The Planning of Inter-American Transportation Infrastructure in the late 19th Century

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> "Journeys of both vocation and recreation southward will be made by countless numbers of our own people at particular seasons; and similar journeys by corresponding numbers of their people will be made northward at certain other seasons; whilst at all times there will be a merry stir and noisy bustle of regular and abundant business. A continuous rush of trade and travel each way, occupying both tracks day and night throughout the year, maybe taken into account with quite as much certainty as we may depend on the rising and setting of the sun, or the ebbing and flowing of the tide."[1]

With these words Hinton Rowan Helper, an US-American author and diplomat, in 1879 described what he expected to be the impact of an eight-thousand mile-long-railway between North and South America. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the idea to construct such a hemispheric railway, soon dubbed the 'Intercontinental Railway',[2] fascinated state actors, transportation engineers, and businessmen across the Americas.[3] The US government and private entrepreneurs invested several hundred thousand dollars in the project; in 1890 the First International Conference of American States established the Intercontinental Railway Commission which became a pioneer

[1] Hinton Rowan Helper, *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy; and other Oddments; Including a proposition for a Double-Track Steel Railway from the westerly shores of Hudson Bay to the midway margin of the Strait of Magellan; the two terminal points, measured along the line contemplated, being nearly, if not quite, eight thousand miles apart; Together with an inquiry whether, in view of certain facts of grave international and intercontinental polity and proceedings herein portrayed, the proposed road should not, in all justice and fairness, and in conformity with the highest attributes of republican foresight and vigilance, be deflected so far away from Brazil as to cut her off entirely from its boundless benefits, so long as her antiquated and antagonistic system of government remains imperial or otherwise monarchical;* (St. Louis, 1879), 15.

[2] The projected railway was renamed 'Pan American Railroad' at the Second International Conference of American States in Mexico City in 1901.

[3] Eric Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map: The United States, the Pan-American Highway, and the Quest to Link the Americas* (New York, 2019), 2; Robert T. Brown, "El futuro de los ferrocarriles internacionales de Sudamérica. Un enfoque histórico" *Revista de la CEPAL* (August 1979): 7-40, here 8.

organization for international relations in the Americas; during the following years, the commission dispatched several survey teams to Central and South America to study the feasibility of this infrastructure project. Despite all these efforts, the railroad was not built.

Most scholars of Inter-American relations have ignored the Intercontinental Railway. Those who did pay attention have considered it as a failed initiative of late 19th century Pan-Americanism and imperial infrastructure.[4] Such interpretations are all but wrong. However, there is much more to that story. The project was not only an effort to extend US influence in Central and South America but an undertaking whose planning involved many actors who engaged in transnational technical, political, and cultural exchanges and negotiations.[5] There is no doubt that geopolitical hierarchies and political and cultural divisions played an important role in the planning process and that actors from different countries worked to adapt the project to local, national, and regional interests. Disagreements, however, sometimes surfaced between distinct professional groups rather than actors from the United States and Latin America.

Focusing on the period between the 1870s, when US-American boosters started to promote an Inter-American railroad, and 1891, the year the Intercontinental Railway Commission met in Washington, DC to study possible routes, this paper argues that the Intercontinental Railway was an early example of how mega transportation infrastructure projects promised to usher in a new era of integration, international cooperation, and hemispheric unity. From the Hudson Bay to Tierra del Fuego, railroad backers enthused over the improvement the Intercontinental Railway would bring to peoples' daily lives by offering unprecedented possibilities for trade and travel. A closer look at the planning of the railroad and its possible routes, however, reveals that US-American and Latin American boosters had equally utopian visions of transportation infrastructure as key element of modernization, progress, and integration.

The exact origin of the idea to construct a railway from North to South America is unclear, but we do know that US-American diplomats stationed in South America during the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) were among its earliest supporters. In the early 1870s, Joseph

[4] See e.g., Ricardo Salvatore, "Imperial Mechanics: South America's Hemispheric Integration in the Machine Age" *American Quarterly* 58/3 (2006): 662-691, here 674-676.

