2016 were delayed until 2020.

This narrative forms the backbone of the analysis by the majority of academic and policy-oriented commentators of the Spanish liberalization process, although they may examine the topic in greater or lesser detail. Liberalization is portrayed as an inevitable process, a top-down unfolding

of European policy applied to a national context. While differences from other countries, reduced to legislative and organizational aspects, are often diligently catalogued, there is little to no effort at explanation. This approach sits comfortably with the overall view of the process as the national application of dehistoricized, neutral, supranational policies. As for the tone, it mostly comes in two versions: explicitly supportive of the liberalization process and critical of Spain's failure to fully follow through, or a pretence of neutrality which in practice amounts to tacit support through a teleology of the inevitable. Hopelessly synchronic and obsessively formalistic, most accounts of the Spanish liberalization process have abandoned both social process and interest in explanation.

In what follows I take a closer look at Spanish railway historiography and its constitutive silences and mentions. The importance of this discussion will become fully apparent next to other forms of historical representation. While museum displays and corporate identity are very different from academic history as mediums for the circulation of ideas about the past, it will later become obvious that what these three approaches share is as important as that which sets them apart. The ideas about the past that they reflect and reproduce add up to a shared understanding of social process. This teleological and often agentless view of history is the broader regime of historical representation into which most discussions about liberalization are anchored.

Explaining the Past

Railway History

The majority of the works of Spanish railway history oscillate between extensions of economic history and rather narrowly understood transport history. The overwhelming majority of studies of Spanish railway history were produced in or after the 1970s; their content is indissolubly related to the academic and institutional dynamics of the Transition years. The first major works addressing the history of the Spanish railways were produced in the 1970s. The works of Tortella (1995 [1973]), Nadal (2009 [1975]), and Artola (1978), proposed or responded to a major preoccupation within the economic history of the era, namely the failure of the Spanish industrialization process in the 19th century. Tortella and Nadal carried out their study of the railways as part of broader investigations of the industrialization process. For Tortella, the railways, together with the banking and industrial sector, were an area of activity that held key insights into the weaknesses of the 19th century Spanish industrialization. Unique in their time, Artola's edited volumes critically engaged with the thesis of the railways' role in industrial underdevelopment, providing across two volumes a detailed empirical response meant to qualify Tortella and Nadal's contributions. The 1980s saw a deeper engagement with railway history, by providing mostly macroeconomic analysis meant to firmly establish the railways' contribution to economic modernization. The work of Gomez Mendoza (1982, 1984, 1985) is the foremost contribution to the topic.

As Muñoz Rubio and Vidal Olivares (2001) note, by the end of the 1980s a significant number of regional and sectorial studies significantly broadened the range of available empirical investigations, a trend that continued throughout the 1990s (see Bel 1993; Cayon Garcia and Muñoz Rubio 1998; Pascual 1988, 1990; Vidal Olivares 1991). The late 1990s saw the publication of what is to date the most important synthesis of Spanish railway history (Comín et al. 1998). 1998 was a turning point in other respects as well, since it was also the year in which the first Spanish Railway History Conference was organized. This event, along with later conferences in the same series, was fundamental in bringing together scholars researching the railways, and it has

played a key role in formulating programmatic directions in the study of the railways. A testament to its importance is the fact that many topics in the history of Spanish railways remain covered exclusively in the contributions to this series of conferences.

