

The REAL Third Rail In American Politics

December 20, 2011 Category: Economics

Download as PDF

OPENING REMARKS:

The American reluctance to embrace mass transit in the form of **public, high-speed, maglev rail-lines** (PHMR) is nothing short of tragic. The fact of the matter is that PHMR would be far more efficient (in terms of both time and energy) than the congested roadways we currently use. Such a system would be a massive improvement over asphalt arteries—clogged as they often are with fiberglass capsules-on-wheels that are impelled by 150-year-old technology (i.e. internal-combustion engines).

This is a matter of common sense. Think about it for a moment: There is a way for tens of millions of people to save tremendous amounts of time and energy by using more efficient transportation technology. Therefore, to not come together—in a common cause—and pursue that opportunity is rather foolish.

For too long now, we Americans have, indeed, been foolish. As the rest of the developed world invests in this superior mode of transportation, the U.S. is stuck in an antiquated mindset: cars, cars, and more cars crammed on ever-expanding stretches of pavement called “highways”. As it turns out, tens of millions of people needlessly waste hundreds of hours per year stuck in traffic.

PHMR would involve a shared project—in which we all participate and in which we all have a stake. Its development would be a nation-wide enterprise to help make our society better. (Better for whom? For all of us.)

AN AUDACIOUS PROPOSAL:

PHMR would be a rail system that travels at a speed of at least 200 mph...though there is no reason that it would need to travel much slower than the speed of sound—say, 760 mph (about 8 mph below mach 1). (Breaking the sound barrier at ground-level would, obviously, entail logistical complications.) For the present essay, I'll use this fastest-case-scenario, understanding that perhaps half the maximum speed may be more realistic (in which case, the reader can simply double the times mentioned). Note that in 2013, Tesla Motors founder Elon Musk proposed a high-speed rail system (dubbed the “Hyper-loop”) that would travel at 800 mph—an indication that the present proposal is not quixotic.

Meanwhile, the “commuter” version of the PHMR would, of course, travel at slower speeds (say, 100 mph) for logistical reasons: shorter distances with more frequent stops (less time to accelerate and decelerate).

The system's trains would be impelled—presumably on a monorail track—by clean energy (via “green” technology: electricity produced by wind, solar, and/or hydro-power). There would be

minimal friction involved, as the train would be suspended above the rail via repelling magnetic fields. The design is simple and relatively straight-forward. It would be safe. It would be cost-effective. It would be convenient. It would be dependable. And, crucially, it would be universally accessible (i.e. not limited to the affluent and well-connected). The hassle of “traffic” around urban centers would become a thing of the past for most Americans—regarding both daily commutes to work from suburbs into cities...and longer-distance (inter-city) travel.

The MRO (maintenance, repair, and operation) of the system would be strictly a matter of public employment. That is to say, the system would be primarily *socialized*. No private interests would be involved. In other words, it would be a public service, not a for-profit venture. Therefore, access would not be determined by socio-economic status. No cabal of “insiders” would stand to gain from the program. (In other words, conflicts of interest would be minimized.) The fact that the system would not be limited to the socio-economic elite would mean that transportation would be democratized. Everyone would benefit in some way—whether directly or indirectly.

[Ancillary note: Socializing *intra*-city mass-transit is also very important (a topic for another essay).]

PHMR would be used for three kinds of things. First, it would be used for nationwide, inter-city (i.e. longer-distance) travel. Second, it would be used for commuting into urban centers from surrounding communities. *Inter-city* PHMR would reduce travel time significantly while *commuter* PHMR would save commuters a significant amount of both time and money every day. Third, the system would be used for long-distance cargo / freight transport—something that would make products (most notably, food) less expensive to distribute. In other words, retail prices would be reduced as a result of such a system. Not only would the system reduce the price of many American products and services, it would making commerce far more efficient.

