

ARTICLE

Contesting US hegemony: Pan-American infrastructure and South American visions of global transportation, 1880s–1890s

Mario Peters¹

German Historical Institute Washington, Washington, DC, USA
Email: peters@ghi-dc.org

Abstract

This article examines the significance of mobility and transportation infrastructure in the early development of pan-Americanism and the formation of a vision of global transportation in South America in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on the 1880s and 1890s, I explore the connection between transportation and the economic and cultural expansionism of the United States, pan-American debates on intercontinental steamship service and an inter-American railroad, and South American approaches to international transportation, which both included and transcended the Americas. My case study contributes to scholarship on the global history of mobility and transportation by showing how, despite the intention of the United States to establish hemispheric exclusivity and hegemony, transportation became a subject of multilateral cooperation. South American experts and diplomats, I argue, renegotiated and reinterpreted the meaning of pan-American infrastructure, integrating it into a broader vision of global transportation that positioned their countries more prominently in worldwide traffic networks.

Keywords: South America; United States; pan-Americanism; mobility; transportation; railroads; steamships

On 5 June 1885, a little-known moment of pan-American cooperation took place in Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay. On that day, Clemente Barrial Posada, Professor of Geology and Scientific Director of the Museum of Natural History, met with Solon Otis Thacher, one of three members of the Central and South American Commission, which the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations had established the previous year to develop commercial relations between the United States and countries south of the Rio Grande. Thacher interviewed Posada about cattle raising and agricultural production in Uruguay, but, more importantly, their conversation focused on the construction of a railroad from North America to South America. Posada had intimate knowledge of South America's topography, and during the interview, he offered his opinion on a potential route for the railroad.¹

The meeting with Thacher prompted Posada to start working on what would become the first detailed proposal for the South American section of an inter-American railroad. For about two years, he laboured on his study, developing a route from Bogotá to Buenos Aires and from there to

¹Clemente Barrial Posada, *Proyecto del Ferro Carril Internacional Americano y la Naturaleza Geologica de la América del Sud: Vida y Costumbres Humanas/The Proposed Route for the American International Rail Road: The Geological Nature of South America and the Life and the Customs of the People* (1887), 2–4, Reference Material Pertaining to Central and South American Countries, 1891–1897, Box 5, Records of the Intercontinental Railway Commission, Record Group 43 (RG 43), Records of International Conferences, Commissions, and Expositions, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter, NARA II).

Recife, on the coastline of Brazil, where the railroad would connect with transatlantic steamers.² In 1887, Posada submitted two versions of his manuscript, one in Spanish and one in English, to the US Charge d'Affaires to Paraguay and Uruguay, John E. Bacon, and asked him to forward his work to Washington. Bacon, who saw promising investment opportunities in South American railroads, strongly endorsed Posada's study, calling it 'as perfect as a work of the sort can be' and urging his government to give it the most careful consideration.³

Largely forgotten today, Posada's work and his collaboration with representatives of the United States took place in a time of increasing inter-American cooperation and expanding global and transcontinental transportation infrastructure systems. This article examines how maritime and overland transportation became a central issue in US-Latin American relations in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on the 1880s and 1890s, I explore early US-American visions of inter-American mobility and transportation infrastructure, the importance of debates about transportation in the formation of the pan-American movement, and South American visions of international transportation, which both included and transcended the pan-American framework. I apply both hemispheric and global lenses to these issues to contribute to scholarship on pan-Americanism and the global history of mobility and transportation, as I will elucidate below.

The origins of modern pan-Americanism have long been associated with the US foreign policy toward Latin America initiated by Secretary of State James G. Blaine in the 1880s to foster closer cooperation among states from all the Americas. Scholarly works written in the early to mid-twentieth century either described pan-Americanism as a success story, celebrating the alleged benevolent attitudes of the United States toward its southern neighbours,⁴ or, as some Latin American authors did, dismissed it as an umbrella for violent interventionism and imperialism.⁵ In the 1960s, a broader shift began in the United States toward critical analysis of the country's foreign relations; this shift catalysed interpretations of pan-Americanism as 'the friendly face of US aggression in Latin America'.⁶ Still, late-twentieth-century scholarship on pan-Americanism largely ignored Latin American agency in inter-American affairs, as earlier celebratory accounts had done.⁷ Over the past twenty-five years or so, as part of a cultural turn and a transnational and global historiographical shift in the study of US-Latin American relations, historians have discussed pan-Americanism in relation to a broad array of topics, including architecture, sports, feminism, and law, among others. Most importantly, they have moved beyond US-centric narratives and instead focused on Latin American perspectives, interests, and strategies.⁸

²Ibid., 6–7.

³John E. Bacon to unknown, 21 June 1887, Memorandums Relating to the Survey, 1887–1892, Records of the Intercontinental Railway Commission, RG 43, NARA II.

⁴Most notably, Joseph Byrne Lockey, *Pan-Americanism: Its Beginnings* (New York: Macmillan, 1920) and Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States: An Historical Interpretation* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace, 1943). For an insightful discussion of the historiography of pan-Americanism, see Juan Pablo Scarfi and David M. K. Sheinin, 'Introduction: The Pan-American Shift from Apology for Empire to Imperial Critique to Latin American Agency', in *The New Pan-Americanism and the Structuring of Inter-American Relations*, eds. Juan Pablo Scarfi and David M. K. Sheinin (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–7.

⁵Scarfi and Sheinin, 'Introduction', 3–4. One example of a highly critical analysis is Ezequiel Ramírez Novoa and Juan José Arevalo, *La Farsa del Panamericanismo y la Unidad Indoamericana* (The Farce of Pan-Americanism and Indo-American Unity) (Buenos Aires: Iberoamérica, 1955).

⁶Scarfi and Sheinin, 'Introduction', 1; David M. K. Sheinin, 'Rethinking Pan-Americanism: An Introduction', in *Beyond the Ideal: Pan-Americanism in Inter-American Affairs*, ed. David M. K. Sheinin (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 1.

⁷Scarfi and Sheinin, 'Introduction', 1.

⁸Mark J. Petersen, *The Southern Cone and the Origins of Pan-America, 1888–1933* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 4–7; See, among many others, Richard Cándida-Smith, *Improvised Continent: Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Juan Pablo Scarfi, *The Hidden History of International Law in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Recently, mobility and transportation infrastructure have become prominent topics among historians of the Americas. A growing corpus of literature examines the transnational mobility of people in South America,⁹ and scholars in the region have explored the development of local or national transportation networks from a transnational perspective.¹⁰ Historians have also begun to discuss pan-American transportation projects that aimed to connect North America and South America, yet this literature remains at an early stage and, so far, the story has been told very much as a US-American idea, especially for the period under consideration in this article.¹¹ Although the establishment of steamship lines was among the most prominent subjects on the early pan-American agenda, historians thus far have devoted little attention to international maritime connections in the Americas in the late nineteenth century.¹² While there are countless national histories of railways in the Americas and some excellent works on the international relevance of North American transcontinental railroads,¹³ the major inter-American transportation project of the late nineteenth century, the never-completed inter-American railroad, has received little scholarly attention. Historian Eric Rutkow offered the first detailed account of the railroad project, and his work is an important reference for my analysis of early US-American visions of inter-American mobility, alongside David Brown's biography of Hinton Rowan Helper, a writer who claimed to be the inventor of what he called the 'Three Americas Railway'.¹⁴ Rutkow and Brown have rightly argued that the determination of US-Americans, both inside and outside government, to build the railway 'intersected with an expansionist compulsion to reach new, foreign markets' and the intention to export US culture to the southern countries.¹⁵ Their work is important for understanding the connection between expansionism and the railroad project and the controversy that the project caused in the United States. Building upon this previous research, this article seeks to advance historical scholarship on pan-American transportation by putting the focus on transnational interaction and South American agency. This approach behoves us to move beyond US-centred narratives and helps us understand how different actors from multiple countries shaped inter-American transportation. I aim to show how and why diplomats, engineers, and businessmen from across the Americas, whose interests simultaneously overlapped and conflicted

⁹See, for instance, Ori Preuss, *Transnational South America: Experiences, Ideas, and Identities, 1860s–1900s* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Edward Blumenthal, *Exile and Nation-State Formation in Argentina and Chile, 1810–1862* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁰See, for instance, Rodrigo Booth, 'Turismo, Panamericanismo e Ingeniería Civil: La Construcción del Camino Escénico entre Viña del Mar y Concón (1917–1931)' ('Tourism, Pan-Americanism, and Civil Engineering: The Construction of the Viña del Mar-Concón Scenic Road, 1917–1931'), *Historia* 47, no. 2 (July–December 2014): 277–310; Valeria Gruschetsky, 'Saberes sin Fronteras: La Vialidad Norteamericana como Modelo de la Dirección Nacional de Vialidad, 1920–1940' ('Knowledge without Frontiers: North American Roadbuilding as Role Model for the [Argentine] National Highway Department, 1920–1940') in *Saberes del Estado Volume I (State Knowledge)* eds. Mariano B. Plotkin and Eduardo Zimmermann (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2012), 185–211; Dhan Zunino Singh, 'La Movilidad Transatlántica de las Tecnologías de Transporte: La Americanización del Sistema Subterráneo (Boston, 1897 y Buenos Aires, 1913)' ('The Transatlantic Mobility of Transportation Technology: The Americanization of the Subway System, Boston, 1897 and Buenos Aires, 1913') *Iberoamericana* 20, no. 74 (2020): 13–33.

