

Why Passenger Trains Don't Work in Europe

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On recent trips to Europe, I rode the London Underground, traveled on trains to the north of Scotland, zipped to Paris on the Eurostar, took the TGV to Lyon, and tripped on trams in cities from Glasgow to Sofia, Bulgaria. Americans coming home from trips like this would easily wonder why we don't have similarly great passenger rail systems. Here rail travelers have to deal with crumbling infrastructure in the Northeast Corridor and New York, Boston, Washington, and other metro systems.

The reality is that Europe's trains are enjoyed by tourists, but they don't work that much better for Europeans than the U.S. system works for Americans. According to a report published by the European Union, the average European travels a little over 600 miles a year by rail compared with a little over 100 miles by the average American. Yes, that's six times as much, but the 500-mile difference comes with huge tradeoffs.

First, the high fuel taxes and other policies Europe uses to encourage train travel and discourage driving have greatly suppressed total mobility. According to the same European Union report, the average American travels 15,000 miles a year by automobile compared with fewer than 6,000 by the average European. Gaining 500 rail miles at the expense of losing 9,000 other miles is hardly fair.

Second, Europe's decision to dedicate its rail network mainly to passengers has pushed a huge amount of freight onto the highways. The same EU report says that 46 percent of European freight goes by truck while only 11 percent goes by rail, while in the United States more than 40 percent goes by rail while just 30 percent goes on the highway.

Moving all of that freight by rail saves a lot more energy than moving a few passengers by rail. Contrary to claims that our railroads are somehow technologically behind those of other countries, we have the most efficient rail network in the world.

Third, subsidies to European trains, especially the infrastructure-heavy high-speed rail lines, have left many countries deeply in debt. Those debts are large enough to undermine the entire economies of some countries, just as the massive — \$350 billion in today's dollars — Japanese National Railways debt in the late 1980s contributed to Japan's decades of economic doldrums since then.

Nor have those debts gotten many people out of their cars or airline seats and onto trains. High-speed rail advocates brag that some rail lines have captured passengers away from the airlines, but the latest report from the European Union says that air travel in Europe is growing more than

twice as fast as train travel: 4.9 percent per year versus 2.1 percent. To the extent that train travel is growing, it is taking passengers not from cars or planes but from buses that are more energy efficient and require far fewer subsidies than trains.

What about all the trams (streetcars) and metros (subways and elevateds) that seem to blanket European cities? Something like 140 cities in Europe have rail transit systems, compared with just 40 in the United States. Yet the average European rides trams and metros just twice as many miles a year — about 120 versus 60 — as the average American. Is it really worth tens of billions in additional subsidies to increase urban rail ridership by an average of 60 miles a year?

If passenger rail doesn't work that well, then why do so many European countries support it? The simple answer is that most railroads in Europe are government owned, while most railroads in America are private. While private owners operate efficiently to earn profits, the politicians who run state-owned railroads are more interested in doing things that are highly visible to voters, whether they are worthwhile or not.

The bottom line is that passenger rail is expensive because it requires so much costly infrastructure compared with airlines or even highways. As a result, it has always been used mainly by the wealthy and elites, not by ordinary people whose mobility was often limited to foot travel until mass produced automobiles became available.

I love passenger trains as much as anyone and more than most. So it is hard for me to accept it, but they really have no useful role in modern life. While I will be happy if a few private trains, such as Florida's Brightline, turn out to be successful, I can't see any justification for the tens of billions of dollars of annual subsidies that the United States is pouring into intercity and urban rail passenger trains.

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