

International Railways in Argentina

Rethinking International Relations and Regional Integration Studies in the Southern Cone

Alejandro Rascovan

IMHICIHU/CONICET, FSOC/UBA

The invention of railways in the nineteenth century changed the world, displacing older technologies and modifying how humans perceived space and time. Further, the implementation of the railroad coincided with the institutionalization of nation-states in Europe and the Americas. The creation of a nation consisted of three major tasks—formalizing national borders, creating institutions, and capitalizing on the international division of labor. Railways played a major role in each of these endeavors. They played a key role in aiding politicians and entrepreneurs in efforts to achieve specific economic growth and political consolidation. They also structured each country's territory via infrastructural connection. Argentina and its neighbor countries each experienced these elements of railroad construction.

While every South American country built railways in the mid-1800s, it was not until the twentieth century that the distinct national systems began to connect to one another. By 1950, thirteen international railways operated in South America. Seven of those lines involved Argentina, more than any other country.¹ These international lines served a wide range of interests and, like their solely internal counterparts, had to overcome technical and political difficulties to succeed.

This article aims to explore the intersections between railway studies and international relations in Argentina in order to shed light on how international rail infrastructure aided the process of regional integration in South America,

1. Five of these seven international railways are still working, according to Belgrano Cargas y Logística SA: Brazil (Paso de los Libres–Uruguaiana); Uruguay (Concordia–Salto); Paraguay (Posadas–Encarnación); Bolivia (Pocitos–Yacuiba); and Chile (Socompa–Antofagasta). See www.bcyf.com.ar/empresa/empresa.php?codigo=nuestra-flota (accessed 14 January 2016).



particularly between Argentina and its neighbors. While this subject has been approached through a number of perspectives, many of which are highlighted below, several paths of research remain understudied. The analysis of Argentina's international railways will be broken down into three phases, each shaped by the distinct economic policies of different foreign partners and directed by different best practices in infrastructure development. These three phases are also tied to state policies toward railways. During the first phase, between 1850 and 1950, the state focused on the development of a national network rather than international connections. This focus stemmed from Argentina's privileged relation to England, which meant that most of the nation's raw goods were exported there. That relationship began a slow decline in the 1930s, slowly instituting the second phase. During the postwar period, Argentina inaugurated the second phase by moving its economy away from England in favor of internal industrial development and closer relations with neighboring countries and other "nonaligned countries." International railways peaked in South America between 1950 and 1990. While foreign relations between some nations remained tense, the economic and political benefits of international exchange tended to outweigh conflicts. The third period started in the 1990s, when at the peak of neoliberalism, Argentina developed a close political relationship with the United States. The growth of this connection occurred at the same time as the institutionalization of the MERCOSUR, a regional integration process that favors a free market between its members.² These shifts deepened the railway crisis and led to the cancellation of almost every route and the privatization of freight movement. While continental integration has been a central quest of Argentina's economy since the 1930s, railways have never been a consistent force in the effort. Today, though five of the seven international railways are still in use, the amount of cargo transported does not match that transported by trucks or boats. The nation's international and national railways have steadily declined since the 1990s, with abandonment and poor upkeep hamstringing both systems.

Most existing academic work on Argentinian railways falls into two main categories, economics or engineering. The majority of works focused on the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century privilege a review on private capital and its relation to the state. These works spend a great deal of time exploring how the expansion of railways reflected the conflict between development and imperialism.³ Most of the works that do exist on these subjects

2. MERCOSUR is a free market and political alliance formed in 1991 by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay; Venezuela was incorporated later.

3. Jorge Schwarzer and Teresita Gómez, *La primera gran empresa de los argentinos: El ferrocarril del Oeste (1854–1862)* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006); Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, *Historia de los ferrocarriles argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lancelot, 2006); Mario J. López, *Historia de los ferrocarriles nacionales, 1866–1886* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 1994); Mario J. López and Jorge E. Waddell, *Nueva historia del ferrocarril en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2007).

fail to include theories and methodologies from other disciplines such as geography, economics, or sociology.

International relations research on railways consists mainly of works focused on the analyses carried out by international credit institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB),⁴ the World Bank, the Development Bank of South America (CAF),⁵ or FONPLATA since the 1950s.⁶ These institutions argued that railways should be integrated across South America and reinforced the idea that greater international rail connections were vital to the economic success of the entire continent. International relations scholarship has viewed these studies in purely economic terms; those from before the 1990s represent what is known as classic regionalism and those that came after, neoregionalism. Only rarely has international relations looked beyond an economic view, and specific case studies have never been a focus. This is a major gap given the fact that oft-studied international relations topics, such as the CEBAC⁷ meetings held during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, contained crucial debates about transportation. The significance of the topics considered could open the possibility of studying regional integration processes and cooperation between Argentina and Brazil from a wider and more complex point of view.