¹¹One notable exception is Rosa Elena Ficek, 'Imperial Routes, National Networks and Regional Projects: The Pan-American Highway, 1884–1977', *The Journal of Transport History* 37, no. 2 (2016): 129–54, especially 129–33.

¹²Caribbean cruise tourism is an exception to this rule as historians have discussed its origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Catherine Cocks, *Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 55–61; Blake C. Scott, *Unpacked: A History of Caribbean Tourism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), Chapter 1.

¹³See Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011); G. Chang et al., eds., *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁴Eric Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map: The United States, the Pan-American Highway, and the Quest to Link the Americas* (New York: Scribner, 2019), 7–53; David Brown, *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), especially 248–70.

¹⁵Quotation from Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 3.

with each other, cooperated on transportation. Most importantly, a focus on interaction and South American agency shows how pan-American infrastructure became part of alternative visions of Latin America's connections to the world.

Historians have long noted that simple definitions of 'pan-Americanism' are limiting,¹⁶ and recent scholarship, given its broadened scope, has reinforced that simple definitions are problematic. Mark J. Petersen, for example, has pointed out that if we aim to understand pan-Americanism, we need to be aware of the multiple forms the pan-American movement took and the broad array of actors that shaped its development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁷ Inspired by the recent transnational historiographical shift, several scholars have made valuable efforts to capture the multiplicity and complexity of pan-Americanism. Petersen, Benjamin A. Coates, David M. K. Sheinin, Juan Pablo Scarfi, and Andrew R. Tillman have provided explanations that are of great use for my analysis of inter-American transportation. Drawing upon their work, I take pan-Americanism as a movement of both hegemony and cooperation, as a framework that proved to be useful for many different actors from across the Americas, and as a 'hemisphere-wide phenomenon that reflected the interests of Latin American peoples as much as . . . those of US-Americans'.¹⁸

This article contributes to the existing scholarship in three ways. First, I seek to advance recent scholarly efforts by analysing how both hegemonic aspirations and cooperative efforts marked the early history of inter-American transportation. Coates has examined how commercial imperialism and the promotion of a US civilising mission to Latin America coalesced in the writings and actions of William Eleroy Curtis, a journalist and 'pan-American lobbyist'.¹⁹ In the same vein, my analysis of early US-American proposals for inter-American transportation—in whose development Curtis played a pivotal role—reveals how enthusiastic promoters of infrastructure expected better steamship service and the railway to extend the economic and cultural influence of the United States. Diplomats and experts from Central and South America were aware of such ideas, but they also were interested in better transportation and greater local, national, and global connectivity. Consequently, they engaged in debates on transportation at inter-American forums such as the First International Conference of American States, held in Washington, DC, in 1889–90, and the Intercontinental Railway Commission (1890–9), which became important platforms for cooperation and the planning of infrastructure.

Second, this article joins the recent trend to focus on Latin American agency in inter-American affairs. South American approaches to international transportation are an excellent topic to further develop Petersen's argument that pan-Americanism was a 'malleable framework' that 'seemed primed to advance Latin American . . . agendas'.²⁰ My focus on mobility and transportation infrastructure shows that even prior to the First International Conference of American States, which in the popular and official perception figures as a foundational moment in the development of the modern inter-American system,²¹ South Americans used the pan-American framework to pursue their own projects.

Third, I seek to advance the global history of inter-American transportation and international mobility in South America. Tanya Harmer recently made the case for further globalising the

¹⁶Sheinin, 'Rethinking Pan-Americanism', 1.

¹⁷Petersen, *The Southern Cone*, 3–5.

¹⁸Juan Pablo Scarfi and Andrew R. Tillman, 'Cooperation and Hegemony in US-Latin American Relations: An Introduction', in *Cooperation and Hegemony in US-Latin American Relations: Revisiting the Western Hemisphere Idea*, eds. Juan Pablo Scarfi and Andrew R. Tillman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–29; Petersen, *The Southern Cone*, 3–14; quotation from Scarfi and Sheinin, 'Introduction', 1.

¹⁹Benjamin A. Coates, 'The Pan-American Lobbyist: William Eleroy Curtis and U.S. Empire, 1884–1899', *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 1 (January 2014): 22–48.

²⁰Petersen, *The Southern Cone*, 7.

²¹See for example, 'Our History', Organization of American States, accessed 25 January 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/about/our_history.asp.

history of US-Latin American relations, despite the danger that researchers might overlook specificity and intraregional differences.²² Indeed, taking Latin America as a single unit of historical analysis is problematic, especially when we consider the multiple and multidimensional conflicts that marked Latin American societies in the late nineteenth century. With regard to inter-American relations, Latin Americans involved in the making of pan-Americanism did not act as a homogeneous group, nor did US-Americans.²³ This was also true of pan-American discussions on transportation in which, for instance, the delegates of Brazil tended to agree with their counterparts from the United States rather than their neighbours from Argentina. While awareness of such divergences is crucial, a global historical approach to inter-American transportation provides new insight into the history of international mobility. As I will show, it contributes to a better understanding of South American approaches to pan-American infrastructure because, for experts from South America, like Posada, improving inter-American transportation was part of a larger endeavour to integrate their countries in worldwide trade and traffic networks. Moreover, using a global historical approach helps us understand the intersection of local, continental, hemispheric, and global ambitions and the actual relevance of better connections to the United States in South American visions of global transportation.

The article has three main sections. In the first section, I analyse *The Three Americas Railway*, a collection of essays written by North American authors and edited by Hinton Rowan Helper in 1881, showing how the authors envisioned inter-American transportation and mobility as facilitators of US-American economic and cultural expansion. The second section explores pan-American debates and exchanges on transportation by investigating the reports of the Central and South American Commission (1884–6), the records of the First International Conference of American States (1889–90), and the minutes of the meetings of the Intercontinental Railway Commission (1890–1). The third section focuses on hitherto unexplored South American perspectives on international transportation and mobility. I look at four studies on the topic written by scientists and engineers from Brazil and Uruguay, including Posada, in the 1880s and 1890s. They embraced the idea of an inter-American railway, yet more prominently advocated a railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The latter promised to establish cross-border connections on their continent and, in combination with transoceanic steamers, raise their countries' profile in worldwide traffic networks.

Mobility and transportation, I argue, were of fundamental importance for modern pan-Americanism because (1) they were major concerns for people from across the Americas; and (2) debates on mobility and transportation shaped the development of pan-Americanism into a hemisphere-wide and truly multilateral movement. Although new intercontinental steamship connections and the inter-American railroad were closely connected to the hegemonic aspirations of the United States, South Americans played an active role in the planning of these infrastructures, integrating the pan-American framework into a broader global vision of transportation.

Visions of mobility and expansion: The Three Americas Railway

For many supporters in the late nineteenth-century United States, the main goal of pan-Americanism was to break the commercial dominance of European powers, mainly Britain, and extend their country's economic influence in Latin America. When the pan-American movement began in earnest in the 1880s, the idea that the United States needed to cultivate closer commercial

²²Tanya Harmer, 'Commonality, Specificity, and Difference: Histories and Historiography of the Americas', in *Cooperation and Hegemony in US-Latin American Relations: Revisiting the Western Hemisphere Idea*, eds. Juan Pablo Scarfi and Andrew R. Tillman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 71–108, especially 83.