[5] Cultural anthropologist Rosa Elena Ficek made this argument in her article on the Pan-American Highway; Rosa Elena Ficek, "Imperial Routes, National Networks and Regional Projects in the Pan-American Highway, 1884-1977" *The Journal of Transport History* 37/2 (2016): 129-154, here 130.

Pomeroy Root, ambassador of the United States to Chile, and Francis Thomas, United States minister to Peru, sent proposals to the US State Department suggesting the construction of such a railway. In view of the recession that struck the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War, they argued that an Inter-American railroad would open new markets for US-American manufacturers in Latin America and help solve the problem of domestic overproduction. Root added that it would also help settle conflicts between South American countries, which, in turn, would improve the prospects for US-American export trade.[6]

The best-known early promoter of the railroad idea was Hinton Rowan Helper whom I have cited at the start of the paper. Born in rural North Carolina in 1829, Helper as a young man spent three years travelling through California in the early 1850s. He soon became an avid supporter of the Transcontinental Railroad and urged Southern States to take the lead in its construction because he believed that it would help them to diversify their economy and counterbalance the increasing commercial power of the North.[7] From 1862 to 1866, Helper served as American consul in Buenos Aires. During that time, he realized that US-American manufacturers could not sell as many products as their European competitors on South American markets because of the lack of rapid and reliable transportation between North and South America. He thus started advocating for the establishment of more direct steamship lines between the United States and cities on the Atlantic coast of South America.[8] Years later, Helper wrote that immense suffering from seasickness during his steamship journey from Buenos Aires back to New York in November 1866 had made him ponder over the railroad as a much more efficient and comfortable alternative for intercontinental trade and travel in the Americas.

In 1879, after years of unsuccessful lobbying for the construction of an Inter-American railroad in New York, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and other cities on the Unites States East Coast, Helper moved to St. Louis, Missouri. There he organized an essay contest to popularize the railroad idea and published the five prize-winning contributions in *The Three Americas Railway* (1881). Two years prior Helper had published the book *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy* which contained correspondence related to two legal cases in which he had unsuccessfully represented

[6] Brown, "El futuro de los ferrocarriles internacionales de Sudamérica", 8-9.
[7] See David Brown, *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South* (Baton Rouge, 2006), 37-38.
[8] Ibid., 255.

US-American clients against the governments of Bolivia and Brazil.[9] While working on these cases, Helper had travelled back and forth between the United States, France, Brazil, and Bolivia. *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy* is an odd mix of legal letters, racial slur against supposedly inferior Latin Americans, and railroad propaganda. In the preface to the book Helper launched into a tirade against Roman Catholicism and the Brazilian monarchy and wrote that "Every State in South and Central America and Mexico is now sorely afflicted with at least half a dozen overpowering evils…"[10] Nevertheless, he believed that "the construction of the longest and the costliest and best railway ever yet devised, expressly as a means and for the purpose of cultivating more amicable and intimate relations with them [Latin Americans]"[11] was of major importance for the United States. Helper argued that the railroad would eradicate 'evils' such as "General apathy and improgressiveness [sic] […] almost universal contempt and disdain of every sort of manual labor" and explained:

> "The dwellers in those countries [Latin America] have millions of square miles of fertile lands and precious metals and tropical forests and fruits, and other sources of inexhaustible wealth, the true values of all of which we shall help them to develop, in a cheerful spirit of ready amenability to the great commercial law of demand and supply; and on the other hand we shall sell to them, at handsomely remunerative profits to ourselves, tens of thousands of carloads of our surplus manufactures and other merchantable products, which, while fitly affording them all promised gratification, will constantly create within them a craving for still newer and better things, and will thereby, for the first time in their lives, awaken within them the exquisite delights of self-regulated and rightful unrest, activity and achievement."[12]