The late 1980s through the 1990s was also the period in which the first works addressing the problem of liberalization of the transport sector were published (Bel 1996; De Rus 1989; Dodgson and Rodríguez Álvarez 1996; Izquierdo 1997; Nash and Preston 1996). These works overwhelmingly favoured the liberalization and privatization process, and unanimously opted for a commercial model of the railways that sees the national company as firmly established on the foundation of market criteria. If there is one virtue of these works, it is that they reveal a broader meaning of liberalization as the process of adjusting the railways to competition within the horizon of privatization, rather than the much narrower works that treat liberalization mostly as synonymous with the EU policies of separating infrastructure and management and that push for distinctly narrow, empiricist and ahistorical analysis (an illustration of the latter can be found in Ramos Melero 2000; García Álvarez 2006). The differences in the treatment of liberalization correspond quite precisely to the boundary between works published before and after the first round of opening up the railways to direct competition from private sector providers. The distance from the liberalization process seems to have produced for the first group of works a space in which alternatives were part of this history, however feebly. As such, the works that address liberalization before the process began to be formally implemented maintain the type of possibilism that is required by the legitimation of a future process. In the well-established explicit or implicit assumption that liberalization is the only course forward, the political character and the historical option for this model of railway development is more readily available than in the retrospective projection of liberalization as an agentless and inevitable transformation.

In the 2000s the few works that up until then had touched on the social history of the railways (Ferner 1990; Ferner and Fina 1988) were joined by others that were explicitly interested in going beyond the narrow confines of economic history (Cuéllar Villar et al. 2005; Juez Gonzalo 2000; Muñoz Rubio 2011). Overall, a few characteristics of Spanish railway history clearly stand out. First of all, up until the early 1990s almost no works addressed the history of the railways during their organization as Renfe; instead, the bulk of railway history focused on the 19th and early 20th century history of the railways. Although significant advances have been made in the 1990s and 2000s, railway history is still dominated by works that do not cover the recent history of the railways; within this literature, studies that focus on recent social or labour history are even more striking. Secondly, Spanish railway history is to a large extent mostly an extension of economic history, as most of the analysis that extends into the public monopoly years of the railways looks at Renfe from a rather narrow focus of institutional or company history.

The subordination of railway history to economic history is not unique to Spain. This has been the case internationally for railway history, as it has for transport history more generally, prominently in research from the 1960s to the 1980s.⁶ Slow to respond to the critical advances achieved by the study of mobility, the social-constructionist analysis of technology and essential developments in critical science and technology studies, transport history remains, in many respects, a fairly conservative area of research. However, just because Spanish railway history

⁶ For an introduction and overview of the relationship between railway history and the history of technology, as well as the institutional developments that have marked their institutionalization, see Armstrong (1998), Divall (2010), Gourvish (1993), Mom (2003), Pirie (2014), Simmons and Robbins (1998).

shares some of the same biases as the broader field of transport history, this does not necessarily mean that the reasons for this tendency are the same.

Understanding the silences and mentions of Spanish railway history requires paying attention to the institutional context in which it evolved. The development of Spanish railway studies is today fundamentally linked to the Spanish Railways Foundation (*Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles* – FFE). Established in 1985 as a public institution, its board includes representatives of the main public companies in the Spanish railway sector. Its mission includes “the conservation of the historic and cultural heritage of the railways; the encouragement and promotion of knowledge about and usage of the railways by society; the diffusion of railway news through periodic publications and other media; and the diffusion of cultural aspects connected to the railways.” (FFE n.d.). To this end, it maintains and coordinates the activity of two railway museums, in Madrid and Vilanova y la Geltrú (Catalonia), as well as the Railway History Archive, the Documentation Center, the Railway Library, and the Railway Training Programme (*Aula de Formación Ferroviaria*). The programmes run under its aegis include the Railway History Programme (which has resulted in a broad range of academic publications), its own railway research and studies programme, a postgraduate programme on land transport, the journal *Vía Libre*, and cultural programmes such as the annual photography contest “Caminos de Hierro” and the railway-themed poetry and short story awards “Antonio Machado”.

The contemporary state of Spanish railway historiography is indivisibly linked to FFE’s railway history programme, which has been the main catalyst of new academic work for the last two decades. The history of this programme and the institutional setting in which it developed speaks powerfully of the complicated interplay between railway history, the institutionalization of economics as a discipline in the 1980s, and the internal dynamics of academic networks. Miguel Muñoz Rubio, director of the railway archive and library from 1998 to 2010, and of the railway museum from 2010 to 2012, saw his work in these positions as part of a broader plan of reorganizing the archive and the library in order to facilitate public access.⁷ A railway historian who started his career with a doctoral thesis on the company history of Renfe, which resulted in an important published monograph on the topic (1995), he assumed this position in a year of seminal importance for contemporary railway history.