²³*Ibid.*, 82.

ties with Mexico and Central and South America was already well established.²⁴ The Civil War had drastically reduced the country's merchant marine, precipitating a decline in its share of the global commercial tonnage. Many Americans felt that the United States was falling behind in international trade, a mood that deepened after 1865. Meanwhile, domestic industrial and agricultural production soared in the years after the war, and many believed that overproduction and underconsumption caused the recurrent economic downturns after 1873. This sparked a search for new foreign markets, and convinced as they were that the United States had a natural right to hemispheric trade, economic expansionists declared other American countries obvious destinations for US-American exports.²⁵

As David M. Pletcher and Rory Miller, among others, have noted, these economic expansionists had to face the fact that European trade and investment in Latin America far exceeded those of the United States, with Britain being the unchallenged leader.²⁶ In the last third of the nineteenth century, British interests in Latin America focused on investments and, in geographical terms, on southern South America. The British organised companies to operate railways, urban services, haciendas, banks, mines, and oilfields in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Peru, thereby controlling key sectors of economy in these countries.²⁷ Britain was also the preeminent trading partner for South American nations, receiving the greatest share of their leading exports, such as sugar, cotton, and wool from Peru.²⁸ Brazil and Chile had long been important markets for British exports and remained so for the rest of the century, while exports from Britain to Argentina increased significantly after 1880.²⁹ While Britain's commercial influence in southern South America was substantial, and Germany and France also developed considerable trade there, the United States lagged behind. According to Pletcher, in 1869, British investments in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Peru amounted to \$131.9 million while US-American investments counted \$47.9 million. Patterns of South American trade with the United States varied from country to country, as did its commercial weakness. In 1883, for example, the United States had a considerable share of Brazil's foreign trade (26.8%), while numbers for Uruguay (13.7%), Argentina (6.7%), Chile (5.1%), and Peru (1.7%) were much lower.³⁰

In the opinion of many economic expansionists, the main deterrent to inter-American trade was the lack of transportation, especially steamship service. Accordingly, they denounced the aforementioned decline of their country's merchant marine and attributed European commercial dominance in South America to the fact that Britain, Germany, and France had long-established, fast, and reliable transatlantic steamship connections.³¹ Indeed, as Pletcher noted, the British Royal Mail Steam Packet Company had connected Britain with Rio de Janeiro since 1851, and in 1863 it had established service to the Rio de la Plata. By the mid-1880s nearly thirty European companies, twelve of them British, maintained regular service to port cities on the South American Atlantic Coast, offering more than 500 trips a year. At the same time, there was only one monthly steamer from New York to Rio de Janeiro and none to Buenos Aires.³² US-Americans who sought

²⁴See David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment: American Economic Expansion in the Hemisphere, 1865-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 208.

²⁵George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 270, 286-7; David Sim, 'The United States in an Age of Global Integration, 1865-1897', in *The Cambridge History of America and the World Volume II 1820-1900*, eds. Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 185-6.

²⁶See Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment*, 180-1.

²⁷See Rory Miller, *Britain and Latin America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Longman, 1993), 97, 119.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 108-9.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 112. Cotton textiles made up almost 50% of British exports to Latin America in 1880 but declined in relative significance thereafter, while coal, and iron and steel products increased.

³⁰Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment*, 180-3.

³¹*Ibid.*, 191.

³²See *ibid.*, 195; See also US House of Representatives, *Report from the Central and South American Commissioners*, 48th Congress, 2nd Session, 1885, Ex. Doc. No. 226 (hereafter, *Central and South American Commission Report I*), 19-20.

to develop business with Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay faced significant delays and high freights, and in fact, they often shipped their products on British vessels. The situation was not much different on the Pacific coast, where the British Pacific Steam Navigation Company monopolised much of the coastal trade.³³ Consequently, calls for better inter-American steamship connections grew alongside the United States' interest in closer hemispheric commercial relations, and transportation became a keystone in the early development of pan-Americanism.

The idea that better transportation would help the United States undermine European commercial dominance and establish a hegemonic position in the Americas also characterised one of the earliest publications on the topic, a collection of essays titled *The Three Americas Railway* that Helper published in 1881. Helper had already argued that better inter-American transportation was essential for more trade and investment when he had served as the US consul to Argentina in the 1860s. During his time in Buenos Aires, he had observed that US-American merchants and manufacturers could not compete with their European counterparts in South American markets, which had prompted him to champion more frequent steamship connections.³⁴ The idea of an inter-American railroad took hold after his return to the United States, and he spent considerable time and money on promotional efforts.³⁵ The clearest attempt to promote the railroad was an essay contest that Helper organised in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1879. He appointed a jury of three to assess the essays and offered a \$5,000 prize to be distributed among the top five authors, whose contributions he published in *The Three Americas Railway*.³⁶

The prize-winning authors, all men, came from the United States or Canada.³⁷ They argued that without a direct overland connection, the United States could not secure a greater share of the Central and South American trade. Urging for the construction of the Three Americas Railway, William Wharton Archer, author of the third-prize essay, explained, 'the only way to open up South and Central America and Mexico, and give them free outlet for their immense productions ... is by means of a longitudinal and intercontinental railway'.³⁸ Franck Frederick Hilder, the first-place author, made a similar argument, adding that the railway would help the United States reverse its trade deficit with Latin American countries: 'We must take into consideration not only how valuable will be the import trade of the varied products of South and Central America; but the still more important results of opening new markets for our surplus manufactures and merchandise'.³⁹ The authors dwelt on the topic of transatlantic commercial competition, bragging that once the railway was built, 'European traders will find, in our merchants and manufacturers very formidable rivals in all the business centres of the South'.⁴⁰ Accordingly, perspectives for increased trade and investment, and, by extension, US-American profits, also determined the projections of possible routes for the Three Americas Railway. In his preface to the book, Helper suggested 'a perfectly direct track' from the United States–Canada border south to the Rio Grande. From there, Helper wanted the railway to beeline through Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and into Argentina.⁴¹ The authors of the essays gave much more detailed

³³Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment*, 195–6.

³⁴Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 11; Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 255.

³⁵Later, Helper explained that the hazards of sea travel had awoken in him the idea of the railroad as a more comfortable mode of inter-American travel. For a vivid account see Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 7.

³⁶Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 16.

³⁷Forty-seven authors, including eleven women, had submitted contributions. Most of them came from the United States. There was not a single contribution from Latin America.

³⁸William Wharton Archer, 'Third Prize Essay', in *The Three Americas Railway*, ed. Hinton Rowan Helper (Saint Louis: W. S. Bryan, 1881), 162.

³⁹Franck Frederick Hilder, 'First Prize Essay', in *The Three Americas Railway*, ed. Hinton Rowan Helper (Saint Louis: W. S. Bryan, 1881), 56–7. At the time, US-American imports from Brazil, for example, exceeded exports by ratios varying between four to one and seven to one. See Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment*, 187.

⁴⁰Hilder, 'First Prize Essay', 56.

⁴¹Helper, 'Preface', in *The Three Americas Railway*, ed. Hinton Rowan Helper (Saint Louis: W. S. Bryan, 1881), 6.

descriptions of potential routes, but their proposals largely aligned with Helper's idea to build the railway midland, 'nearly equidistant between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans'.⁴²

Historians of inter-American relations have emphasised that US-American economic expansionism 'always intersected with cultural and ideological concerns', especially the belief in racial hierarchy, conservative attitudes against revolutionary change, and the conviction that advancing US interests also served the well-being of other peoples.⁴³ The essays in *The Three Americas Railway* exemplified this intersection of economics, culture, and ideology. They also reveal late nineteenth-century railroad boosterism. The authors all believed that modern technology could improve society, which is not surprising given that three of the five were railway engineers. Describing the railway as a harbinger of progress, development, civilisation, and universal peace, they also believed in US-American exceptionalism and recycled long-established racialised stereotypes about Latin Americans as uneducated and hot-tempered people who lived in revolution- and war-ridden countries. In their descriptions, Latin America appeared as a tropical paradise full of natural riches and resources that only awaited North Americans' enterprising spirit. Accordingly, they all portrayed the Three Americas Railway as the central element of a civilising mission that would lead to the uplift of Latin American societies under US tutelage.⁴⁴ Hilder, for instance, wrote:

By [the railway's] aid, jealousy and ignorance, nurtured by isolation, bigotry and intolerance, will be swept away . . . the tides of commerce, civilization, science, and art, shall flow and mingle as freely as the waters of the ocean, or the winds of heaven. In the Southern Republics, peace and prosperity will take the place of tumult and revolution, as they learn that construction, and not destruction, should be the work of their national life.⁴⁵

What is more, all of the authors emphasised that building the railroad was feasible. Even before the book was published, Helper's essay contest had caught the attention of experts and the press, goading many railway engineers into explaining that it would be impossible to build an inter-American railroad.⁴⁶ At the same time, as Rutkow and Brown have noted, Helper also received support from legislators and interested citizens from across the United States and some Latin American foreign secretaries.⁴⁷ Yet scepticism prevailed: the *New York Times*, for example, similar to other newspapers, had written that the Three Americas Railway 'would not be much more likely to be built, nor would [it] be more profitable, than a railway to the moon'.⁴⁸ Such leeriness and ridicule of the project prompted the authors of the essays to insist that it certainly could be achieved.

