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# The Economics And Politics Of High-Speed Rail: Lessons From Experiences Abroad



## Synopsis

The technological revolution linked to high speed rail (HSR) has been accompanied by myths and claims about its contribution to society and the economy. Although HSR is unquestionably a technological advance that has become a symbol of modernity, this review and analysis of the international experiences shows that the conditions necessary to have a positive impact, economically, socially and environmentally, are enormously restrictive. The Economics and Politics of High Speed Rail: Lessons from Experiences Abroad, by Daniel Albalade and Germán Bel, introduces the main questions policy makers and scholars should examine when considering and studying HSR implementation, with particular emphasis on the US's recent interest in this technology and possible application in California. Albalade and Bel then review the experiences of the most significant implementations of HSR around the globe. This in-depth international perspective includes chapters on the pioneers of HSR (Japan and France), the European followers (Germany, Spain and Italy), as well as Asian experiences in China, Taiwan, and Korea. Albalade and Bel's study provides a clear distinction between the myths and realities associated with this transportation innovation. Among the most relevant findings, this study highlights how HSR projects that do not satisfy highly restrictive conditions on mobility patterns, measured costs, and economically rational designs that make it desirable have been the source of huge financial debacles and the economic failure of HSR in most cases, which result in unfortunate consequences for taxpayers. The Economics and Politics of High Speed Rail is a rigorous investigation of the economic and political challenges and ramifications of implementing new public transportation technology.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This authoritative contribution to the literature on high-speed rail is rigorous, comprehensive, and timely. This book is a must-read for anyone truly interested in understanding the economics and politics of high-speed rail. (Rick Geddes, Cornell University) Albalade and Bel have written a book that should be required reading for transportation planners and government policymakers in the US. They chronicle the experience with HSR from around the world and distill important lessons for the US. They challenge policymakers to "renounce the modernity offered by HSR" and instead look closely at territorial, mobility, demographic, and economic characteristics of their location to decide if HSR is the best investment. Albalade and Bel write a careful analysis of HSR efforts in Japan, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, China, So. Korea, Taiwan and the US "showing difference in finance (public, private and mixed), territory, emphasis on passenger or freight, changes in consumer demand and impacts on economic development in the nodes and the wider region. Their overall conclusion: "Caution." (Mildred E. Warner, Cornell University)[Daniel Albalade and Germán Bel] provide by far the most comprehensive review of the international experience with high speed rail in Europe and Asia, and mine it for insights on the circumstances in which high speed rail is financially viable, environmentally sensible, and politically irresistible. It's a cautionary tale of how infrastructure systems can get overbuilt. (Jose A. Gomez-Ibanez, Harvard University) Two Spanish economics professors have written this book to inform the debate on high-speed rail (HSR) in the US, using the international HSR experience. Most valuable are the separate chapters describing HSR in Japan, France, Germany, Spain, and China. These chapters include sections titled Objectives and Motivation; Structure, Design and Functions; Spending and Profitability; Demand and Modal Competition; Economic and Regional Impacts; and Environment and Other Externalities. The experiences are sobering for anyone thinking HSR can be built and operated profitably in the US. Public-private partnership (PPP) advocates, take note. The book warns strongly against political pressures to build HSR in less populated areas since HSR has drained economic activity from smaller cities to the major cities. Instead, HSR should connect only hubs with significant existing travel markets since HSR does not significantly increase (and induce) travel. The bibliography and index are excellent. There is no comparable published book, despite the burgeoning literature on HSR. Summing Up: Highly recommended. Students, upper-division undergraduate and up; faculty and researchers; professionals; general readers. (CHOICE) The Economics and Politics of High Speed Rail provides a very methodical look at the basic economics

and, to a lesser extent, politics behind the growth in high-speed rail (HSR) services around the world. ...The book, is in fact, largely a synthesis of what others have found regarding the HSR networks that a number of countries have developed. This approach makes the volume a very accessible read. ...Those with an interest in the development of HSR will certainly find a wealth of information systematically presented on its development together with an outline of some elements of its impacts. (E-International Relations)

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Excellent discussion of the realities of high speed passenger rail systems. It points out which systems are successful, and demonstrates the lack of viability of the Spanish system of HSR.

Various data of the main projects of high-speed trains are presented. The examples are well explained and referenced. The figures are bad. If you are looking for updated information on high-speed trains you need to buy this book.