The year 1998 marked the 150th anniversary of the Barcelona-Mataro line, a date which came to symbolically mark the beginning of the railways in Spain. On this occasion the two-volume comprehensive history of the Spanish railways was published (Comín et al. 1998). As previously noted, 1998 was also the year in which the First Railway History Conference took place. Initially planned as a one-time event, its success led the organizers to convert it into a periodic event aimed at bringing together academics engaged in the study of the Spanish railways. Organized between 1998 and 2012, the six Railway History Conferences served to set the research agenda for the field. The meetings not only provided an opportunity for national and international exchanges, but also served as an opportunity for diagnosing the state of railway history and railway studies. It was

⁷ As far as this objective is concerned, Muñoz Rubio’s work, together with that of the other employees of the archive and the library, have no doubt brought about a radical change in the ease of access to available documents. The cooperative, accommodating, and cordial atmosphere created by the staff of the railway archive, together with their continuous work of classification and organization of archival material, is an example of the democratic ethos that pervades the work and intentions of the researchers and staff of the archives. This is no doubt a very important contribution to facilitating the expansion of research about the railways, the consequences of which continue to unfold. As I will discuss, the limits of this public character are structural and institutional rather than contextual – not a totally unexpected development, since as Muñoz Rubio himself reminded me, the archive “ultimately remains a company archive”.

within the context of the conferences that the topic of the social history of the railways first gained some prominence.

The “star topic” of Spanish railway studies, in the words of Muñoz Rubio, remains to this day the contribution of the railways to national economic development throughout the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. The social history of the railways remained in the shadow of these dominant concerns, and one of the early concerns of the researchers that came together in the First Railway Conference was how to encourage and strengthen research in previously neglected areas.

“We [i.e. economic railway historians] used to do company history, but for us workers did not exist”, the director of the railway archives and library told me. He added that this was, and continues to be, an unacceptable omission. One of the responses to this was the attention devoted to the topic at the Railway Conferences. More directly, this also led to the publication of the volume *Repression obrera y lucha sindical* (2011), described by its editor Muñoz Rubio as a unique study, for the volume, which is a collaboration by international scholars, is a rare attempt to bring together diverse perspectives on the repression of workers and labour struggle across various national railway companies. Due to its broad scope, the disparate contributions are only loosely linked by a common theme, but what immediately stands out is that the research essentially stops at the 1970s. None of the articles in the book deal with labour questions after the 1970s, in Spain or elsewhere. Other titles dedicated to the social history of the Spanish railways also mostly share this feature. With very few exceptions, contemporaneous labour issues in the railways remain unstudied, to the point they are rarely even mentioned.

The commendable, if incipient and fragile attention that the topic has received starting in the late 1990s now finds itself threatened again. The impulse behind the recent attention should, to a large extent, be understood as happening in the context of an unanticipated development within the FFE. According to Muñoz Rubio, conducting original research was never one of the priorities of the Foundation, as reflected in the fact that the financial resources it has depended on have always been secured as extra-budgetary funds. Conversations with historians collaborating through the Historical Research Programme of the Foundation make it clear that much of what has been done reflects the efforts of a handful of researchers and their temporary success in working with the institutional resources of FFE as much as the margins of the institution. When the FFE was established in the mid-1980s, I have been told, it was a deeply innovative institution, and the type of solution it represented for the conservation of railway heritage was in many ways unique. Born under the auspices of a few historians’ interest in the railways, it was also a product of broader structural conditions. The 1980s interest in railway heritage and conservation was happening at a time of massive closure of lines and profound reorganization of the railways. The immediate threat to the existence of the railways was quite rapidly reflected in an increased interest in conservation and heritage work. For more than two decades, these transformations gave way to an institutional setting in which railway history could become conversant with its own blind spots and structural silences.