Indeed, given the development of global and transcontinental infrastructure systems at the time, it was not self-evident that efforts to connect the Americas by rail could only end in failure. After all, the Suez Canal had been opened in 1869 and had become an important crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa.⁴⁹ North America's first Transcontinental Railroad had been inaugurated the same year, and other transcontinental lines soon followed, connecting the United

⁴²Hilder, 'First Prize Essay', 59. See also Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 28–9.

⁴³Mark T. Gilderhus, David C. LaFavor, and Michael James LaRosa, *The Third Century: U.S.-Latin American Relations Since 1889*, 2nd edn. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 12–13.

⁴⁴On US perceptions of Latin America in the nineteenth century, see Frederick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

⁴⁵Hilder, 'First Prize Essay', 52. For similar statements in the other essays, see *The Three Americas Railway*, ed. Hinton Rowan Helper (Saint Louis: W. S. Bryan, 1881), 138, 210, 257–8, 264.

⁴⁶Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 259–60.

⁴⁷See Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 16–17; Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 257–8.

⁴⁸*New York Times*, 26 March 1880, quoted in Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 257.

⁴⁹See Valeska Huber, *Channeling Mobilities: Migration and Globalization in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

States and Canada from coast to coast. Transatlantic telegraph cables had begun to transmit information between Europe and North America at unprecedented speed. These 'high points in the development of global connections', as Valeska Huber has described them, as well as the 'novel perception of global unity' they created, also 'found forceful expression' in popular literature, most notably in Jules Verne's novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873).⁵⁰ If travelling around the world was now possible, a railroad connecting North America and South America also seemed thinkable. Accordingly, the authors of the essays in *The Three Americas Railway* all referred to such recent engineering feats to build their arguments.⁵¹

We have seen that one of their main arguments was that closer economic ties between the United States and Latin America depended on the Three Americas Railway. For historians interested in mobility, the close connection between the railroad and the quest for closer economic ties raises the question of whether the project was all about trade—the mobility of goods, so to speak—or if the mobility of people also mattered. A closer look at *The Three Americas Railway* shows that the authors also hoped to encourage intercontinental travel and tourism. In 1881, getting from the United States to the Caribbean and Central America, let alone South America, was not easy. In the extremely limited inter-American steamship service, carrying passengers was of secondary importance; although ships offered accommodations, these were few and lacked comfort.⁵² In 1884, the Mexican Central would complete a railway line that connected El Paso, Texas to Mexico City.⁵³ In addition, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American countries were also building railways, but most connected plantations and other production sites with port cities. They offered passenger transportation, but largely on local lines.⁵⁴ The promoters of the Three Americas Railway bragged that *their* railway would offer unprecedented opportunities for travel and tourism on an intercontinental level. Archer and Francis Augustus Deekens, whose essay had been awarded fourth prize, described in detail how they imagined the railway would further inter-American travel and change the patterns of incipient global tourism.⁵⁵

Their visions must be understood in the context of the touristic turn after the Civil War. After 1865, more and more wealthy US-Americans travelled abroad, mostly to Europe.⁵⁶ It was not until the 1890s that the middle classes started travelling in larger numbers; even so, the postwar years had seen the 'metamorphosis of the traveler into the tourist' and a boom in the tourism business.⁵⁷ When the travelling mania set in, only a fraction of US-American tourists chose Latin America as their destination.⁵⁸ To be sure, since the end of the wars of independence in the 1820s, countries in the region had attracted European and North American travellers, many of whom wrote travel reports that were very popular with readers back at home. Widespread assumptions about hostile climatic conditions and the deadliness of tropical diseases, however, contributed to the popular

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁵¹Archer, 'Third Prize Essay', 203–4; Francis Augustus Deekens, 'Fourth Prize Essay', in *The Three Americas Railway*, ed. Hinton Rowan Helper (Saint Louis: W. S. Bryan, 1881), 221, 246, 249–50.

⁵²Cocks, *Tropical Whites*, 49.

⁵³White, *Railroaded*, 204.

⁵⁴For a good overview of the history of railroads in Latin America see Sandra Kuntz Ficker, ed., *Historia Mínima de la Expansión Ferroviaria en América Latina (A Concise History of Railroad Expansion in Latin America)* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2015).

⁵⁵Archer, 'Third Prize Essay', 191–3; Deekens, 'Fourth Prize Essay', 248–9, 268–71.

⁵⁶In 1870, 35,000 US-Americans visited Europe. By 1885, this number had grown to 100,000, and by 1914 to around 250,000. See Brian Rouleau, 'Mobilities: Travel, Exploration, Tourism', in *The Cambridge History of America and the World Volume II*, eds. Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 489.

⁵⁷See Frank A. Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Foundation of American Internationalism, 1865–1890* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 39–40; Rouleau, 'Mobilities', 475, 485.

⁵⁸The percentage of US-American tourists who travelled to Latin America increased from 3.3% in 1873 to 13.3% in 1890. See Ninkovich, *Global Dawn*, 346, footnote 52.

belief that countries south of the United States were too remote and too dangerous to visit and '[were] best encountered in books, whereas Europe deserved to be visited in flesh'.⁵⁹

Despite the popular perception of tropical lands as 'the white man's grave',⁶⁰ Archer and Deekens were confident that the Three Americas Railway would draw tourist traffic away from Europe to Central and South America. In his essay, Archer compared Latin America's tourism potential to Europe, arguing that the 'old continent' was losing its appeal because thousands of travellers, Europeans and North Americans alike, were doing the same tour and visiting the same places year after year.⁶¹ Emphasising Latin America's lush nature, he claimed that one month of travel on the railway offered more to see than three months' roaming in Europe. Archer also envisioned new health resorts that afforded relief for those plagued by consumption, yellow fever, and cholera. Thousands from across the Americas and Europe, he wrote, would flock to these 'Andean sanitariums' in Peru and Ecuador by rail.⁶² Archer and Deekens both emphasised that travel from North America to South America was only for adventurers at that time. The many perils, and the time and expense required, discouraged most people. The railway, Archer hoped, would bring new destinations in South America within easy reach for citizens of the United States.⁶³ Deekens, too, was convinced that the railway was going to make extended journeys 'north and south, east and west, to the Atlantic and to the Pacific' possible. The 'Grand American Tour' would 'become indispensable to all who [were] fond of traveling for its own sake'.⁶⁴ As the reference to the 'Grand Tour' suggests, Deekens focused on the railway's educational benefits, especially to young people, who could enjoy lessons in natural history and observe the 'features, dresses, occupations and peculiarities' of local people.⁶⁵ As we know, the vision of a Grand American Tour by rail did not become reality, and, obviously, Archer and Deekens wrote with hyperbolic flair, yet their ideas seemed not completely out of reason. After all, improved transportation and transformations in tropical medicine prompted an increasing number of US-Americans to travel south beginning in the 1880s, with Mexico and the Caribbean soon becoming tourist destinations.⁶⁶

Pan-American debates and exchanges on mobility and transportation

Helper never got the recognition or funding he hoped for, but *The Three Americas Railway* helped draw the attention of some of the most wealthy and powerful men in the United States to the railroad project.⁶⁷ During the 1880s, the extension of inter-American transportation became not only a US-sponsored project but also an important subject of transnational exchange and negotiation. In March 1884, the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations established the Central and South American Commission to study the conditions for inter-American trade and the construction of an inter-American railroad.⁶⁸ The best-known member of the commission was journalist William Eleroy Curtis, who, according to Coates, was building a reputation as an expert on Latin America at the time. Curtis promoted closer hemispheric relations but also believed in the racial and cultural superiority of Anglo-American civilisation.⁶⁹ Curtis, Solon Otis Thacher, a

⁵⁹Ninkovich, *Global Dawn*, 43.