In the preface to *The Three Americas Railway* Helper again argued that the railway was of utmost importance for building closer economic ties between the United States and Latin America. According to historian David Brown, railway engineering journals reacted skeptically to Helper's book. Most engineers had serious doubts that the project was feasible in technical terms and many observers saw no commercial potential in trade with Latin American countries which they believed to be largely revolution-ridden and poor.[13] Yet, no less than 47 essays had been submitted to the Three Americas Railway contest and Helper received dozens of letters of support from US citizens and Latin American government representatives, some of which he annexed to his book.[14] During

[9] For details on these cases see Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 248-255.
[10] Helper, *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy*, 12.
[11] Ibid., 14.
[12] Ibid., 15.
[13] Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 259-260.
[14] Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Three Americas Railway. An International and Intercontinental Enterprise Outlined in Numerous Formal Disquisitions and Five Elaborate Essays; All Strongly Advocating Free and Fast and Friendly*

the following years, Helper eagerly continued lobbying politicians and businessmen, but he never got the recognition nor the financial backing and official post he had hoped for.

Yet, *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy* and, to a larger degree, *The Three Americas Railway* helped draw the attention of some of America's most wealthy and powerful figures to the Inter-American railroad project. In March 1884, the US Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations accepted a bill that senator Francis M. Cockrell of Missouri had first introduced two years prior and established a commission to develop commercial relations between the United States and Latin America and "ascertain the feelings and inclinations of the peoples of those countries with reference to railway communications".[15] A group of three men, aided by a secretary, travelled through Central and South America in late 1884 and 1885. The commission's most prominent member was William Eleroy Curtis, a journalist from Chicago, who, in the words of one scholar was the "marketing agent" of Pan-Americanism.[16] After his return to the United States, Curtis submitted a very optimistic report that promised brilliant prospects for American businessmen who were willing to invest in trade with Latin American countries. With reference to the Intercontinental Railway, Curtis some years later wrote that such a line "would have the same effect upon the southern continent, with its vast mineral and agricultural wealth, that the building of the transcontinental railways has had upon the U.S."[17]

The quotations from Helper's book and statements such as Curtis's justify interpretations of the railroad as a tool of American economic expansion and an effort to extend US influence in Latin America. Indeed, the growing prominence that the idea to connect North and South America by rail gained during the 1880s coincided with a growing interest of US-American authorities in Latin America as market for agricultural and industrial surpluses.[18] By the end of that decade, the Intercontinental Railway became a central element of US Secretary of State James G. Blaine's

Intercommunication Between the Sixteen Adjunctive and Concordant Republics of the New World (St. Louis, 1881), 423-467. See also Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 258-260.

[15] The quote is from Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 261.

[16] Benjamin A. Coates, "The Pan-American Lobbyist: William Eleroy Curtis and U.S. Empire, 1884-1899" *Diplomatic History* 38/1 (2014):22-48, here 25.

[17] William E. Curtis, *The United States and Foreign Powers* (Meadville/PA 1892), 68, cited in Coates, "The Pan-American Lobbyist": 43.

[18] Joseph Smith, "The First Conference of American States (1889-1890) and the Early Pan American Policy of the United States" in *Beyond the Ideal: Pan Americanism in Inter-American Affairs*, ed. David K. Sheinin (Westport 2000), 19-32, here 19.

Pan-American movement, a movement that most historians have interpreted as an agent of US imperialism.[19] As cultural anthropologist Rosa Elena Ficek argued, the Intercontinental Railway became a symbol of geopolitical imaginations according to which Latin America was "a space that could be accessed and subordinated".[20] Helper and Curtis, like many of their contemporaries in the United States, also believed in deep-rooted stereotypes about Latin America, theories of Anglo-Saxon superiority, and the transformative power of modern technology. They portrayed the Intercontinental Railway as central element of a civilizing mission that would lead to the uplift of Latin American societies under US tutelage.[21]