Though railways and transport infrastructure have never been a major subject in South American international relations, in the past decade the founding of the Initiative for the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA) and the Union for South American Nations (UNASUR) have led to an uptick in work on the subject. These organizations have brought attention back to the importance of infrastructure and regional politics, opening the door to new studies in international relations that consider the role of mobility infrastructure in regional integration.

International Railways, 1850–1950

Studies of Argentinian railways have rarely focused on international lines, looking instead internally or focusing on individuals.⁸ An international focus is emerg-

4. The IADB was founded in 1959 as a partnership between nineteen Latin American countries and the United States and serves as a financing bank.

5. The CAF is a development bank created in 1970 by seventeen Latin American countries and Spain and Portugal, as well as fourteen private banks.

6. The Fondo Financiero para el Desarrollo de los Países de la Cuenca del Plata is a multilateral finance organism constituted by Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

7. The Argentinian Brazilian Coordination Special Commission was created during the 1950s with the aim of creating an environment for cooperation between the two countries.

8. Juan Bautista Alberdi, *Vida de William Wheelwright* (1976; repr., Buenos Aires: Editorial EMECE, 2002), is a good example of this trend. Wheelwright is a popular example. See also Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, *Historia de los ferrocarriles argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lancelot, 2006).

ing, though, that brings greater depth to the entire field. Maria Teresa Bovi's study of Argentinian and Bolivian rail connections was an ambitious but illuminating study of local politics in the northwestern provinces and their relation to modernity discourses.⁹ Likewise, Ricardo Cicerchia's work on trains between Argentina and Bolivia does not center on railways itself, but instead uses them as a site through which to understand the social dynamics of private life.¹⁰ Other historians such as María Beatriz Blanco have used an economic point of view to explore how the vital Tafi Viejo workshops were affected by the construction of the railway to Bolivia.¹¹ From an international relations perspective, the website "Argentina-rree" created by Carlos Escudé and Andrés Cisneros pans from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, focusing on the diplomatic negotiations that led to the signing of the pacts that enabled the construction of international railways.¹²

Even something as seemingly simple as understanding the history behind why Argentina has three different gauges of railway lines cannot be understood without looking internationally. The first railways were built in broad gauge because the trains were imported into Argentina after use in the Crimean War.¹³ Schvarzer and Gomez argue that a broader gauge was implemented to create a future connection to Chile.¹⁴ Finally, Wright posits that the broad gauge was used because the pampas soils resembled those of the Russian steppe.¹⁵ Engineering decisions were clearly international in scope, so scholars must continue to broaden their point of reference. Railway technology is another subject area that is underrepresented in international relations scholarship and in works devoted to regional integration. Differences in rail gauge standards created major connection issues between nation-states. Most studies that deal with this subject have hypothesized that the different gauges were a security measure meant to lessen the chance of a military invasion.¹⁶ Few engineers exist who can explain the point

-
9. Maria Teresa Bovi, "El Ferrocarril de La Quebrada: Estado, elites provinciales y los discursos sobre la modernidad en la construcción del Ferrocarril a Bolivia, 1880–1910," *XI Jornadas Interescuelas/Departamentos de Historia*, 2007, www.aacademica.org/000-108/967 (accessed 1 February 2016).
 10. Ricardo Cicerchia, *Caminos de fierro ... Tren a Bolivia: El ramal San Salvador de Jujuy-La Quiaca en la primera mitad del Siglo XX* (Mendoza: Prohistoria, 2013).
 11. María Beatriz Blanco, "Los talleres de Tafi Viejo del ferrocarril Central Norte en Tucumán: Los orígenes de su construcción 1900–1910," *XXI Jornadas de Historia Económica*, 2008, xxijhe.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/programa/descargables/Blanco.pdf (accessed 1 February 2016).
 12. Carlos Escudé and Andrés Cisneros, "Historia de las relaciones exteriores argentinas," www.argentina-rree.com/7/7-070.htm (accessed 10 January 2016).
 13. Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, *Los ferrocarriles deben ser argentinos* (1946; repr., Buenos Aires: Lancelot, 2009).
 14. Jorge Schvarzer and Tereista Gómez, *La primera gran empresa de los argentinos: El Ferrocarril del Oeste (1854–1862)* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006).
 15. Winthrop Wright, *Los ferrocarriles ingleses en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1980).
 16. Fernando Devoto and Boris Fausto, *Argentina-Brasil 1850–2000: Un Ensayo de Historia Comparada* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2008).