⁶⁰Cocks, *Tropical Whites*, 2.

⁶¹Archer, 'Third Prize Essay', 191.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 192–3.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 191–2.

⁶⁴Deekens, 'Fourth Prize Essay', 249.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 269–70.

⁶⁶Cocks, *Tropical Whites*, 5, 41–55.

⁶⁷Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 17–21.

⁶⁸Intercontinental Railway Commission, *A Condensed Report of the Transactions of the Commission and of the Surveys and Explorations of its Engineers in Central and South America 1891–1898 Volume I. Part I* (Washington, DC, 1898), 11.

⁶⁹Coates, 'The Pan-American Lobbyist', 25–6.

member of the Kansas state senate, and the third commissioner, Thomas Caute Reynolds, a former Confederate governor of Missouri, set out for Mexico in late 1884. They also visited Guatemala and Costa Rica, but political unrest made it impossible for them to continue their tour through the rest of Central America. Reynolds returned home, while Curtis and Thacher went on to Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. Time did not allow them to travel to Brazil, and they suffered shipwreck on their way back to the United States. Curtis and Thacher finally arrived in New York in July 1885, after nine months of travel, and wrote two comprehensive reports to Congress.⁷⁰

Before they left the United States, the commission organised conferences in New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, and other cities which brought together US-American manufacturers engaged in the South American trade, Latin American diplomats and merchants, and others who had lived in the countries the commission members expected to visit.⁷¹ At these meetings, the participants exchanged ideas about inter-American mobility and transportation, and they agreed that increasing inter-American trade depended on better steamship and railway connections. In their reports, the commissioners lamented that European countries had far more frequent connections to Central and South America and thus more trade. From the commissioners' point of view, the establishment of more steamship lines, operated by US-American companies and subsidised by the US government, was necessary to rectify this situation.⁷² Similarly, they considered railways as important as steamships. Assessing the position of Latin American authorities toward the construction of an intercontinental railway was, accordingly, a central task on their tour through Central and South America. Curtis and Thacher, basing their opinion on 'reliable information' that they had received from men 'who had traveled portions of the territory proposed to be penetrated', claimed that extending existing railways from Mexico City to Panama would be easy. They also claimed that the idea of an inter-American railroad was very popular, especially in Argentina and Uruguay, which led them to conclude that it was feasible.⁷³

The Central and South American Commission devoted more attention to trade but also aimed to improve passenger transportation. At the meeting in New York in September 1884, several participants expressed their belief that people from across the Americas would use an inter-American railway. Alexander D. Anderson, a representative of the World's Industrial Exposition of New Orleans, for instance, remembered that the Mexican Central Railway's 'first train northward from the city of Mexico [had] brought to the United States a party of students to be educated in one of our colleges' some months earlier. Referring to the planned inter-American railroad, he anticipated that these students would be 'the forerunners of thousands more who [would] come and go between the United States and Spanish America for purposes of travel, pleasure, and education'.⁷⁴ These expectations were in line with the visions of inter-American travel that Deekens and Archer had penned some years prior. They also aligned with two of the commission's more general goals. The commissioners intended to support young US-Americans in Latin America, whom they deemed 'valuable to the United States in building up social, political, and commercial interests'; and they aimed to bring larger numbers of young men from Central and South America to the United States for education, which, they claimed, would spread respect for democracy, religious freedom, and free education.⁷⁵ Obviously, the Commission's promotion

⁷⁰*Central and South American Commission Report I*; US House of Representatives, *Reports of the Commission Appointed under an Act of Congress Approved July 7, 1884, 49th Congress, 1st Session, 1886*, Ex. Doc. 50., 54 (hereafter, *Central and South American Commission Report II*).

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*Central and South American Commission Report II*, 27. In fact, there was considerable opposition to shipping subsidies, and opponents accused Curtis of being corrupt and acting upon the behalf of large shipping companies to whom he had tight connections. See Coates, 'The Pan-American Lobbyist', 30–1.

⁷³*Central and South American Commission Report II*, 30–1.

⁷⁴*Central and South American Commission Report I*, 51.

⁷⁵*Central and South American Commission Report II*, 24–7.

of closer US-Latin American social relations and inter-American mobility was driven by commercial expansionism and the belief in Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority.

Increasing the influence of the United States in Latin America was also the main motivation for the organisers of the First International Conference of American States,⁷⁶ which took place in Washington, DC, from October 1889 to April 1890. Secretary of State James G. Blaine and Curtis, whom Blaine appointed special agent of the State Department in charge of planning the conference, aimed to establish a pan-American trading bloc under US leadership to counterbalance European commercial dominance in Central and South America.⁷⁷ They also intended to establish a hemispheric arbitration system to settle conflicts between countries in the Americas. Most delegates from the seventeen Latin American and Caribbean countries that participated in the conference were diplomats; the US delegation was mostly composed of businessmen. The conference established the Commercial Bureau of the American Republics, the predecessor of the Pan American Union and today's Organization of American States, but the delegates did not manage to reach an agreement on arbitration or a projected customs union. Given its limited results, most contemporary observers in the United States, Latin America, and Europe, as well as present-day historians, concluded that the conference was a failure.⁷⁸

Transportation was one of the most important and less contentious topics at the International American Conference. The delegates formed several committees, four of which worked on transportation. The Committee on Communication on the Atlantic, which had five members, from Argentina, Brazil, Haiti, Paraguay, and the United States, recommended the establishment of bimonthly steamship services between US-American port cities and Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires. These services were to be provided by vessels that offered 'accommodations and capacity necessary for the transportation of freight and passengers' and would 'carry the mail'.⁷⁹ Advocating a direct and fast connection between the United States and southern South America, the committee recommended that ships 'only touch at one port of the intermediary countries on the trips to and from Buenos Ayres'.⁸⁰ The fact that its members did not want steamers to make multiple stops on the way did not mean they were uninterested in creating a dense transportation network. Indeed, the committee recommended that 'subsidiary lines of river navigation' be established to the ports of Bolivia and Paraguay, two countries without access to the Atlantic Ocean.⁸¹

The Committee on Communication on the Pacific Ocean, whose five members came from Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States, made similar suggestions. They recommended that the 'nations lying along the western coast of the American continent' subsidise one or more steamship lines to make round trips between San Francisco, Valparaíso, and intermediary ports twice a month. The committee determined that ships had to be 'suitably constructed for the transportation of passengers as well as freight, and first class in every respect, with all modern improvements'.⁸² Remarkably, in contrast to the Atlantic committee's call for only one intermediary stop, the Pacific committee wanted steamers to

⁷⁶Hereafter referred to as the 'International American Conference'.

⁷⁷According to Coates, Curtis's friends in the business community had pushed for his appointment. See Coates, 'The Pan-American Lobbyist', 31.

⁷⁸Joseph 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 M. K. Sheinin (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 20; David Healy, *James G. Blaine and Latin America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 159.

⁷⁹Report of the Committee on Communication on the Atlantic, 1890, p. 1 of 4, Committee Reports, 1890, Committee on Communication on the Atlantic to Committee on Patents and Trademarks, Box 1, First International Conference of American States, 1889–1890, RG 43, NARA II (sources from this series hereafter cited as NARA II, FICAS, Committee Reports).

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 4.