Today, however, during another era of radical reorganization, this type of history finds itself threatened by the vulnerability of the same institutional setting that made its development possible in the first place. If the division of the state railway company into Renfe and Adif did not have major repercussions for the research activity – although it generated practical problems in terms of everyday functioning – the subsequent divisions and the budgetary cuts are expected to end the independent research agenda that has operated through the mediation of FFE. And with it stand

threatened the incipient attempts at uncovering the “dark history of repression”: a history which characterizes railway companies as institutions devoted to specific models of exploiting labour, and which, according to one of the foremost scholars of Spanish railway history, has been silenced by a historiographical tradition that has, for a long time, reproduced an idealized image of the company.

FFE – is the archive different from the museum?

“The museum is another line of work, it is completely distinct [from the archive]”, the director of the archive tells me as we move on in our conversation about his academic work. Yet, a walk through the museum does not feel so fundamentally different from one through the landscape of Spanish railway history. The Madrid Railway Museum perhaps best captures the objectives of FFE. Opened to the public in 1984, it was the response to an anxiety born of a period of reorganization: an era dominated by the images of a futureless railway, when the response to imminent line closures was given voice in the form of memorializing fervour.

The museum is located in the old railway station of Delicias, which dates back to 1880 and was closed in 1971. The potential visitor can find out more about the museum on its website, where the English-speaking visitor is briefly introduced to the exhibits and their history:

“The Madrid Railway Museum opened its doors to the public in 1984. It is located in the former station of ‘Delicias’, one of the finest and most representative examples of Spanish industrial architecture, inaugurated in 1880. The museum contains a selection of vehicles and other railway-related exhibits which aims to show the historical evolution of this mode of transport. Its fundamental purposes are to convey the reality of the railway, both past and present, promote an appreciation and understanding of rail transport, encourage railway-related research and enhance the railway heritage, all in the spirit of public service. The recent opening of the Railway History Archive and the Railway Library Consultation Room, as well as the conservation and constant expansion of the Photographic Library, have greatly contributed to the achievement of these objectives.”⁸

The Spanish-speaking visitor is told a bit more about what to expect in terms of the structure of the exhibition:

“A visit to the Madrid Railway Museum makes it possible to become familiar with an impressively complete collection of historical railway equipment. The central hall of the station hosts a highly diverse exhibition of locomotives and passenger coaches, through which one can understand the evolution of rail traction throughout over the more than a century and a half of the existence of the Spanish railways, as well as the conditions in which the passengers of these trains travelled. On both sides of the central hall thematic rooms are located, including one devoted to antique railway station clocks, another devoted to model railways, with working scale models, and a third where the main elements of railway infrastructure, that is, the tracks, are explained. On the outside tracks the Algodor signal box and its signal bridge can be found, a unique element of our industrial heritage that started operation in 1932 and which, when running, allowed for the remote control of the switch junctions and signals.”

If moved to take the step from potential to actual visitor, the person curious to learn more about the past of the railways can step through the gates of the old railway station and purchase a six-euro

⁸ See: <http://www.museodelferrocarril.org/en/principal.asp> (accessed on June 4, 2017).

ticket that will give them unlimited access to the collection for the rest of the day. The visitor will have here fairly unencumbered access to the extensive collection of objects that the museum takes pride in. Not unlike in other transport and railway museums, the visitor will experience her visit from a position that loosely replicates the experience of the passenger. She can freely move between the passenger coaches restored to original condition and will perhaps enjoy the luxury of a fully restored dining car that doubles as an occasional venue for events organized by the museum, such as the TST discussion series⁹ which I would occasionally attend. Daily visits to the archives that the same building hosts will frequently mean crossing paths with groups of children as young as five or six or small filming crews trying to capture the authentic feel of turn-of-the-century travel as a young woman hidden in a suspicious number of layers of white lace waves from the steps of a luxury coach.