of view that justifies the different choices in gauge. Those studies that have attempted to offer other explanations have not yet reached consensus.¹⁷

Explorations of how international connections between nation-states differed is another subject that could use focus and might provide much insight. The links Argentina made with Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay have not received a great deal of attention. The railway connection with Paraguay served only a small market, and the one to Uruguay was built after rails had begun to decline in the 1970s. The connection with Brazil, meanwhile, took over forty years to establish because of military tensions. The connection with Bolivia came as the result of an objective set by the national government to incorporate areas that were recently added to the national territories. Connecting Argentina to Chile via rail proved to be a challenging endeavor. Benedetti's work on the Huaytiquina railway, rooted in geographic methodologies, covers the planning of the line through its inauguration—from 1888 to 1948.¹⁸ He examines the line's economic impact on local communities, but also considers the tensions it highlighted between national and provincial politicians. Benedetti's work shows how international railway connections with Chile influenced the relationships between the state, private investors, and the local economy.

The trans-Andean railway has also received more attention in recent years. Ian Thomson, a former transport official turned scholar, connects economics and the experiences of professionals working on the railway.¹⁹ Perhaps the most extensive work about the railway was published in 2013 by Pablo Lacoste.²⁰ Lacoste's look at the trans-Andean line covers both its economic and cultural impacts. Both authors focus on the construction company tasked with building the line, again bringing economics, politics, and engineering together.²¹ Lacoste's work centers on the line as both a form of passenger travel and a site of cultural production.

The prominent role of foreign investment in the railways is the subject with by far the most investigation when it comes to international connections. The British Empire, other European countries, and the United States all invested heavily in Argentinian railways. These networks of investors, external forces,

17. C. E. Jovanovich Lopes, "A compagnie auxiliaire de chemins de fer au Brésil e a cidade de Santa Maria no Rio Grande do Sul Brasil" (Ph.D. diss, Catalunya Politechnic University, 2002); Vanda Ueda, *La Formación de las Redes de los Ferrocarriles en Río Grande Do Sul: Hacia Un Nuevo Modelo de Integración en el Mercosur*, 2002, www.fee.tche.br/sitefee/download/jornadas/2/e3-02.pdf (accessed 15 January 2016).

18. Alejandro Benedetti, "El ferrocarril Huaytiquina, entre el progreso y el fracaso: Aproximaciones desde la geografía histórica del territorio de los Andes," *Revista Escuela de Historia*, no. 4 (2005).

19. Ian Thomson, "El ferrocarril transandino: Un desastre financiero de cien años que todavía atrae a los inversores," *Estudios Internacionales* 38, no. 148 (2005): 39–54.

20. Pablo Lacoste, *El Ferrocarril Trasandino* (Santiago: Editorial IDEA, 2013).

21. www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0062438.pdf (accessed 4 April 2016).

and local politics have been deeply analyzed by railways scholars.²² While lines vested with British capital have received the most attention, historians Salvatore and Piglia have done some work on the role of investments from the United States.²³ These scholars focus on how ideas of Pan-Americanism shaped transport infrastructure and encouraged the construction of ocean-to-ocean connections such as the Panama Canal. Espig's research into the Farquhar Syndicate, a powerful railroad group controlled by North American investors, confirms the important role of Pan-Americanism as a motivating factor.²⁴ Because of its pervasiveness, the subject deserves more focus, especially for its role in encouraging regional integration.

The State-Run Railway Years, 1950–90

The nationalization of the railways in 1947 changed the entire railway map in Argentina. The political reforms of Perón's government caused major shifts throughout society. Though several works have focused on 1945–55 through both railways and foreign policy, few have paid attention to the overlap of those two fields. Lacoste highlights the interesting example of the Argentine–Chile rail, which ran from 1944 until 1998 under the auspices of both states. In this way the function of the train became both a mobile and political site. It was politicized by international tensions and by trans-Andean fiscal crises.²⁵ During these crises trucking gained ground on rail and by 1989 the amount of cargo transported by railways was as low as in 1906 and 1962–63, when there was a fierce workers' strike.²⁶

22. Julian S. Duncan, "British Railways in Argentina," *Political Science Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1937): 559–582; Colin Lewis, *British Railways in Argentina 1857–1914* (London: Athlone–Latin America Institute, University of London, 1982); Ricardo M. Ortiz, *El ferrocarril en la economía Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Problemas S.A., 1946); Andrés M. Regalsky, "Foreign Capital, Local Interests and Railway Development in Argentina: French Investments in Railways, 1900–1914," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21, no. 3 (1989): 425–452; Alejandro Rascovan, "Las empresas ferroviarias en las provincias de Entre Ríos, Corrientes y Misiones (1866–2014): Entre intereses globales, nacionales y regionales," *Revista de Transporte y Territorios*, no. 13 (2015).