⁸²Report of the Committee on Communication on the Pacific Ocean, 1890, p. 1 of 4, NARA II, FICAS, Committee Reports.

dock at 'all the ports of said coast which [could] be safely visited'.⁸³ For both committees, making inter-American steamship service more predictable and reliable was a major concern. They emphasised the importance of a schedule of departures and arrivals and advised the participating governments to include the expected interval of journeys in concession advertisements and contracts.⁸⁴

The Committee on Communication on the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, which also included five delegates, from Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, the United States, and Venezuela, informed the conference that steamers were providing rather satisfactory services of international commercial and postal communication in the region, an assessment that differed considerably from the conclusions drawn by the Central and South American Commission a few years prior. For instance, analysing the connections between the United States and Venezuela, the committee concluded that conditions for travel had improved due to the recent substitution of steamships for sailing vessels. The steamers provided 'accommodations for passengers, and modern improvements for safety, convenience, and comfort' and offered trips from New York to Curaçao, Puerto Cabello, and Maracaibo.⁸⁵ Yet, deeming it necessary to reduce the time needed to transport people, letters, and perishable freight, it recommended faster ships and more voyages, such as on the steamship service to Venezuela: 'steamers now leave New York every ten days, but it is desired that the service be increased to four sailings per month'. It made the same suggestion for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's line between New York and Colón, Colombia.⁸⁶ The committee also emphasised the significance of personal meetings for trade. Merchants had to be mobile if they wanted to be successful. Accordingly, its members attributed European commercial dominance in Latin America not only to the faster transportation of goods but also to the far superior conditions for travel to and from Europe—despite recent improvements on inter-American routes:

Commercial travellers from the United States are seldom, if ever, seen in the mercantile cities of the Southern countries, and the buyers for those markets seldom visit the warehouses of the merchants of the United States. This is in a large part attributable to the lack of proper means of communication. The merchant of any of these countries can take his state-room upon a swift steamer, and after a comfortable and restful voyage spend a month in examining the manufactures and showrooms of European countries.⁸⁷

That situation, the committee members claimed, could be changed. They dramatically concluded by suggesting that establishing first-class sea communications between the United States and other countries bordering the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea offered an unparalleled opportunity to provide commercial benefit to 85 million people.⁸⁸

The last of the committees, the Committee on Railroads, was the largest to work on transportation, having one member from each country represented at the International American Conference. First, it produced a comprehensive report on the state of railroad construction in the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America that was meant to lay the foundation for planning an inter-American railway. Then, it proposed that the Intercontinental Railway Commission be established. On 26 February 1890, the International American Conference passed this resolution, which stipulated the commission's task: 'to ascertain the possible routes, to determine their true length, to estimate the cost of each, and to compare their respective

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴Report of the Committee on Communication on the Atlantic, 2; Report of the Committee on Communication on the Pacific Ocean, 3.

⁸⁵Report of the Committee on Communication on the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, pp. 3–4 of 16, NARA II, FICAS, Committee Reports.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 15.

advantages’.⁸⁹ The Intercontinental Railway Commission, the ‘pioneer organization for international relations in the hemisphere’,⁹⁰ included members from eleven countries. Between December 1890 and April 1891, it held nineteen meetings in Washington, DC, identifying potential routes and preparing the surveys for the railway.

The commission worked in harmony for some time, but, as Rutkow notes, that changed once the delayed Argentine delegation arrived in February. Argentina was one of the few countries that had followed the International American Conference’s recommendation to appoint three engineers to the delegation. When the commission’s survey committee proposed a route—shown on a map as a ‘bright red line, like a hemispheric aorta’—the Argentines criticised it as too vague.⁹¹ Tensions over the route and when to send surveyors to Central and South America marked the commission’s work thereafter. These disputes were informed by professional distinctions—most of the other members were diplomats and businessmen—as well as a US-Argentine antagonism rooted in the two nations’ competing hegemonic ambitions.⁹²

Beyond the well-known US-Argentine rivalry, a closer look at these discussions shows two things. First, the Argentines were ready to support the railway, but they viewed its foremost purpose as connecting the countries of South America; if the route did not do that, then there was no point in proceeding with the surveys. As Miguel Tedín, a member of the Argentine delegation, put it, ‘Peru, Bolivia, part of Brazil, and part of the Argentine Republic, principally, are included in this line. Chile is left aside without explanations . . . ; when it shall be shown that the chosen route answers effectively *the interests of all concerned*, then will it be time to approve of it.’⁹³ Second, South American representatives did not act in unison, and even the few engineers in the commission disagreed on critical questions. Endorsing efforts of the US delegation to dispatch the survey teams as soon as possible, delegates from Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela hastened to defend the survey committee’s work and the route it had proposed. Responding to Tedín, Pedro Betim Pães Leme, a leading railroad engineer and representative of Brazil, argued that all the commission could do was ‘unite the countries on the map and leave it to the surveying parties to decide as to the points at issue’; C. Federico Párraga of Colombia, the chairman of the survey committee, and Luis J. Blanco of Venezuela seconded Leme’s opinion.⁹⁴ Tedín countered that he ‘differ[ed] essentially’ from them. Reminding his colleagues that they were planning ‘an Intercontinental Railway having for its object the connection of Bolivia, Peru, the Argentine Republic, and Paraguay’, he argued that their countries had ‘a right to know why we . . . have decided upon the adoption of a particular route’; furthermore, he insisted that all the commission’s resolutions had to be ‘perfectly justified’.⁹⁵

In the end, the Argentines acquiesced to the route, but their consent was more an expression of diplomatic etiquette than sincere approval. The surveyors had been ordered to prepare for departure weeks earlier, even though the commission had still been engaged in debates over the route.⁹⁶ They left New York on 10 April 1891 and were expected to stay in the field for about one year. Their work lasted much longer than initially anticipated: the last surveying party did not return from South America until 1893. A US-led executive committee took over the commission’s

⁸⁹Report of the International American Conference Relative to an Intercontinental Railway Line (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), 11.

⁹⁰Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 27.

⁹¹See *ibid.*, 27–31.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 28. On the conflicted relationship between the United States and Argentina at the time, see also Joseph S. Tulchin, ‘Argentina: Clash of Global Visions I’, in *United States-Latin American Relations, 1850-1903: Establishing a Relationship*, ed. Thomas M. Leonard (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 147–68.

⁹³Intercontinental Railway Commission, *Minutes of the Intercontinental Railway Commission* (Washington, DC, 1891), 62. Emphasis added.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 62–4.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 64–6.

⁹⁶See Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 31.

business in Washington, DC. After the surveys were concluded, it published seven extensive volumes of reports before it finally closed its activities in 1899.⁹⁷ By that time, the railway idea had lost much of its earlier official and popular support. Nevertheless, the Second International Conference of American States, held in Mexico City in 1901/02, established a new committee, the Permanent Pan-American Railway Committee, that would continue to exist well into the twentieth century.

Although initiatives to improve inter-American transportation were informed by the intention of the United States to extend its influence across its borders, Latin Americans shaped how they were carried out. For one thing, they lauded proposals to establish maritime and overland connections more than other topics discussed at the International American Conference. In addition, experts and diplomats from South America played a key role in the Intercontinental Railway Commission. They were willing to cooperate with the United States on intercontinental transportation, but, as Petersen has argued, 'this engagement was on their own terms'.⁹⁸ South American elites associated the extension of infrastructure with national economic growth and territorial integration. Beyond that, inter-American transportation promised to establish better communications between the countries on their continent. However, they did not wish for hemispheric exclusivity, an idea that was central to the pan-American agenda of the United States. Their endorsement of new hemispheric steamship and railroad connections did not mean that they shifted their attention away from Europe to the United States. On the contrary, as I will show in the next section, South American experts developed approaches to international mobility and transportation in which closer inter-American and transatlantic connections coalesced into a broader vision of enhanced global connectivity.

'A Revolution in the Rapid Communications of the World': South American visions of global transportation

By the 1880s, the idea of establishing overland cross-border connections in South America was not a novelty. Since mid-century, railroaders, mainly of foreign origin, had developed plans for transnational lines. US-American businessman William Wheelright, who invested heavily in steamships and railroads in Chile and Argentina, had proposed to construct a railway across the Andes in the 1850s but had not managed to secure enough funding. In the early 1870s, railroad builder Henry Meiggs also planned to construct a line from Santiago de Chile to Buenos Aires but then invested in Peruvian railroads instead.⁹⁹ A few years later, brothers John and Matthew Clark, Chilean citizens of British-Argentine descent, obtained concessions to build the Transandino. Yet, construction did not begin until 1887, and it was not until 1910 that traffic on the entire line from Mendoza, Argentina, to Santa Rosa de los Andes, Chile, could begin.¹⁰⁰ As far as South Americans were concerned, the problems that delayed the construction of transnational railways on their continent only galvanised their conviction that thoroughfares were necessary and feasible: across the mountains, from Colombia down to Argentina, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In the 1880s and 1890s, experts from Brazil and the Southern Cone worked this idea out in detail and with a global perspective. In the following pages, I discuss the work of four of these experts, all of whom have largely fallen into oblivion, but at the time held leadership positions and worked for local or national governments. They were members of leading professional associations and in international networks, and their work found considerable attention among their peers and

⁹⁷For details on the surveys and the executive committee see Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 32–9.

⁹⁸Petersen, *The Southern Cone*, 43.

⁹⁹On Wheelright and Meiggs in South America, see Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment*, 196–200.