In sum: Such a system would save the rank and file hard-earned cash while making their personal lives easier. How much time would be saved if most of us rarely had to contend with traffic? How much money would be saved if gas usage and car maintenance were drastically reduced? How many lives would be saved from the elimination of most traffic accidents? Exact figures are impossible to come by. But whatever the answers to such questions may be, they would certainly portend drastic improvement over America’s current state of affairs.

By having a continental network of public, high-speed rail-lines, Americans could all be far more productive on a daily basis. AND they could look forward to train-rides—a wonderful experience for which Americans have lost an appreciation. So the obvious question is: What in heaven’s name are we waiting for? Why don’t we—as a nation—invest in a nation-wide PHMR program?

The answer involves two things: E.V.I. in the I.C.E. That is: entrenched vested interests in industries based on an ancient, dirty technology (the internal combustion engine). The most obvious case of E.V.I. is the petrol business. Therefore, the key to promoting PHMR is overcoming the barriers erected by “big oil”—an endeavor that would require a major movement.

Alas, many Americans can’t seem to grasp the virtue of public infrastructure. The very concept is foreign to us: A collective effort to pool our resources in order to galvanize support and orchestrate a solution from which everyone benefits. The notion of a shared project undertaken for the common good has been rendered anathema by the dominance of Neoliberal economic ideology—the propaganda of which paints any such enterprise as “socialism” (i.e. something we’re

not supposed to want, ever, under any circumstances). This naïve caricature of “social services” has gone on for long enough.

Aficionados of the automobile need not be concerned with the implications of this grand project. Worries about mass transit compromising one’s freedom (regarding mobility) are completely unwarranted. Understandably, many of us experience a feeling of independence by having a personal automobile at our disposal. But how free are we, really, when we must worry about severe traffic problems and often contend with the hassle of parking? A PHMR would not limit us; it would empower us.

Far from restricting our movement, the proposed system would liberate us from the handicaps of road-travel. We would not be in any way constrained by having a public transportation option. After all, we would all still have our beloved cars and trucks at our disposal. Automobiles would remain at our beckon call. Their use would be discretionary—*there for us* whenever we wished to get around the old-fashioned way (as we surely would, whenever we felt like it). Most of us would just have another option for getting from A to B. That’s MORE freedom, not less.

Even for those who would rarely or never use the PHMR, every penny of their taxes that would go toward the program would be well worth it. How so? Because the (positive) neighborhood effects would be profound. For any person still using automobiles, traffic would be drastically reduced. Meanwhile, getting a quart of milk at the grocery store would cost much less. And even if someday oil prices happened to sky-rocket, products and services would remain largely unaffected. Other than oil company executives, PHMR would be in *everyone’s* best interest. Streamlining commerce would affect all of us in a positive way—even those of us who never rode the train.

Fares on a PHMR system would be treated in various ways. For example, those who can prove their trip to be necessary for their employment could be given an automatic pass each way (for all work-days). Most commuters would never have to worry about rush-hour congestion again—and would no longer incur direct expenses for getting to and from their job. Plus, they’d get to work and back home much faster...and with greater ease...and be able to even read a book during their commute. (Think of it: Traveling as fast as possible, while kicking back with a magazine, without ever having to worry about getting in an accident or getting a speeding ticket.) This would free up a tremendous amount of time each day for all participants.

The environmental benefits would be significant as well. Far less pollution would be produced—something we can all agree would be stupendously beneficial.

Imagine—for a moment—traveling, *safely*, in a relatively straight, un-interrupted line, from one city to another, at 760 miles per hour. That’s *15 minutes* between New York City and Boston. No kidding. Add six or seven minutes on each end (for boarding / acceleration and deceleration / de-boarding), and everyone would still be doing the entire trip in under half an hour—safely, dependably, at minimal expense.

Sound too good to be true? This is eminently feasible in the near future. Anyone who says otherwise is being disingenuous. Think about taking only three and a half hours for a trip between New York and L.A...without leaving the ground...for much cheaper than current airline ticket prices. How about ***under an hour*** between Manhattan and downtown Chicago? Boston to Miami: about a 90-minute ride along the eastern seaboard. San Francisco to L.A.: about a half-hour ride along the California coast. (Even if it moves at “only” half the ultimate speed, 380 mph, double those times would still be phenomenal.)

