

Reforming as remembering: exploring the continuities of industry reform in the case of British Rail

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Abstract

Industry reforms, embodied in various governmental inquiries into the affairs of the construction industry, have become a regular feature in Britain. Underpinning these reforms is a common agenda of performance improvement, where the industry is continuously urged to deliver a better built environment more quickly and in line with technological change. Each reform appears to be motivated by a desire to disrupt the status quo as the industry moves forward into an often-positive future triggered by episodes of change. However, treating each reform as episodic change implies that change is an event that is 'out there' to be made sense of *over* time, rather than experienced 'in here' as the industry metamorphoses and changes *in* time. Inspired by Henri Bergson's ideas of duration and the multiplicity of time, an alternative interpretation of industry reforms is one of continuous *changing* rather than discontinuous *change*. This article draws upon archival research into the reforms of the British railway industry, as we scrutinise the minutiae behind the many inquiry reports since the 1960s. The findings reveal that, far from looking ahead into a better future, there is more of a continuity of remembering the past when undertaking industry reforms. This ever-extending past is situated in the intensification of current debates into public-private-partnerships, where the rhetoric of collaboration is more about returning to the glorious past of coordination rather than blind faith in the profits of privatisation.

Keywords: archival research, changing, industry reform.

1. Introduction

Given that the construction industry plays a pivotal role as an underpinning sector in any national economy (see e.g. UK Contractors Group, 2009), it is unsurprising to find a great deal of government interest into the affairs of the sector. In the UK, the construction industry has, over the past two decades, engaged in a series of government-led initiatives aimed at improving the performance of the industry starting with the often-cited Latham (1994) and

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Egan (1998) reports (see e.g. Adamson and Pollington, 2006; Smyth, 2010, and; Green, 2011). These inquiries tend to tell of a similar tale; that is, the industry is underperforming, especially when compared with manufacturing, and that reforms are necessary to bring about better performance (see e.g. Green, 2011). Typically, recommendations are made for the industry to adopt new working practices such as integrated team-working and better collaboration to drive improvements. Supporters of such reforms have often been inspired by popular ideas in the 1990s of business process reengineering and lean production techniques (see e.g. Womack *et al.*, 1990, and; Hammer and Champy, 1993). Consequently, efforts have tended to centre on advancing performance measurement frameworks for the industry (see e.g. Cooke-Davies, 2002; Beatham *et al.*, 2004, and; Chan *et al.*, 2004).

Critics have, however, observed that the continuous improvement agenda is far from being a contemporary feature in the UK construction industry. Murray and Langford (2003), for instance, traced the various inquiries about UK construction since the post-War period and discovered a number of themes that keep recurring over time. Ostensibly, calls for better communication and coordination between design and construction and a move away from the 'adversarial culture' of the industry in order to drive efficiency gains have all been longstanding, well-trodden aspects of industry reform. Thus, it can be seen that little has changed of reforms in the UK construction industry. Industry reforms have certainly been argued to have limited impact in the construction industry. Bresnen and Marshall (2001) noted the difficulties of changing working practices because the diffusion of new ideas, especially those imported from other industries like manufacturing, often fails to account for the contextual specificities of construction. Furthermore, Green (2011) found the efficiency agenda somewhat tiresome; he argued that the exhortations of continuous improvement and industry reforms seem meaningless, and that the only thing that appears to have changed is the circumstance within which construction operates.

Indeed, as Green (2011) asserted, reforms of the construction industry have often focussed myopically on rational processes of managing performance as if the industry existed in a vacuum devoid of its institutional context (see also Winch, 2003, and; Adamson and Pollington, 2006). By downplaying the institutional context of industry reforms, there is often a sense that continuous improvement is simply a managerial process where firms in the industry have control over their own destinies. So, reforms tend to be conceptualised as discrete change programmes where rhetorical moves are made in the present to dismiss the ills of the past and promise a brighter future. It is our contention, in this article, that such interpretations of industry reforms are inadequate on two counts. Firstly, working practices in the industry are shaped by, and constantly shaping, broader institutions that govern the sector (e.g. the state, markets etc.). Therefore, the analysis of industry reforms cannot simply be reduced to managerial ideas of change and continuous improvement. Rather, there is a need for closer scrutiny of the complementary and contesting institutional agendas that transcend the boundaries of construction companies. Secondly, the tendency to view industry reform as change moving forward towards a perfect future (e.g. Pitsis *et al.*, 2003) raises questions about the assumptions of time. As Chan (2012) suggested, drawing on Henri Bergson's (1913) ideas about social change, time is often misconstrued as merely a linear entity embodied in clock-time. Consequently, the focus has largely been on time moving forward into the future, rather than a deeper appreciation of the ever-extending past