¹⁰⁰On the complicated history of the Transandine Railway, see J. Valerie Fifer, *United States Perceptions of Latin America: A New 'West' South of Capricorn?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 93–105, 141–8.

political leaders who were interested in extending their countries' international connections through transportation. (See Figure 1)

Born in Spain in 1842, Clemente Barrial Posada, whom we met at the start of this article, moved to Uruguay in the 1860s. In the 1880s, he became one of the first experts in South America to develop a continent- and ocean-spanning approach to transportation. Posada combined his proposal for the South American section of an inter-American railroad with the idea of expanding South America's transatlantic connections to Europe. In the manuscript that he submitted to the US Charge d'Affaires in 1887, Posada discussed one of the most controversial issues concerning an inter-American railroad: the question of whether the railroad should be built east or west of the Andes. He had studied South America's geology for nearly two decades and travelled from Colombia to Patagonia on horseback. Claiming to be familiar with conditions on both sides of the continent's longest mountain range, he recommended that the railway follow an eastern route, passing through Ecuador and western Brazil, and following a straight line through Bolivia and Paraguay, on its way from Bogotá to Buenos Aires.¹⁰¹ More importantly, Posada devoted the larger part of his study to an extension of the railway from Buenos Aires to the port city of Recife, on the Brazilian Atlantic Coast, via Uruguay. Estimating that the line would comprise nearly 9,000 kilometres, he described the geological nature of the land, flora, and fauna, prospects for agriculture and mining, and the people and their customs along the route. In his conclusion, Posada emphasised that the proposed extension to Recife would boost the transport of passengers and freight to and from Europe. After their arrival in Recife, he anticipated, people and goods would continue their journey to the interior of South America via railway.¹⁰²

More trade with Europe and a potential increase in immigration were common themes in South American publications on transcontinental railroads at the time. In 1888, Brazilian engineer Alfredo Lisboa, who worked for the Railways of Pernambuco, published a proposal for an interoceanic line that would connect Recife to Valparaíso on Chile's Pacific coast. One of Lisboa's main arguments was that this railroad would help attract immigrants from Europe to South America.¹⁰³ This was in line with the Brazilian government's proactive immigration policies, as well as those of the countries of the Southern Cone. Notably, even US-American boosters of an inter-American railroad welcomed European immigration to South America. Archer and Deekens, winners in Helper's essay contest, believed that, once 'whitened' and thus 'uplifted' through immigration, South America's population would engage in trade with the United States.¹⁰⁴ Such racist views aligned with the racial whitening ideology that took hold in South America at the time, especially in Brazil.¹⁰⁵ They also corresponded to the racist visions of South American experts, like Posada, who hoped that transcontinental railroads would be effective tools in the advancement of 'civilisation' and the removal of 'savage' indigenous people, as they had been in the United States.¹⁰⁶ The stronger transatlantic economic ties that South American railroad planners envisioned, however, starkly contrasted with what US-American promoters of an inter-American railroad had in mind. Helper, Curtis, Blaine, and others hoped that *their* railroad would put Europeans at a disadvantage in South America since, they claimed, transatlantic steamers would not be able to compete with its speed.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹Posada, *The Proposed Route for the American International Rail Road*, 6–7.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 99–100.

¹⁰³Alfredo Lisboa, *A Estrada de Ferro Transcontinental América do Sul: Uma Contribuição para o Estudo do seu Traçado* (*The South American Transcontinental Railroad: A Contribution to the Study of its Route*) (Recife: Typographia Economica, 1888), 4.

¹⁰⁴Archer, 'Third Prize Essay', 181, 186; Deekens, 'Fourth Prize Essay', 260–1.

¹⁰⁵Sales Augusto dos Santos, 'Historical Roots of the "Whitening" of Brazil', *Latin American Perspectives* 29, no. 1 (January 2002): 61–82; George Reid Andrews, *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888–1988* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 25–89.

¹⁰⁶Posada, *The Proposed Route for the American International Rail Road*, 100.

¹⁰⁷Rutkow, *The Longest Line on the Map*, 11–12; Archer, 'Third Prize Essay', 180.



Figure 1. Map of South America. The map shows the countries and principal cities of South America. In 1887, geologist Clemente Barrial Posada suggested that the inter-American railway run from Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia, to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and from there to Recife on the Brazilian Atlantic Coast. Other South American experts promoted an interoceanic railway from Recife to Valparaíso on Chile's Pacific Coast. Credit: United States. Central Intelligence Agency. South America. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2000. From Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. <https://www.loc.gov/item/00559563/> (accessed 16 July 2024). Scale: 1: 35,000,000.

Posada's proposed extension of the inter-American railroad from Buenos Aires to Recife and Lisboa's proposal for a South American interoceanic line show that South American experts aimed to connect the countries on their continent by railway and strengthen ties to Europe. Beyond that, they closely observed railroad construction in other parts of the world and envisioned South America playing a key role in new global routes. In 1897, Brazilian engineer Gustavo Estienne published his study *A Estrada Brazil-Pacífico ou o Transcontinental Sul-Americano* (*The Brazil-Pacific Railroad: The South American Transcontinental*). Like Lisboa, Estienne proposed a railway from Recife to Valparaíso, but his study was more comprehensive than the one his fellow countryman had written a decade prior. Railroads across the globe inspired Estienne. He devoted the first chapter of his book to the North American transcontinental lines and the Trans-Siberian Railroad, whose first stretch had been completed in 1896, and was especially impressed by the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which had connected Canada from coast to coast since 1889. Referring to Verne's famous novel, he predicted that travelling around the world would soon become rather commonplace and claimed that the feat that Verne's protagonist Phileas Fogg and his companions had accomplished in eighty days could now be done in fifty-eight days.¹⁰⁸

Turning his attention to the projected South American transcontinental line, Estienne explained that the railroad would help further mining, the production of coffee, and cattle raising. It would also serve for travel on a local scale, for example, offering the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro the opportunity to escape the city's exhausting summer heat for southern Minas Gerais, with its much more temperate climate.¹⁰⁹ More importantly, Estienne expected the South American Transcontinental to have a transformative impact on global travel and international trade and communication. The railroad would carry passengers, 'luxury goods', and mail, and shrink the distance between South America's Pacific coast and Europe. On top of that, it would reduce travel time between Europe and South America, as well as between these continents and Australia and Oceania. Estienne acknowledged that, due to the vastness of the South Pacific, the South American Transcontinental could not have the same impact as the Canadian Pacific Railroad in North America, which he expected to become the preferred corridor for transit between Europe and East Asia. Yet, the railroad had the potential to shorten travel between Great Britain and Australia by ten days. Therefore, Estienne concluded, 'a considerable part of travel and mail transportation between Europe and these beautiful countries [Australia and Oceania] will be done, preferably, on the South American Transcontinental'.¹¹⁰ (See Figure 2)

Some years before Estienne published his work, Juan José Castro, an engineer from Uruguay, had developed what was probably the most comprehensive study on railroads in South America at the time. Commissioned by the Uruguayan government, this 600-page volume was sent to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago to showcase the nation's achievements. However, as its title, *Treatise on the South American Railways and the Great International Lines*, suggests, Castro's work was truly global in its outlook. The fact that Castro wrote it in English shows not only that he aimed at an international readership, but also that he believed his work was 'of the greatest interest not only for South America, but for the whole World'.¹¹¹ The book included chapters on the state of railway construction in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Peru.¹¹² Most interestingly, Castro also devoted one chapter each to the Intercontinental Railway and the projected interoceanic line from Recife to Valparaíso, claiming that Uruguay would have a 'most prominent position' in both international railroad projects due

¹⁰⁸Gustavo Estienne, *A Estrada de Ferro Brazil-Pacífico ou o Transcontinental Sul-Americano* (*The Brazil-Pacific Railroad: The South American Transcontinental*) (Rio de Janeiro: Typographia Leuzinger, 1897), 35–6.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 65–6.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 123–4. Translation by the author.

¹¹¹Juan José Castro, *Treatise on the South American Railways and the Great International Lines Published under the Auspices of the Ministry of Foment of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay and Sent to the World's Exhibition at Chicago* (Montevideo: La Nación Steam Printing Offices, 1893), 7.

¹¹²The chapters on Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil are much longer than those on Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Peru.