Road-trips are fun—and, of course, would still be optional for those interested in an in-car bonding experience. From time to time, some of us would be looking for an “on the road” adventure rather than maximum travel efficiency. Some of us would still want to experience the thrill of driving from time to time. Splendid. But for everyone else, the rest of the time, being stuck in traffic would be a thing of the past. (Congested arteries may well cease to exist altogether.)

So much gas would be saved, Exxon-Mobile and BP would be forced to transition their business to clean energy procurement and provision...or become obsolete. Is that a bad thing? Saudi Arabia would become irrelevant to the U.S. economy. Is that a bad thing? Groceries at the super-market would be less expensive (due to lower transportation costs). Is that a bad thing? And it would even be much more convenient for the in-laws to visit. Not necessarily a bad thing.

Jobs in any I.C.E.-based industry would surely be reduced. But this would not translate to a net job-loss. Rather, it would entail *job-displacement*—from one industry to another. Truck-drivers, auto-industry manufacturers, and road-maintenance workers would ALL have new (and possibly, more appealing) jobs available to them in the fields oriented around PHMR. (An analogous job displacement would be involved in the transition from the for-profit sickness-treatment industry to universal public healthcare.) The new career-openings would be safer and more secure, as workers would be public employees (presumably in a union), not some cog in a corporate Machine.

Job security? Once there, the PHMR would be a permanent fixture. Emergent roles would offer brand-new opportunities for employment as a public servant. Meanwhile, less of our tax-money would be spent on the expensive MRO of roadways, on highway police presence, and on other costs incurred by the slow, sluggish, unpredictable activity called “driving”.

What would this massive public works project cost? Well, there are actually two different questions to address:

- How much would it cost to *build*?
- How much of the Federal budget would *yearly MRO* require?

The first question is difficult to answer, but one thing is for certain: The R.O.I. (return on investment) would be PHENOMENAL, both socially AND financially. A prudent proposal for development: \$1 trillion in federal outlays over a decade. That’s right: 1,000 billion dollars—about the same amount the Pentagon spent (wasted) during five years of military ventures in Iraq at the beginning of the 21st century. This is not an unreasonable amount to invest once we take into account the stupendous, long-term R.O.I.

As for MRO costs each year: Collectively, it would be far, far less than what taxpayers are CURRENTLY spending (privately) on annual transportation expenses (gas, insurance, maintenance, registration, parking, lost time, etc.) In other words, this is a way to SAVE the rank and file money each year. The long-term advantages for everyone are monumental. Much lower car-insurance costs, longer car lifetimes, fewer trips to the gas station, fewer parking fees, no traffic delays, etc.

The biggest drawback involved would be the necessary invocation of eminent domain during the construction phase. Initially, the program would involve the displacement of various commercial and residential structures along PHMR routes. However, this is a very small price to pay for the fantastic long-term benefits. (All those affected by construction would, of course, be fairly compensated.) The worst thing about PHMR is that it is probably the ugliest acronym ever devised.

We commonly fuss over talking about the proverbial “third rail” in our political discourse...when we haven’t yet even started addressing the most important rail of all. It’s time to start talking.

EPILOGUE: A New Form of Commons:

Mass transit lines are a vital public service in a developed civil society. It should be noted that public spaces are vital to a functioning democracy. Yet, currently, such spaces lacking in our country. What better place to serve as a commons than a public mass-transit hub...open to all?

All PHMR hubs could become crucibles of commerce. Meanwhile, each station would be a new-fangled kind of public space for the 21st century that does even better what cafes and coffee shops try to do (but end up falling far short). PHMR stations would essentially be (secular) social congregation hubs...as well as mass transit hubs. This would break down provincialism and parochialism with every arrival and departure. You can’t get that on the freeway...or in a parking lot.