Very interesting read about HSR

Well I give this book 4-stars, but with reservations. There are not many scholarly works on intercity passenger rail, at least not new work so this book is definitely valuable but it is sadly incomplete in that it only examines high-speed rail services of +250-kmp (155-mph) on newly built infrastructure. It is somewhat deficient in that its authors seem to know little about railways beyond the limited scope of the study. First with the deficient part, they the writers seemed unfamiliar with the jargon of the rail industry, for example stating that for the Shinkansen "it was necessary to broaden the width of the track to 4.7 feet (the earlier narrow track measured 3.5 feet) to guarantee a more efficient service". This is technically correct but why not state that the Shinkansen used international "Standard Gauge" where the rails are 4 feet 8 1/2 inches apart as in the first modern British railways opposed to the narrow "Cape Gauge" of 3 feet 6 inches which was adopted for the construction of cheaper railways in overseas British colonies? Or like many railway writers in Japan do, just use metric. That's how an experience railroad author would right using the terms and jargon of the subject matter. You might include a little bit of history, that as advised by British civil engineers Japan in the 19th Century had adopted the narrow gauge of

3ft.6in. (named after its use in South Africa) because it reduce construction costs but the wider gauge was necessary increase capacity and maintain stability at high speeds. The "Standard Gauge" with its odd width may have been adopted so that Shinkansen rolling-stock could be interchangeable with the rail systems in Europe and North America. Also the authors in the book keep referring to "interurban" journeys/services when they meant I think "intercity" journeys/services. Interurban in railway jargon usually refers to rapid electric passenger railways of an intra-regional nature, connecting several neighboring communities like the South Shore Line in Chicago or the private urban railways in Japan. They are somewhere between a commuter/rapid transit service and an outright intercity service, the distinction is far from clear. I believe that if this book's two economist authors had included contributions from an individual with extensive knowledge of railroading to advise and edit the work so it read well for the rail community including those in the industry, passenger rail advocates, and rail fans, it be a much better book. Sadly the maps included this book are so poorly reproduced to be utterly useless. It's a shame for I in Photoshop could use the UIC maps to create maps that when printed in low quality could be read| essentially convert the maps from color (reproduced in grayscale in the book) to black and white. One thing that also worried me is that they quote Randal O'Toole from the CATO Institute several times, a problem since O'Toole is not just rabidly anti-rail but in fact dishonest; his Wikipedia entry states that "Detractors have noted O'Toole's selective use of information, undocumented statistics, and unverifiable sources of information in order to support his claims against rail transit". Finally consider this O'Toole statement from the August 21, 2012 Christian Science Monitor article "Obama plan for high-speed rail, after hitting a bump, chugs forward again": "The problem with Obama's high-speed rail is that it's an obsolete technology that doesn't make sense today| High-speed rail was successful in Japan because at the time it was developed only 12 percent of Japanese were driving| It makes no sense today when cars go where you want to go when you want to go." The idea by O'Toole that Japan built the Shinkansen in the early sixties because it lacked the need or ability to build modern highways is clearly ridiculous. In 1956 the national government established the Japan Highway Public Corporation to construct and manage a nationwide network of expressways. In 1957 construction commence on the Meishin Expressway linking Nagoya and Kobe, with the first section of which opened to traffic in 1963. The car company Toyota was established in 1933 and by the early 1960s was expanding overseas, the first Toyota built outside Japan was at Melbourne, Australia in 1963. By the end of the decade, Toyota had established a worldwide presence, as the company had exported its one-millionth unit. Furthermore

both commercial airlines and intercity buses were already well-established alternatives to rail travel in 1960s Japan, O'Rourke is just making stuff up to prop up his anti-rail pro-highway ideological agenda. Yet I don't think that O'Rourke's research actually adversely affected this book but they did falsely imply that the debt from post-Tokaido Shinkansen construction and operations led to the massive deficits of the national railway by the 1980s but has stated in Christopher Hood's *Shinkansen: From train to symbol of modern Japan* that this is not true. According to sources cited by Hood the Shinkansen related debt including the Seikan Tunnel at the time of privatization accounted for only 20% of JNR's long-term liabilities. The collapse of JNR was due more to poor management, low productivity, and the construction and operation of money losing rural conventional services due to pork barrel politics. This is why privatization was the solution, which was successful. This doesn't change the main premise of this work that the construction of new high-speed rail systems is not economically justified for the most part and that nations such as Spain are now burdened with enormous construction debt and operational losses, I'm surprised that they didn't use the word boondoggle. There simply are not enough riders to cover operational costs, let alone to amortize the capital debt. Also according to the authors HSR has had little economic impact on regional economies and are decidedly not green since HSR consumes more resources and emits more pollution than what is reduced overall in carbon emissions in the transport sector. These conclusions however are far from new and the stellar book *On the Right Lines? The Limits of Technological Innovation* by Stephen Potter came to the same conclusions in 1987. Potter wrote that the Shinkansen model of HSR involving entirely new very high speed infrastructure was only justified on transport corridors where the service could capture at least 50 million riders annually. This is why he saw Maglev as not having much of a future even if it was technologically practical. That is why he saw French TGV and German Neubaustrecken (ICE) style HSR systems where a limited amount of new high-speed track upgrades service across entire network as more applicable since costs are reduced by using existing conventional infrastructure to reach urban centers and provincial cities far beyond the new high speed tracks. For these investments ridership of 10 million annually is enough to economically justify them in a cost-benefits analysis including externalities such as economic growth, transport congestion, and environmental impacts. For rail corridors with ridership below 10 million annual riders the upgrading of existing railways was the best alternative, with a focus increasingly on high-performance train-sets like the British HST/Intercity-125 or Sweden's tilting X-2000; trains that could run up to 200-kph (125-mph) on upgraded existing tracks without