23. Ricardo Salvatore, "Imperial Mechanics: South America's Hemispheric Integration in the Machine Age," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 663–691; Melina Piglia, "Commercial Aviation in Argentina: A Call to Rethink the History of Aeromobility in Latin America," *Mobility in History* 7 (2016): 109–116.

24. Márcia J. Espig, "O 'polvo' e seus 'tentáculos': A organização da Companhia Estrada de Ferro São Paulo–Rio Grande e sua aquisição pela Brazil Railway Company," *Anais do XXVI Simpósio Nacional de História–ANPUH*, 2011.

25. Pablo Lacoste, *El Ferrocarril Transandino* (Santiago: Editorial IDEA, 2013).

26. www.cnrt.gob.ar/content/estadisticas/ferroviario.pdf (accessed 15 April 2016).

Regional politics have brought a focus to railways for a number of decades, and this work must be given more attention. Beginning in the 1950s the United Nation's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) became a major promoter of international railways on the continent. Though ECLAC has received wide scholarly attention, the Argentinian Brazilian Coordination Special Commission (CEBAC) and its transportation committee have not. The CEBAC transportation committee was central to the pursuit of regional integration between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay via MERCOSUR. These less prominent talks, during the 1970s, included the possibility of creating new international railways and discussion of tax policies for railways. Despite these important topics, the only extensive work about the CEBAC transport committee has been my Ph.D. dissertation.²⁷

ECLAC and CEBAC produced important reports during the 1970s about railway usage that called on governments to expand its role. These were coupled with calls for a comprehensive analysis of Pan-American projects.²⁸ Yet, the CEBAC meetings drew little attention across the continent. While regional politicians still pushed for the development of railways, national governments, such as Argentina's military dictatorship, had already embarked on the first steps of neoliberal reform that limited interest in the transport mode. Only in the 1990s, when new trade agreements were signed, would railways gain the attention of politicians once more, and only then because regional integration within neoliberal parameters was emerging as a suitable interest for governments.

Neoliberalism and the Regional Integration Process, 1990–Present

While much has been written about 1980s and 1990s Argentina and South America—from the return of democracy in most of South America to the external debt crisis—academic literature on railways during the period remains scarce. This may be partially due to their decline in the preceding decades. The rails did not disappear, however; the IADB, for example, continued its attempts to further commerce through infrastructural development, as the 1990s saw the mass privatization of railways across the continent. These developments and their ties to broader neoliberal policies are as yet poorly studied.

Ian Thomson and others used their studies of 1990s infrastructure to critique neoliberal policies. Thomson wrote in favor of investing in transport infrastructure, particularly railways, arguing that new rails should be built in lieu of at-

27. Alejandro Rascovan, "Mercosur: Integración regional y dinámicas transfronterizas—el caso del ferrocarril internacional en la frontera Argentina-Brasil" (Ph.D. diss., University of Buenos Aires, 2014).

28. Robert T. Brown, "The Future of the International Railways of South America: A Historical Approach," *CEPAL Review*, no. 8 (1979).

tempting to maintain existing lines.²⁹ That particular view challenged neoliberal ideas that called for focusing on privatization of existing systems. Lacoste, this time with Jiménez Cabrera, wrote about the trans-Andean railway and the part played by subnational actors, mostly the Mendoza Province's attempt to reactivate the international railway with Chile.³⁰

While neoliberal policies were reshaping (mostly by destroying) much of South America's railway system, regional integration carried on. Works that tie railways to this process occur in two frameworks, with both linking mobility to infrastructure and commerce. First were official reports on railways from institutional voices such as IIRSA, CAF, FONPLATA, and IADB. Second were academic studies that documented the political significance of those institutions and reflected on their policies. The institutional reports focused on bioceanic rail corridors and attempted to lay out strategies to connect nations physically with rails.³¹ CAF's 2004 report *Rails with Future* argued that with the neoliberal reforms, railways might help boost commercial activity.³²