The visitor is provided with little explicit direction, but the actual structure of the collection provides a sequence of historical progression from steam to electric trains that is intuitively grasped. Having enjoyed both peeking inside the cabin of a steam locomotive and resting for some minutes in a Talgo coach, an instantiation of patriotic pride on display, the visitor can direct herself to one of the four thematic rooms found to the left and the right of the four tracks. One of them is dedicated to infrastructure and another aims to provide the visitor with more knowledge about the Talgo. A room devoted exclusively to station clocks introduces the visitor to one of the less prominent technologies of the railways, and another is meant to familiarize her with the miniature world of model railways. While many of the objects on display, most of them carefully restored to their initial condition, are accompanied by little more than identifying labels, the infrastructure room is heavier on description and accompanying audiovisual material. As one enters the infrastructure room, one can read:

“You are invited on a journey to become familiar with a fundamental aspect of the railways, the railway infrastructure. The tracks on which the trains move, the communication and safety systems that organize circulation, electric installations, bridging systems, the construction of tunnels, route planning, and the evolution of all of them throughout history. And, of course, its protagonists, the workers who build, maintain, and guard the railway routes.”

The visitor excited at the prospect of entering the world of the railway infrastructure workers is up for a rather brief encounter. There appears to be little to learn about railway workers beyond the fact that around 5000 of them are distributed along the 15,000 km of railway lines that ADIF is in charge of. A diorama allows the visitor to familiarize herself with eight different elements of the track. Individual elements are illuminated at the push of a button, as the visitor learns to differentiate between X and Y. Next to these physical features, anonymous and generic workers become mere appendices to the railway technology. Having perhaps hoped to learn something about railway maintenance workers, the visitor comes across a very basic description of “maintenance work”. The true protagonist of the infrastructure room remains railway technology. In the thematic rooms of the museum, one of the most internally complex occupational schemes seems to be mostly remembered in the depictions of shadows on the walls. The black contours of protection helmets of shadows on the walls stand out as the most striking depiction of the absent *ferroviarios*.

⁹ *Transportes, Servicios y Telecomunicaciones*, transport history journal published by the Iberian Railway History Association.



Depictions of workers on the walls of the infrastructure room of the Madrid Railway Museum (photo by author)

futuro, la exposición del tren (FFE 1998) or *Ferrocarril y Madrid: historia de un progreso* (Matilla Quiza et al. 2002), an edited volume available at an 80% discount. The visitor less interested in picking up the history of the railways where the museum leaves off might exit after having purchased a tote bag or a cute painted tin locomotive, not unlike those to be found in a Budapest Christmas market. And it is more than likely that most visitors will also stop to admire the fine details of the miniature models that will be quickly classified as “toys for grownups”. At prices that rarely drop below 100 euro, these toys are likely to never make it into the homes of most children awestruck by the perfection of their design. They will however feature prominently, together with many other items, at the monthly model railway fair hosted on the premises of the museum.

The present of the railways also gains prominence in a promotional video that glorifies the contemporary achievements of HSR. Upon departure, the visitor exits the museum the same way she walked in, not before passing by the glass cases which display the publications of the Railway Foundation; these can be purchased at the same place where the ticket was earlier handed out through the window of a reconstructed wooden cabin. While these books are more likely to be picked up by those heading the same way towards the library or the archive, the visitor might still spend a bit of time checking out the books on sale, which might include a 50% discount on the 60-euro two-volume history of the railways. Perhaps she will pick up the catalogue of the 1998 photo exhibition *Expreso al*



Diorama in the Madrid Railway Museum (photo by author)

The Madrid Railway Museum is, in its manner of depicting the past, typical rather than exceptional among transport and railway museums. As Divall and Scott convincingly show, transport museums have fallen behind the innovations in museum practices and curatorial choices that followed the 1980s wave of critical museology (Divall and Scott 2001). This can be attributed partly to the particular characteristics of the field of expertise that these museums are embedded in, but one should not forget about the financial constraints that railway museums most often face. In addition to this any tentative discussion of the circumstances that explain the predicament of many

transport museums must take into account the specific difficulties that arise from dealing with industrial artefacts.