and the pace of present life. Thus, in examining industry reform as a change process, there is a need to draw on memories of the past to supplement current emphasis on the future.

In this article, we turn our attention to the analysis of public-private-partnerships as the centrepiece of reform of the UK construction industry over the last twenty years. Much has been written about the prospects of how more effective ways of collaboration between the public and private sectors can yield better performance in the construction industry. Yet, we draw on an ongoing archival analysis of the British railway industry to demonstrate how the seeds of public-private-partnerships had been sown during the 1960s, and how reform tends to have less of a performative rationale and more of an ideological, often-emotional imperative that is mostly ignored in the analysis of collaborations in construction. This article is organised as follows. In the next section, we draw upon Henri Bergson's ideas about time and social change to offer a critique of the way change is perceived in the study of industry reforms in the construction industry. The central argument is that one needs to move beyond the duality of change over time – change as a thing or change as a process – towards understanding the situated experiences of industry reform in time. The archival research method of analysing the case of the British railway industry in the 1960s is then outlined before a discussion of preliminary findings is presented. The findings point critically to the limits of viewing industry reform as change moving positively forward into the future, and suggest a need to conceptualise change as an integral process of remembering the past in the ever-moving present.

2. Time and continuous improvement: moving beyond the duality of change

Scholars analysing industry reforms can be broadly split into two main camps. On the one hand, proponents of reforms emphasise change as a prescriptive, managerial process where the measurement and improvement of performance is a key object to be attained. On the other hand, critics of the reform agenda in the construction industry often highlight the challenges that prevent the transference of acontextual prescriptions of interventions that promises a better future. Yet, both proponents and critics of industry reform in construction share a common vantage point. That is, both camps tend to view change and their effects as a linear, episodic phenomenon that is “out there” waiting to be analysed, rather than experienced “in here” (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001). Even in Green's (2011) very rich institutional analysis of industrial change in the UK construction industry, the various episodes tend to be carved up in to episodes of decades moving forward. Therefore, reforms are often analysed as discrete phases of change that starts with a (bad) past, (challenging) present, and (promising) future, with proponents focussing rationally on the cause and effects of positive change and critics emphasising the problems of the change process.

However, there has been, at least in wider organisational and management studies, growing dissatisfaction with the ontological and epistemological standpoints taken in the production of knowledge about organisational change (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). Pettigrew *et al.* (2001) claimed that much research on organisational change have, in the main, accounted for static states and urged for more fine-grained analyses of the experiences of change as a discontinuous process to be undertaken. Weick and Quinn (1999) argued that the focus

should be diverted to ongoing change, or *changing*, in organisations. Chia (2002), inspired by Henri Bergson's thinking about time, argued against the way knowledge about change has become a "commodified 'product'; a thing that can be 'assembled', 'rearranged', 'packaged', 'transferred' and 'consumed' (p. 865)." Thus, change can not only be understood through its visible effects over time, but also by the everyday lived experiences of all those concerned. According to Barley (2008), organisational theorists have largely ignored "the throws of everyday life (p. 510)."

To transcend episodic moments of change and account more fully for the experiences of ongoing change, there is a need to see beyond the duality of prescription and process and embrace broader understandings of time. As Chan (2012) drawing on Henri Bergson's (1913) ideas about social change stressed that scholars in the field of construction management have mainly limited the understanding of time to chronological, linear notion of clock-time where time is usually separated in to discrete episodic moments moving forward. According to Bergson (1913), time is much more multiplex than clock-time suggests; there is oftentimes a heterogeneous array of temporal perspectives in (organisational) life, and that time is not only moving forward, but extending backwards to the past and embracing the ever-moving (and emotional responses to the) present. Arguably, in studying industry reforms in the construction industry, the extensive past as each reform is introduced and the emotional responses to the present day are aspects that often get downplayed in the analysis of change. It is with this in mind that this ongoing study seeks to account for through an archival analysis of reform in the British railway industry.