Between October 1889 and April 1890, the US government hosted the First International Conference of American States in Washington, D.C. Blaine, the main driving force behind the event, aimed at the establishment of a Pan-American trading bloc under United States leadership to counterbalance European commercial dominance in Latin America and a hemispheric arbitration system to settle conflicts between countries on the American continent.[22] The Conference established the Bureau of American Republics, the predecessor of the Pan-American Union and the Organization of American States, but the delegates did not come to agreements on arbitration and a projected customs union. Given its limited results, most contemporary observers in the United States, Latin America, and Europe considered the conference a complete failure and historians have come to similar conclusions.[23] Naturally, Blaine, who had spared no efforts to get together a hemispheric conference since the early 1880s, saw things differently and touted the event as a huge success. In a letter sent to President Benjamin Harrison few weeks after the end of the meeting, Blaine highlighted that "No more important recommendation [had] come from the International American Conference" than "a plan for a preliminary survey for a railway line to connect the great commercial cities of the American Hemisphere".[24] The delegates to the Conference had formed a subcommittee on railway communications. Henry Gassaway Davis,

[19] Coates, "The Pan-American Lobbyist": 22-23.
[20] Ficek, "Imperial Routes", 131.
[21] See Coates, "The Pan-American Lobbyist". 43; Ficek, "Imperial Routes", 131.
[22] See David Healy, *James G. Blaine and Latin America* (Columbia and London, 2001), 145-146, 156.
[23] See e.g. "The American Congress," in *South American Journal* (19 April 1890), cited in Smith, "The First Conference of American States", 20; Healy, *James G. Blaine*, 159.
[24] International Railway Line. Proposed Intercontinental Railway. Letter from the Secretary of State to President Benjamin Harrison (12 May 1890), in *Report of the International American Conference Relative to an Intercontinental Railway Line* (Washington, DC, 1890), 4.

railroad millionaire and senator from West Virginia, and steel magnate Andrew Carnegie represented the United States on the committee. Davis and Carnegie would soon become the most prominent and avid promoters of the Intercontinental Railway project. The committee did not develop a proposal for a hemispheric line but produced a report with information on the state of railway construction in the United States and Latin America. Its members agreed on a resolution that proposed the establishment of the Intercontinental Railway Commission (IRC) "to ascertain the possible routes, to determine their true length, to estimate the cost of each, and to compare their respective advantages" and on 26 February the Conference passed that resolution.[25]

I have commenced this paper by arguing that a closer look at the planning of the Intercontinental Railway's route reveals the utopian character of the railroad propaganda, particularly the promise of integration. Allow me to briefly return to the earliest years of the project to build my argument. As we have already seen, Hinton Rowan Helper had, at an early point in his life, developed an unshakeable belief in the universal benefits of railroads. Apparently, he was convinced that the longer the railroad, the more it would serve the common good. In *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy*, he claimed that, once an Inter-American railroad was constructed, "[t]he multifarious and ever-enduring benefits which this road will bring about, on a scale almost inconceivably extensive, will themselves but constantly increase and expand the vast sphere of their own inherent usefulness…"[26] Even considering the boom of railroad construction and the widespread railway enthusiasm in the United States and elsewhere at the time, these words strike as quite naïve. Helper was not an engineer nor transportation planner; nevertheless, it is astonishing how little attention he paid to the location of the projected Inter-American railroad. In the preface to *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy*, Helper wrote that "the one thing most needed to secure in perpetuity an uncommonly high degree of well-being for the inhabitants of all the countries of the New World [was] a longitudinal midland double-track steel railway from a point far north in North America to a point far south in South America." [My emphasis] He suggested that "the line of the road should, in most latitudes, be as nearly as possible equidistant between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans" but acknowledged that engineers might adapt the route to local topography.[27]

[25] *Report of the International American Conference Relative to an Intercontinental Railway Line*, 11; Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 25.
[26] Helper, *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy*, 11.
[27] Ibid., 9-10.