expensive new construction or track maintenance. Eventually Potter concluded that the examination of and innovation in fares, public image, comfort, and scheduling could make a much bigger contribution to revenue and ridership than increasing top commercial speeds, for example the very operationally efficient intercity DMUs widely used in Britain and Japan on secondary mainlines. And that is where this book falls completely flat, its failure to include the study of "upgraded or incremental" high-speed rail projects like the Intercity-125, X-2000, Metroliner/Acela. Or even Japan's upgrading of its conventional railways with high-performance intercity DMU/EMUs. This oversight is likely due to the re-definition of "high-speed rail" from its original accepted 1960-70s definition of fast and frequent intercity services with speeds of at least 125-mph on new dedicated or upgraded shared (with commuter and freight) track. This in my opinion is wrong, clearly since these services are much more technologically and operationally sophisticated than conventional trains with speeds of only 80 to 100 mph. I think that the Florida East Coast Railway's "All Aboard Florida" intercity rail project between Miami and Orlando qualifies as high-speed rail since it will run at speeds up to 110-mph on its upgraded coast line and 125-mph on new track to Orlando International Airport. And this "higher speed rail" service is exactly the type of rail service that America is likely to get for the Seattle-Portland Cascades, the Empire Service in Upstate NY, and the Midwestern corridors centered on Chicago. "High Speed Rail" I think is a general term that should be more specifically divided between "Higher Speed Rail (HrSR)" services with top commercial speeds of 160-kph to 200-kph (110 to 125 mph) and "Very High Speed Rail (VHSR)" services utilizing extensive new infrastructure with commercial speeds of 250-kph (155-mph) or higher. I think that this book "The Economics and Politics of High-Speed Rail" should have included case studies of Britain's West Coast Mainline (1960-2012), Amtrak's Northeast Corridor (1965-2012), and Sweden's X-2000 (1985-2012). A history and cost-benefit analysis of the transport, economic, and environmental impact of these three HrSR services would have been most enlightening. Also their chapter on Italy should have study the effects of the Pendolino in the 1980-90s before the most recent Italian high-speed projects, this innovative and important high speed train wasn't even mention in this book! We are not likely going to see the construction and operation of new build "Very-HSR" services in the USA, the California project seems to be falling apart and with the NEC I think further upgrading and expansion of the existing line is what in order, Amtrak is never going to get \$151 billion for a 200-mph system. It's all a political fantasy. The EU, World Bank, or private sector is not going to fund these projects! I noted that they in the chapter on China several times quoted the

excellent 2011 CaiXin Online article "All Aboard China's Fast Trains to Trouble: Now that high-speed trains are crisscrossing the country, enormous costs and other shortcomings have been exposed" which should be read by those at the California High Speed Rail Authority and at Amtrak. Thus exploration of these more practical HSR systems is of greater use to the American and Canadian reader be he or her a policy maker, a professional railroader, rail passenger advocate, rail fan, or just a interested reader from the general public. Including some readable maps and photos wouldn't hurt the tables and graphs in this book where pretty good. While I agree with most of the conclusions in this book, yet I still have some qualms about their conclusions the economic impact of passenger rail. In the examination of the economic impact of HSR systems built in the last decade it seems too soon to conclusively conclude what the impact is of these very long-term developments have been. Their facts and conclusions on the decades old Shinkansen and TGV seem to be mostly in line with Hood's "Shinkansen" and Jacob Meunier's excellent book "On the Fast Track: French Railway Modernization and the Origins of the TGV, 1944-1983" but it still seems pretty negative compared to those two before mention works. The problem of the drain of urban vitality from provincial cities to larger central hubs like Paris or Tokyo, and how HSR can bring a rise in da tripping tourists but a drop in overnight hotel stays was touched upon. Hood in his book on the Shinkansen pointed out that the economic benefits of the Bullet Train was mixed and not distributed evenly, but he did layout several communities that had seen positive benefits from the new high speed links. Professor Sir Peter Hall and PhD Candidate Chia-Lin Chen from The Bartlett School of Planning have completed two economic studies that cast a very favorable light on the economic benefits of high speed rail in Britain. It was a "underlying fallacy, they argue, is that there is a zero-sum competition between a booming national capital and regional core cities, as well as between regional cities and their hinterlands... Here in the UK, the 30-year-old Inter-City 125 network has boosted the economies of cities that it brought within a two-hour journey time from London, such as Manchester and Leeds". Some older industrial cities don't benefit from fast rail and it does little for industrial or agricultural economies, but it seems that it can play an important role in the development of service industries and the "knowledge economy". The problem with examining the economic impact of passenger rail is that we can't run a precise scientific controlled study with a control version of an "alternative reality" Japan or France where the Shinkansen or TGV weren't built. What would the Northeast Corridor be like without Amtrak's Metroliner/Acela service? We can seek out natural experiments and compare different cities, regions, or countries but given the large number of variables it's