In this macro-economic vision, rail ports would be important social places, not just mass-transit terminals. That is to say, they would exist as a commons as well as transportation centers. There can be little doubt that the stations would be an enhancement of the public square: a public square for the 21st century. [Note that this would have to be done without either over-commercializing or privatizing the stations. It would be a PUBLIC enterprise.]

Each station could act as a new kind of venue for communal gatherings. Peaceful demonstrations could be organized. Heterogenous crowds would inevitably intermingle. Each day, different-minded people (as well as people from different walks of life) could interact in unexpected (and productive) ways. It would be a daily scene of people meeting people they otherwise may not have ever met. Such encounters are crucial for attenuating group polarization and social fragmentation.

The facilitation of widespread, day-to-day exposure to diversity is at the heart of a (vibrant) civil society. Put another way: Any given rail station would essentially be a stage for deliberative democracy. Imagine, dozens of public venues across the country that would provide physical forums for exchanges amongst a pluralistic citizenry—face to face. PHMR stations would be ideal, as they’d be places with new people coming and going on a daily basis.

Right now, Americans only have hyper-commercialized airports, a few dilapidated train stations, a smattering of neglected public libraries, and some under-funded public parks—all woefully inadequate for the aforesaid purposes. (The closest thing to communal gathering spots for many of us is a coffee shop or shopping mall. This is a sad commentary on American culture, indeed.)

Heck, even bookstores—once worthy candidates for such venues—have gone to the wayside. What we now label “civic centers” are nothing of the sort (it’s an Orwellian term for COMMERCIAL venue). So-called “civic centers” are places that exist for the purpose of for-profit entertainment, not to facilitate participatory democracy.

Shall we have “civil discourse” centers? Yes! They would need to be public venues with universal access. Ergo the virtue of the stations in a nation-wide PHMR system.

America is in desperate need of well-maintained, conveniently accessible public spaces—places that may help all citizens avoid the (current) condition of social fragmentation. Tragically, today, we are a nation in which most people wall themselves off from those not in their internally-homogenous grouping. Indeed, nowadays, most people ensconce themselves in their own insular, memetic enclaves. Such a fragmented society is antithetical to democracy.

It is no secret that Americans routinely partition themselves from “outsiders”—habitually limiting their interactions exclusively to like-minded people (and, as it so happens, to those who are in their own vehicle when traveling from A to B). Automobiles are hardly the ideal “vehicle” for facilitating a vibrant public discourse. In fact, they are hardly the ideal “vehicle” for anything other than burning grotesque amounts of fossil fuels and squandering immense amounts of time.

With the PHMR model, the point is to bring a diverse citizenry together so that they may encounter one-another in non-contentious ways, as fellow citizens (i.e. in ways that they can not while, say, sitting in cars on clogged highways). Such a PHYSICAL shared experience would engender the ethos: “We’re all in this together.”

In sum: Each PHMR stations would be a tribute to the recognition that, ultimately, we’re fellow travelers with a common interest: the public interest. Like public education, public healthcare, and public safety, mass-transit is a positive right. It is precisely the kind of thing on which civil society depends.

Crucially, PHMR stations would not be limited to those in the upper socio-economic echelons. The key is that there would be UNIVERSAL ACCESS. The notion of “equal access regardless of socio-economic status” is something that has been lost in America’s recent hyper-privatization fervor of security, education, and healthcare. By introducing a PHMR system into the American experiment, each person would find that he was far more exposed to (and be able to commiserate with) everyone else. In other words, the network would exist as a place without privilege.

The entire system would be a refuge from the harsh iniquities of the private sector. Stations would be havens where there was no domination, no exploitation, and no marginalization. On a public rail-line, no member of any group would be treated as more / less important than a member of any other group. Everyone would be a V.I.P.: the super-affluent seated next to blue-collar workers. In every station, all people, in all of their splendid diversity, would most fundamentally be fellow citizens—fellow travelers.