In *The Three Americas Railway*, Helper with regard to the route wrote that "that question need not now be seriously discussed".[28] He did express his preference though for a line "as rectilineal [sic] as the straightest street in the most quadrangular city […] from the southern boundary of British America to the northern frontier of Mexico." From the United States-Mexico border, Helper wanted the route to proceed as a "bee line" to Mexico City, "through Guatemala and the rest of Central America, to the Isthmus of Darien; thence into South America, passing eastward of the Andes, felling the forests and furrowing up the surfaces of Columbia, Ecuador, Eastern Peru, and Bolivia." As possible southern terminal points of the railway Helper named Buenos Aires, Rosario, and other cities in Argentina.[29] As mentioned, Helper believed in the railroad's capacity to play a crucial role in an US-American civilizing mission to Latin America and improve the lives of people he considered backward and inferior. The fact that he did not consider the route a matter of importance (he dedicated no more than a single paragraph to the route) and his proposal of a straightforward north-south line correspond to that imperialist mindset and his biased view on Latin America.

On 4 December 1890, nearly a decade after the Three Americas Railway contest and the publication of Helper's namesake book, the IRC held its first meeting at the State Department in Washington, DC. Although the International American Conference had determined "[t]hat the said commission should consist of a body of engineers of whom each nation should appoint three"[30], its members were largely railroad magnates and diplomats. In late January 1891, the delegates formed subcommittees to study possible routes and prepare field surveys for the Intercontinental Railway.[31] The minutes of the commission meetings convey the impression that during several weeks the IRC worked in harmony. That changed once the delayed Argentinian delegation arrived in February. Historians have pointed to US-Argentinian tensions over arbitration and hemispheric dominance that had surfaced during the International American Conference.[32] Suspicions of the United States' expansionist intentions certainly came into play during the meetings of the IRC;

[28] Helper, *The Three Americas Railway*, 6.
[29] Ibid.
[30] *Report of the International American Conference Relative to an Intercontinental Railway Line*, 11.
[31] Intercontinental Railway Commission, *Minutes of the Intercontinental Railway Commission* (Washington, DC, 1891): 10-14.
[32] See Healy, *James G. Blaine*, 148-149; Smith, "The First Conference of American States", 26.

dissent between commission members, however, apparently developed not so much as expression of an US-Latin American antagonism.

The Argentinian delegates Carlos Agote, Julio Krause, and Miguel Tedín were among the few engineers in the commission. Immediately after their arrival, they criticized the IRC's previous work as precipitous and inconsistent.[33] The commission's president Alexander Cassatt, the former vice-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad company, had been struggling for weeks to find a chief engineer for the Intercontinental Railway. He had made plans to hire Virgil Bogue, a Union Pacific engineer, who had worked in South America for several years and was fluent in Spanish, but Bogue declined Cassatt's offer. Carlos Agote argued that the appointment of a chief engineer was premature until the commission's committee on surveys agreed on a route.[34] The delegates consented to refer the question to the survey committee; however, during the following weeks, the appointment of a chief engineer and the definition of routes for the survey parties developed into the most contentious issues. In early March, the survey committee hired William Shunk, a New York railroad engineer, who lacked any experience of working in Latin America, as chief engineer for the Intercontinental Railway.[35] The Argentinian delegates had abstained from voting and again declared that they were not willing to consent to any appointment before the definition of a route.

Later that month, the survey committee presented three routes for the surveys in Central and South America. Their work was largely based on a report written by First Lieutenant George A. Zinn of the US Army Corps of Engineers at the request of Davis and Carnegie during the International American Conference. Following official instructions, Zinn had developed a proposal to unite the principal cities of the American republics by nearly straight lines, which, according to historian Eric Rutkow, were 'ridiculous fiction' and led Zinn to dramatically underestimate the total length of the projected Intercontinental Railway.[36] Carlos Agote and Miguel Tedín opposed to the routes proposed by the survey committee as too vague. A week later, when the committee proposed three further routes, Tedín objected again

[33] See Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 31.
[34] Intercontinental Railway Commission, *Minutes of the Intercontinental Railway Commission*, 22-25.
[35] Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 28.
[36] See Ibid., 30. For Zinn's report see "Appendix to the Report of the Committee on Railway Communications," in *Report of the International American Conference Relative to an Intercontinental Railway Line* (Washington, DC, 1890), 83-215.