Figure 2. Map of Uruguay. This 1897 map of Uruguay shows the country's international borders with Argentina and Brazil, its railway lines, and steamship lines from the capital and port of Montevideo to other ports in South America and to Europe and the United States. At the time, engineer Juan José Castro argued that its railway system and ports made Uruguay a potential hub on the projected Intercontinental and Interoceanic Railway lines. Credit: Bradley & Poates Engraver. Uruguay. Washington, DC: International Bureau of the American Republics, 1897. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668495/> (accessed 16 July 2024). Scale: 1: 3, 231, 361.51 Miles to One Inch.

to the development of its railway system and its ports on the Rio de la Plata and the Atlantic. He voiced his support for the inter-American railroad, whose mission, he stated, was 'to consolidate the bonds of American brotherhood, breaking forever the barriers placed by nature against free intercommunication between neighboring countries'.¹¹³ As this quote shows, Castro echoed the rhetoric of pan-Americanism used by US-American leaders and experts and asserted the transformative potential of modern transportation technology and the human domination of nature. Upholding 'the railway and the immigrant' as the most important factors in US-American progress, he hoped that transportation infrastructure and immigration would have the same impact on South America's interior, especially the vast Brazilian hinterland, which he described as 'unexplored desert'. Finally, he credited his countryman Posada with having initiated the idea of an inter-American railroad and lamented that Uruguay had failed to fully support the project at the International American Conference.¹¹⁴

Castro did not make any new proposals for an inter-American railway but merely copied the resolutions of the International American Conference and the reports of the Intercontinental Railway Commission. Nevertheless, he wrote a chapter on the projected South American 'Interoceanic Railway' that was far more substantive than all that had been written about the project before, and he emphasised its benefits: running from Recife to Valparaíso, the 'Interoceanic Railway' and its branch lines promised to unite the railway systems of Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile and transform the economies of these countries. Beyond its impact on South America, the railway would become a global transit corridor: at Recife, it would connect with transatlantic steamers, and at Valparaíso it would connect with transpacific steamers. Convinced that this combination of railway and steamers had the potential to reduce travel time between South America and Europe and between these continents and Australia and New Zealand, Castro explored this aspect in greater depth than Estienne would do a few years later. Castro wrote that sea travel from Lisbon to Recife took ten days, but if shipping companies employed faster steamers, 'such as those of the Cunard, White Star, Inman, Norddeutsche Lloyd or Transatlantique Companies and many others engaged on the western ocean route', the journey could be reduced to six. With the 'Interoceanic Railway' and its connections to faster steamers, travel from Lisbon to Montevideo and Buenos Aires would take nine and a half days and ten and a half days to Valparaíso. Accordingly, travel time and costs from English and French port cities to the Rio de la Plata and the South American Pacific coast could be reduced by half.¹¹⁵ Assessing the Interoceanic Railway's potential to shorten travel times and decrease the costs for the worldwide transportation of passengers, freight, and mail, Castro claimed that it would outshine other global transit corridors:

In whatever way this project be viewed, it is seen that it is destined to produce a revolution in the rapid communications of the world; indicating a route of vaster importance than the opening of the isthmus of Panama or the Suez Canal. It will be superior to the first-named by reason of the shorter time which will be occupied in communication between Australia, New Zealand, Chile, and Peru and the European continent; it will surpass the second on the account of the greater rapidity and comfort of communication between the same places and Great Britain and the Mediterranean and European Atlantic ports ...¹¹⁶

The detail with which Castro presented data and information suggests that this was not just hyperbole but that he truly believed in the potential of transportation technology to impact worldwide trade and travel. What prevented South America from assuming a prominent position

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 417.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 416–18.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 504–5.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 508–9.

in global transportation networks, however, was that the railway systems of its countries had not been designed from an international perspective. Concluding a lengthy discussion of railways and demographic statistics, Castro emphasised that railways in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay had already brought progress, but only on a local level, not least because ‘each nation [had] made its own railway system for its particular wants, without studying the part it should take in the system of universal communication’.¹¹⁷ This assessment was accurate; in fact, large parts of South America remained unconnected even to local and national transportation at the time. And yet, from the perspective of global history, it is important to note that Castro and other South American experts believed that their continent could become a hub of a new global route. People and freight arriving in Valparaíso on transpacific steamers would take the train to Recife and then continue their journey to Europe on transatlantic steamers.¹¹⁸ South American transcontinental railways, in their view, had the potential to bring about nothing less than a profound transformation of global traffic.

Conclusion

This article has shown how, in the late nineteenth century, debates about mobility and transportation played a formative role in the early development of the pan-American movement and how inter-American transportation, despite the United States’ hegemonic aspirations, became a subject of multilateral cooperation, with South Americans reinterpreting the pan-American framework as a mover of global integration rather than hemispheric exclusivity. At the time, US-American promoters of better steamship service and the inter-American railroad advertised these infrastructures as indispensable tools of economic expansion, emphasising their potential to accelerate exports and the ‘opening’ of Central and South America for US-American investments and, by extension, the displacement of Great Britain as the hegemonic foreign power there. Along the way, they reproduced tropes that Emily S. Rosenberg has identified as central tenets of the global expansionism of the United States, especially the ideas that US-American export trade brought international advancement and that technology, introduced by US-American investors, ‘would elevate anyone that embraced it’.¹¹⁹ The belief in the uplift of foreign societies under the guidance of the United States characterised early visions of inter-American travel and tourism. These visions are an important but often overlooked facet of US-Latin American relations. In the United States, supporters of better transportation—for example, the winners in Helper’s railway contest and the members of the Central and South American Commission—encouraged young US-Americans to go south and were likewise eager to bring more people from Central and South America to the United States, notwithstanding their stereotypical views of Latin America. Of course, such ideas are an example of cultural imperialism because these transportation proponents often encouraged exchange initiatives to promote what they perceived to be their own modern and superior culture. Yet, purposefully or not, they also promoted inter-American contact and interaction.

While hegemonic ambitions featured prominently in the early history of inter-American transportation, they interacted with important moments of pan-American cooperation. Indeed, as this article has shown, transportation was a field especially prone to collaboration—a close examination of the debates about intercontinental infrastructure and mobility proves that pan-Americanism was a truly international movement. Beginning in 1884, the extension of steamship connections and the construction of a railroad between North America and South America became undertakings that involved different groups of people from multiple countries.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 531.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 569–70.

¹¹⁹Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 14–28.

Lawmakers, diplomats, businessmen, merchants, journalists, and technical experts from the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America met and engaged in multilateral agreements and cooperation, exchanged information and knowledge, and established committees and commissions to study transportation. At the International American Conference, proponents of ‘better communications’ worked to enhance the circulation of people, goods, information, and ideas, including the very concept of pan-Americanism, throughout the Americas. All of the delegates deemed faster transportation of goods and merchants to be essential to the establishment of closer economic ties and expanded trade. Thus, they perceived the mobilities of people and goods to be intrinsically intertwined.

As Latin American diplomats and engineers engaged in the planning of inter-American transportation, they played an active role in the formation of the pan-American movement. A closer look at this engagement shows two things. First, Latin Americans did more than just participate in these planning processes: while discussing and writing about new steamship and railroad connections, they renegotiated and reinterpreted the meaning of pan-American infrastructure. They understood that the United States aimed at hemispheric hegemony and exclusivity, but that did not keep them from voicing their support for better inter-American transportation. They believed that modern technology brought progress—South Americans, in particular, often mixed this idea with racial elitism—and saw inter-American projects, especially the railroad, as a way to further infrastructural development on local and regional levels, which, in turn, they expected to bring about economic growth and increased mobility. Second, and related to the first point, the planning of inter-American connections was deeply interwoven with worldwide developments and the formation of a global vision of transportation and mobility, particularly in South America. South American experts closely observed the extension of steamship lines and the construction of transcontinental railroads elsewhere, including in North America. Some were sincerely interested in connecting their countries more closely with the United States, as Posada’s cooperation with the Central and South American Commission and Castro’s statements on the railroad and ‘American brotherhood’ show. However, a careful reading of Posada’s proposal for an inter-American railroad and the detailed studies of an interoceanic line puts the actual relevance of the United States into perspective. These studies suggest that what mattered most to South American experts was building connections within and between the countries on their continent and to other parts of the world. While aiming at improved local, national, and regional transportation, they also thought globally and sought to strengthen transoceanic ties and make their continent a hub in global traffic networks. Pan-American infrastructure, then, was but one element in this broader effort toward enhanced connectivity.

Acknowledgements. I wish to thank Andreas Greiner, Simone Lässig, Paulina Leder, Raphael Rössel, Casey Sutcliffe, Lutz Wahnschaffe, Richard Wetzell, and the editors and reviewers of the *Journal of Global History* for their comments and advice on this research.

Financial support. None to declare.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Mario Peters is a research fellow in History of the Americas at the German Historical Institute Washington.