

The rail and road network in Spain does not follow economic criteria, but central

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This shows inside the train station AVE, Atocha (Madrid). Credit: Dave A.

A researcher at the University of Barcelona has examined the construction of surface transportation infrastructure in Spain from 1720 to 2010. The economist and author of the study, Germà Bel explains how both the construction of train lines and state highways in Spain since the 18th century has been based radially around Madrid as the political capital and not on the commercial activity of routes.

"In Spain, infrastructure policy tends to follow a national construction model comprising connections that converge in one point – the political capital. This mainly happens as of the 23rd April, 1720 with the implementation of a new ruling that drives centralization by prioritizing radial roads for administrative reasons, not according to traffic flow," explains Germà Bel, lead author of the study published in the *Business*

History journal.

The article highlights that in other countries such as Germany, Italy and the UK, and even France, infrastructure policy is linked to the economic and productive activity. In other words, the type of infrastructure such as the temporal sequence in which the building takes into account criteria of economic activity and productivity of the economy.

As the researcher clarifies, "the fact that Spanish infrastructure construction tends to be more economic and productive use, does not mean that investment is made solely in and around Madrid but that route financing comes from differing sources."

In this respect, Germà Bel states that when funding was needed from the user, by tolls or private levies, investment has been made in routes with commercial activity. "In this way the first toll motorways were built across the Mediterranean Corridor and the Valle del Ebro," says the researcher. However, on an instrumental level, when their use does not correspond to commercial activity, they have generally been built using funds from the state budget.

"Public money has been systematically used to make infrastructures radially converge in Madrid. As a general rule they are funded mainly from the state budget, including their upkeep, and they are generally older. If for whatever reason, like a recession, infrastructure construction undergoes a rational rethink, it is much more transversal (not radial) and leans towards the corridors where productive activity is higher," explains the researcher.

AVE: the high-speed train with the longest and least commercial route

The geographical centralization of transport services also occurs in the case of the train. In particular, the high-speed AVE train has a radial

extension policy expressly declared on the 25 April, 2000 by the then president of the Spanish government, José María Aznar. He stated that the focal point of its infrastructure policy was to create "a high-speed rail network that in ten years time would connect all of Spain's provincial capitals with the centre of the country in four hours." (Aznar, 2000).

[Germà Bel](#) asserts that "An example of this is that, along the Barcelona-Valencia, for example, that in the 80's was the most densely-line traffic continues without high speed, and still single track sections on the Iberian gauge ride."

Historically however, the first commercial trains linked Barcelona with Mataró (1848), Sama with Langreo (1852/56), Valencia with Xàtiva (1854) and Madrid with Aranjuez (1851). The latter was the only line built using public money.

The expert stresses that demand for rail services is small compared to other pioneering countries despite it have the most railway tracks in kilometres in Europe. As the [researcher](#) points out, "AVE passengers in [Spain](#) represent just 6% of passengers in Japan, less than 20% in France and 30% in Germany."

More information: Germà Bel, "Infrastructure and nation building: The regulation and financing of network transportation infrastructures in Spain (1720 -2010)", *Business History* 53 (5): 688 – 705, 2011.

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