hard to be entirely confident in the results. Is a large city successful because it has HSR, or does it have HSR because it's a successful large city? As Hood pointed out the failure of one Japanese city to benefit from its Shinkansen link (population growth had remain stagnant) is likely due to its mountainous local that saw long, cold, and very snowy winters. Instead other surrounding cities at lower altitudes seemed to have become bedroom communities of Tokyo. In this work by Albalade and Bel it seems that the service industry is not as weighed heavily as industry despite that like agriculture before it industrial employment in post-industrial nations is greatly surpassed by the service sector. They seem to feel that the construction of freight links to move goods can have great benefits but facilitating the movement people not so much. The conclusion of the authors seem to be that rail has little overall economic impact and they highlight this by in the introduction quoting Robert W. Fogel the author of *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Economic History* (1964) who theorized that had the railroads not been built in the 19th Century that other transport modes (canals and wagons) would have taken up the slack and while urban and rural development would have been very different in pattern, overall GDP in 1890 would have been only 5% lower. It seems that Fogel in his study only examine the railroad's impact on agricultural production and not industrial or commercial development. This is important because it's clear that complex pre-industrial agricultural economies such as China could successful use waterways both natural and manmade to move agricultural products from farm to city. This was the primary purpose of the Erie Canal. I have also wondered why if the Romans could have built a magnificent road system why didn't anyone else? But while the railroads are not indispensable for industrial civilization with the invention of the steam engine its application to transportation seemed inevitable, primitive railroads predate the Industrial Revolution by several centuries and were used to move coal from mines in Great Britain in the 18th century. By the time of the steam railway England already had the extensive canal system that Fogel envisioned the USA would have needed without railroads and yet despite this excellent system of canals Britain still saw a rapid expansion of railways funded by private capital from the 1830s onward. Today despite the development of motor vehicles and airplanes railroads still remain vital, either in urban transit, long distance freight, or the movement of minerals from mine to port or industrial center. Railroads have played a very large and important role in history, steel wheels on steel rails today are very efficient and perhaps as a version of technological determinism if George Stephenson hadn't successfully commercialize railway technology someone else soon would have! It seems that railroads are as much the result of industrialization as the driver of industrial economies. Who invented the internet, and is the internet

not the inevitable result of technological progress in telecommunications and computer science? We can debate as in Richard White's "Railroaded: The Transcontinental Railroads and the Making of Modern America" the form and shape railroads took and their historical positive and negative impacts on society... but we can't deny that they revolutionized society. Back to Albaladejo and Bel's point however high-speed rail is far from indispensable to modern society, and far from driving growth and quality of life it can instead be a heavy burden. They are correct that these very expensive and large transport projects require plenty of careful due diligence. It seems to me that the many who promote high-speed rail have done very little study on the actual subject beyond the superficial that it is convenient and futuristic. The vast majority of the world doesn't need and can't afford new super high-speed passenger railways. But modern intercity passenger rail can and should play an important role in the future transport of the vast and crowded mega cities that many of us will be living in during the 21st Century. Many of the arguments in Sen Claiborne Pell's visionary book "Megalopolis Unbound: The Supercity and the Transportation of Tomorrow" (1966) ring true today. If you are very much into high speed rail I most definitely recommend this book with its cautionary narrative and conclusions on the topic. That's why I gave it four stars. Please however look up the other books and authors I have mentioned, and a great source of information (quoted in this book) on passenger rail is the annual issues of the Japan Railway & Technical Review published in English and online at [...]. And you cannot go wrong subscribing to Trains Magazine!

I think this is the most comprehensive book written on HSR with international comparative perspective. A must read for everybody interested in the topic. Maps should have better quality.

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