The situation that the visitor encounters is still that of a hegemony of formalist exhibitions. In this sense, the Madrid Railway Museum is an example of what Divall and Scott (2001) refer to as “whiggish histories”. The ideas about the past that dominate this type of exhibition are essentially a take on a narrative of progress. If in the Madrid Railway Museum natural harmony between the railways and the countryside does not feature prominently, unlike in similar British museums, the past depicted here is a quintessentially harmonious industrial past. The railway’s past has been cleansed of all traces of conflict and antagonism. With social context almost entirely absent, the Madrid Railway Museum contributes to and reproduces a vision of the past, present, and the future of the railways in which technological and social progress are unquestionably related. The over 4800 artefacts that are meant to tell the history of the railways do so by explicitly promoting or implicitly suggesting an apolitical narrative of technological progress. The seeming apoliticism of the exhibition is interrupted only for the occasional display of national achievements of railway engineering. The exhibition is also a straightforward illustration of what the authors of *Making histories in transport museums* refer to as the “black-boxing of technological things” (Divall and Scott 2001:119). Although technology is the protagonist of the museum, its inner historical workings remain completely impenetrable. While social change appears as little more than a

reflection of technological progress, the history of technological change and the social coordinates of the technologies on display remain completely opaque. Presented in isolation, the technology on display tells the story of achievements through a history devoid of choice, the story of work without workers and industrialism without conflict.

Altogether Different?

From sufficient distance, Spanish railway historiography and the Madrid Railway Museum appear as more than neighbours in the representation of the past. Taken together, written and displayed railway history reproduce similar silences in their representation of the past. For the field of Spanish railway history, with its origins in economic history, the recent past has only very recently become an object of research. Between the macroeconomic focus on 19th century industrialization and the functional adaptations of the 20th century national company, academic historians have only just begun to take interest in the “protagonists” of the railways – the workers. The pioneering works of social history available today still primarily address labour questions in the railways’ pre-Renfe period. The forays into social history have happened on the whole without a fundamental revision of the methodological instruments that mark the older studies. The dominant positivism and almost obsessive empiricism of railway studies survives in much of the existing social history of the railways, the advances of which have mostly resulted from taking up previously uncovered topics within a largely unquestioned and broadly shared theoretical and methodological standpoint. The extension of research to include social topics has occurred in continuity with the dominant interpretive paradigms and has been cumulative and quantitative in the strictest sense. Broader questions about social process and social change, about the type of historical tropes that academic history reproduces, have been almost entirely absent.

Recent works on Spanish railway history incessantly repeat words such as *intermodality* and constantly emphasize the paradigmatic change in the transition from the railway monopoly as the hegemonic mode of transport to its integration alongside and in competition with other forms of transport. The dominant representations construct the 1980s as the moment of rebirth of a railway previously threatened by extinction after it lost its competitive advantage over road and air transport. Yet, the story railway history mostly tells is one of inevitability. Competitive specialization appears, just like in the visions of its policy advocates, as a necessary outcome to a given situation. The predicament of the railways in the 1970s and 1980s is, for academic historians, given, not constructed or produced. The hegemony of the car is something railway history faces with the dispassion of facing an eternal fact of nature. Social process appears trapped between two variants and possibilities: the ascendant slope, or the progressive trend that overlaps with the efforts of commercialization, and its dark underbelly, the increasingly marginalized railway of the pre-1980s, with its history of decline and its imminent descent towards extinction. This, overall, is a history absent of choices and alternatives. The foundational turn in the history of Renfe is encapsulated by the embracing of unyielding modernization somewhere in the 1980s, but this, in turn, appears as the only possible course: a choice rooted in the seeming absence of alternatives.

