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TGRG page

Developments in international transport geography

1. European Union enlargement and emerging research agendas

On 1 May 2004, ten new member states will join the European Union, bringing the lengthy accession process to its conclusion. The opening up of the EU to the east—eight of the new member states are former communist countries from the eastern bloc—will bring significant change to the processes and implementation of European policy making. Transport is no exception to this, since both the provision of transport infrastructure, and the management of transport services, are heavily reliant on EU funding and regulation.

Enlargement therefore provides a unique opportunity to create an innovative new agenda for transport geography research, particularly comparative work between the accession countries and the existing 15 members of the EU. One issue with immediate resonance is that of regulation of transport services, particularly the railways. Indeed, there exists something of an interesting paradox in the recent experiences of railway regulation across Europe. The legacy of the command economy and the resulting inertia in economic reform has left many states in eastern Europe slow to deregulate their railway networks. But just as the policy process had advanced sufficiently to provide the conditions for deregulation to be introduced, a curious situation emerged: experiences in a number of western European countries highlighted the potential risks of deregulation, undermining at least in part, the marketisation orthodoxy that had swept across the east since 1989.

Many of the warnings came for Britain, where the privatisation and fragmentation of the railway industry started in the early 1990s increasingly came to be seen as a failure. As infrastructure procurement costs mushroomed, and reliability collapsed, more and more voices were heard arguing for a reversal of the whole privatisation project. As the British rail industry entered a period of crisis following a number of high profile accidents, the Dutch government called a halt to the commercialisation of Nederlandse Spoorwegen (NS), citing the British experience as one of the factors in their decision. And more recently, the loss of traffic on the network of Deutsche Bahn (DB) in Germany following the decision to introduce a marketised fares structure again illustrates the potential pitfalls of service deregulation. It remains to be seen whether the process of deregulation will regain its momentum, as several countries across Europe, including both the accession countries and existing EU members such as Italy and Sweden, remain committed in principle to the further commercialisation and privatisation of their railway networks. The impact of enlargement and the resultant changes on the allocation of EU funding streams for transport adds yet another layer of complexity to the analysis of transport policy, and is in itself a highly important area for future research to address, but which will also affect the extent to which the processes of deregulation are progressed.

2. RGS-IBG Annual Conference, London, September 2003

The issues of EU enlargement and deregulation will be discussed at length during the TGRG's sessions as the new-style RGS-IBG conference in London in September. The TGRG is fortunate to once again welcome our German sister organisation AK Verkehr as a partner in our conference modules. The two groups have worked together to assemble an international programme of very high quality, which reflects the mission of the conference to open up academic geography in the UK to new audiences around the world. As well as colleagues from the UK and continental Europe, we are pleased to welcome contributions from North America and Australasia. It is the intention of the TGRG that the London sessions will be used to generate new international transport geography research, addressing the issues raised by EU enlargement in particular, but also in other areas were there is clear opportunity for further international comparative research. We hope that in addition to the discussion and exchange in the formal sessions in London, the new 'compact' conference structure will enable a greater degree of informal contact between colleagues, and that new collaborative research agendas will arise from the meeting. With the

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2004 IGU Congress also attracting a global audience of geographers to the UK, the TGRG welcomes suggestions for potential research projects and papers for the Glasgow IGU. If you would like to become involved, please do not hesitate to contact the TGRG at the address below.

Iain Docherty
Department of Urban Studies
University of Glasgow
25-29 Bute Gardens
Glasgow G12 8RS, Scotland, UK
Tel.: +44-141-330-3668; fax: +44-141-330-4983
E-mail address: i.docherty@socsci.gla.ac.uk