Academic studies from geographers and economists focusing on infrastructure and transportation began to turn to international railways around the turn of the twentieth century, but this interest has not spread to international relations scholars. Mariana Schweitzer, from urban studies, focused on transportation systems in the Southern Cone and insisted that infrastructure be dealt with alongside politics. She called for creating a comprehensive perspective that could explore how macropolitics impact local populations.³³ Inostroza Fernández and Bolívar Espinoza used bioceanic corridors to explore the equation laid out by Schweitzer.³⁴ They argued that the railways offered positive development, but that they also might lead to negative outcomes for local environments and communities. The authors posited that the framework followed by many institutions continues to rely on direct foreign investments that have increased inequality in the region since the 1980s. Others, such as Malamud and Schmitter, strictly from the international relations field, have argued against this perspec-

29. BID-INTAL, *Los ferrocarriles y su contribución al comercio internacional* (Buenos Aires: BID-INTAL, 1996).

30. Pablo Lacoste and Diego Jiménez Cabrera, "Transporte internacional y actores subnacionales: La provincia de Mendoza y la resurrección del ferrocarril trasandino entre Argentina y Chile," *Si somos americanos* 13, no. 1 (2013).

31. FONPLATA, *Transporte Multimodal en Sudamérica: Hacia una articulación normativa de carácter regional* FONPLATA (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 2003).

32. CAF, *Rieles con futuro: Desafíos para los ferrocarriles de América del Sur* (Caracas: CAF, 2004).

33. Mariana Schweitzer, "El sistema de transporte en el Cono Sur: Los nuevos Proyectos," *Estudios Fronterizos* 3, no. 6 (2002): 89–121.

34. Luis Inostroza Fernández and Augusto Bolívar Espinoza, "Corredores bioceánicos: Territorios, políticas y estrategias de integración subregional," *Análisis Económico* 19, no. 41 (2004): 153–174.

tive, maintaining that core investments will lead to development and strong institutions.³⁵

The most interesting international relations perspective on regional infrastructure and transportation was published in 2011, edited by Cienfuegos Mateo and Mellado.³⁶ The volume includes works by Giacalone and Nerys Fernandez that describe regional politics in concert with regional infrastructure issues. Despite being one of the few works to use this frame, the work does not confront the problem of conflating infrastructures and mobilities. The volume and other international relations works rarely consider the specifics of different infrastructures—often lumping together energy, railways, bridges, border policies, and ports. Moreover, most of these works focus on the political-institutional sphere, leaving other realms out. Nerys Fernandez's work remains one of the few that go beyond politics to question the viability of infrastructure built to institutional specifications alone.³⁷

Conclusion

Despite the fact that railways have played a major part in Argentina's history, the subject has only barely been explored by disciplines such as economics and geography. The subject of railways is even less apparent in international relations literature. Exploring the history of railway mobilities and their ties to regional integration from wider theoretical and methodological viewpoints can help scholars comprehend contests for political power and social relationships among local, national, and global actors.

The existing gap in international relations literature means that significant events such as the process of regional integration have been neglected. This is problematic because international relation perspectives can benefit railway scholars by suggesting ways for them to better incorporate notions on what power means, how global actors interact, and how capital affects nation-states. However, regional and international studies must be able to descend from the global institutional scale to focus also on local territories and political actors. By looking at different scales, the two fields might find a space of mutual benefit. The international railway agenda is open, not only in Argentina but in wider

35. Andrés Malamud and Philippe Schmitter, "La experiencia de la Integración Europea y las posibilidades del MERCOSUR," *Desarrollo Económico* 46, no. 181 (2000): 3–31.

36. Manuel Cienfuegos Mateo and Noemí B. Mellado, *Los cambios en la infraestructura regional y sus impactos ambientales en clave de mejorar la gobernabilidad en el MERCOSUR* (Córdoba: Lerner Editora, 2011).

37. Wilson Nerys Fernández, "La integración física y la viabilidad de la IIRSA," in *Una región en Construcción: UNASUR y la integración en América del Sur*, ed. Manuel Cienfuegos and José A. Sanahuja (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2010).

South America. While some scholars and institutions boast studies that present international railways as a means to development itself others from a wide variety of disciplines question that logic and push for a better understanding of the actors and interests involved.

Alejandro Rascovan is a political scientist with a Ph.D. in Social Sciences and a postdoctoral position at CONICET, Argentina. He is also an assistant professor in International Relations Theory at the University of Buenos Aires. His research focuses on regional integration, geopolitics, transborder mobilities, and international railways.