Similarly, the dominant historical logic that integrates the artefacts on display in the railway museum is that of progress and inevitability. Cleansed of choices, alternatives and failed plans, the history on display here tells a story of seamless technological development. Except for the workers standing at the top of the internal company hierarchy (such as the head of the railway station), who

are seen as *representatives* of the company to the public, workers are absent to the point of being reduced to contours and nameless figures recognizable not by their craft or attributions, but by the objects they have become appendages to. History here has become independent of workers, and it appears to be steadily conquering emancipation from work as well.

Taking up the concept of the “usable past”, Colin Divall has insisted in much of his work on the importance of analysing and understanding the ways in which “nonacademic audiences perceive and understand the technological past” (Divall 2010: 940). Captured under the heading of “techno-tales”, these narratives about the past become, in his reading, essential to historians’ work in demystifying historical process. These stories, stories that people employ in the defence or explanation of mobility choices, must, he argues, become central to critical histories of technology and the efforts at producing a public history of technology. Divall also makes the important claim that the public history of technology should not be treated as applied scholarship, but rather as another form of historiography. Interestingly enough, however, he does not appear to let these two related but distinct arguments form a unitary conversation. In his use of the concept of the “usable past” as well as his embracing of the concept of “techno-tales”, historiography and the public’s ideas about history seem to remain two qualitatively distinct realms; their relationship appears to be that of the interaction between producers and consumers of history. Divall’s arguments are powerful and illuminating, and they represent an important step in producing a critical historiography of technology. Equally, his stress on the importance of understanding the ways in which ideas about the past circulate in certain determined contexts or are engaged by certain audiences opens important avenues for researching the constitutive effect of narratives about the past.

Yet, in this employment of the notion of the “usable past” there is also a limitation that arises from the implicit privileging of academic history as the legitimate domain of authoritative representations of the past. As is implicit even in the word “techno-tales”, this view seems to suggest that the public’s ideas about the past are by nature secondary to critical historiography, that the claims to truth these public narratives hold are by definition subordinated to the true site of the production of history, namely scholarly work. Distinct from this, the focus on the production of history is one that argues not simply for heightened awareness of narratives about the past, but also for broadening our understanding of the contexts in which history is produced. My argument is that privileging academic history over other forms of history restricts our possibilities for understanding the struggles over imposing dominant readings of the past. It does not take seriously enough the power of nonacademic actors to formulate readings of the technological past, and it obscures as much as it illuminates the ways ideas about the past get produced in the first place. Of course, in comparison with other contexts for the production and circulation of ideas about the past, critical historiography might be often better equipped to challenge certain historical readings. Even when this is the case, this tells us little about historiography’s influence or the pervasiveness of certain understandings of social process. But more generally, the privileging of academic history also amounts to a certain overconfidence in its autonomy. It is only when viewed alongside other forms of historical practice that the silences and mentions of railway history can regain their own historical character.

When placed in the same field of historical production, academic history and the historical logic of industrial heritage are revealed to be supported by similar explanatory devices. Their central tropes are modernization – and its corollary, decline –, technological progress, and company

reorganization. This is a history which borrows the established chronology of mainstream historiography (first Francoist period, second Francoist period, Transition, and democracy) but cleanses it of political connotations. To the extent that there is room for structural issues, it is only on the terrain of the distant past. It is only when the focus is extended to include the 19th century that capitalism becomes a relevant analytical category. The recent history of the railways features only marginally in railway history. To the extent that it is there, its tropes are well established: the 1980s railway revolution marks the transition from the antiquated conventional rail to the commercial railway of the future, which is spearheaded by the development of HSR. From this agentless history workers have fully disappeared. Their traces are to be found mostly in references to the costs of the reproduction of the labour force and in the occasional reference to the modernization of the company's human resources programmes. If social history is marginal in the overall landscape of railway history, its marginality becomes absolute in relation to the recent past. Just like in the railway museum, within the bulk of the history addressing the recent past of the railways, workers feature as mere shadows on the walls.



Workers depicted in the Madrid Railway Museum (photo by author)

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