> "…because these routes, as well as the previous ones, were merely ideal and imaginary ones, traced upon a map in a general way, but with insufficient data to determine their value. It is not enough to say that the line will run from one point to another; reasons should be given for so doing […] Is it [the route] convenient, is it practicable, does it answer commercial interests, are there possibilities of development […] The chairman of the Committee on Organization of Surveys has said that they were gathering information. How can it then determine that the surveying parties will follow a line, if it has not been ascertained whether that line is acceptable topographically and economically and is in accordance with the general interests of the countries to be connected?"[37]

Other members of the commission acknowledged the lack of information as a problem; the majority nonetheless argued that it was best to push things forward as fast as possible. In response to Tedín, Pedro Betim Paes Leme, a representative of Brazil, claimed that all the survey committee could do was to "determine the general direction, which can not be other than from north to south. It [the Intercontinental Railway] is proposed to unite the principal cities, those which offer, probably [!], the greatest advantages".[38] Luis J. Blanco, a Venezuelan delegate to the IRC added that "[i]t should be remembered that these exploring parties will receive in every country the assistance of scientists furnished by the governments; these having perhaps [!] ample knowledge of the localities and being able to guide our engineers in regard to better routes…"[39] Henry Davis who represented the United States on the survey committee had pressed for the immediate departure of the survey parties for weeks. It was probably due to his influence that measures to that end were taken while the IRC was still engaged in debates over the routes. The surveyors departed from New York on 10 April 1891; a few days later the activities of the IRC were suspended until the surveying parties gathered enough information "for the furtherance of the projected enterprise".[40]

The idea that an Inter-American railway connection would correspond to a straight line from north to south lived on for many years. It had originated with Helper's preposterous proposal; guided the Intercontinental Railway surveys in Central and South America between 1891 and 1893; and was displayed on maps produced by the commission's successor organization, the Permanent Pan-American Railroad Committee, in the early 20th century.[41] Scholars have read the 'bright red line' (Rutkow 2019) as an expression of the Intercontinental Railway's imperialist

[37] Intercontinental Railway Commission, *Minutes of the Intercontinental Railway Commission*, 61-62.
[38] Ibid., 62.
[39] Ibid., 63.
[40] Ibid., 97.
[41] See e.g. "The Pan-American Railway," in *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 36/8 (1904): 512.

character[42] and so have I in this paper. The early history of the project nonetheless shows that the railroad was not just an US-American initiative that Latin Americans rejected right from the start. Studying this important chapter in the development of Inter-American relations through the lens of the history of Mobility also reveals that Latin American attitudes toward intercontinental transportation infrastructure and Pan-Americanism in general were more complex than historiography has shown so far.

Hitherto, I have not found evidence that Latin American delegates to the Intercontinental Railway Commission criticized the 'bright red line' scheme for the hemispheric connection per se, though I still need to analyze archival material to verify this finding. Proposals to design Inter-American transportation infrastructure not as a single north-south line but a network of roads that connected countries on the subcontinent to each other and improved local and regional mobilities only came up decades later at the Second Pan-American Highway Congress.[43] The members of the commission argued over the routes; however, even Miguel Tedín, the most ardent critic of the scheme that came to lead the Intercontinental Railway surveys, adhered to the principle to connect only "cities sufficiently important to be united"[44]. Due to local, national, and regional interests, delegates from different countries had different priorities regarding the route for the Intercontinental Railway. What they had in common was that they seemed wholly ignorant or indifferent about the fact that vast areas, many places, indeed, most of the population of the countries the railroad was supposed to run through would have had no access to the projected line.

[42] See e.g., Ficek, "Imperial Routes", 136.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Intercontinental Railway Commission, *Minutes of the Intercontinental Railway Commission*, 65.

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