3. Research method

As argued above, the analysis of reforms in the construction industry has hitherto ignored the role of the ever-growing past and emotions of ever-moving presence of ongoing change. Thus, a conscious effort was made to ensure that the study focuses less on the rhetoric of continuous improvement and performance management that has indoctrinated current understanding of industry reforms. Rather, an attempt is made to return back to history to re-examine the institutional dynamics of the reform agendas of the past. The choice of studying the case of British Rail is two-fold. Firstly, there is contemporary interest in railway infrastructure in the UK, given debates surrounding the viability of High-Speed Rail. Yet, as the story unfolds, the railway sector in the UK sets a useful scene for unveiling the chequered past of a public service that has been through a series of reforms dating back to the 1960s that saw the encouragement of private sector involvement. Secondly, as discussed earlier, there is a need for more fine-grained analyses of institutional dynamics of industrial change that goes beyond the boundaries of the construction sector. Thus, the choice of British Rail as an archival case study is considered appropriate because rail transport projects are often fraught with the complexities of socio-economic and political interactions (see e.g. Galilea and Medda, 2010, and; Chi and Javernick-Will, 2011).

Archival research is rarely used as a method to analyse the intricacies of industry reform, even though it offers the possibilities for researchers to detect the minutiae of what went on in the reform process. At the same time, the archival research method can be extremely time-consuming and unwieldy, resulting in the researcher feeling lost in the masses of

potentially relevant data. To help develop the narrative for the archival study, we identified the Beeching (1963) report into the reorganisation of British Rail as the starting point for the data collection and analysis. The Beeching (1963) report represented a key moment in the history of British Rail, and one of the early examples of reform of public services that resulted in the closure of one-third of the railway infrastructure in the UK. To help piece together the institutional dynamics of this reform, and to explore the emotional responses as the reform was undertaken, the team amassed a range of data sources from various archives (including the British Library, the Railway Museum and Kew Gardens), including de-classified notes, articles from national, regional and local press, draft notes to inquiry reports and White papers etc. to examine the 5Ws (Who were involved, What went on, Where it all happened, Why it happened, and When events took place) and 1H (How did the reform take place) of this momentous milestone in the history of the British Rail. The purpose of the archival data collection analysis was to help provide a snapshot of the socio-political and economic context of the time (see Hill, 1993). The findings will be discussed in the next section.

4. Some early findings

In this section, the analysis of the triggers for, and consequences of, the Beeching (1963) report will be presented with a view to trace the dynamics and emotional responses to change.

Triggers for reform of British Rail in the 1960s: At first glance, reform of the British Rail appears to follow the convention of rational calls for performance improvement. Consider the following quote extracted from the introduction to the White Paper by the Ministry of Transport (1960), which sets the scene for the reorganisation of the railway infrastructure and the inquiry led by Beeching (1963).

“The heart of the problem is in the railways. They are a great national enterprise and a vital basic industry. They employ half a million people and represent an investment of nearly £1,600m, which is growing by more than £100m each year [...] The railways are now in a grave financial plight. They are a long way short (by about £60m a year) of covering even their running costs (Ministry of Transport, 1960: 3).”

Thus, the reader is drawn to the ‘fact’ that the railways is the central problem. Despite the inherent contradiction found in this quote, where compliments were paid to the economic significance of the railway infrastructure, the focus is nevertheless placed firmly on reining in the growing costs of running the railway system. A rather strong message is then asserted in the report, stressing that:

“Sweeping changes will be needed (Ministry of transport, 1960: 3).”

The tone of this statement gives some sense of the rhythm and pace of change at that time. Reform was not only inevitable but also urgent. Of course, the concern underlying this urgency was not simply about improving the efficiency of this nationalised undertaking. The efficiency claim was arguably a rhetorical device aimed at justifying the means to the reform,

masking a growing political ideology that was in favour of reducing government expenditure and increasing private enterprise. Indeed, the following quote illustrates just how, in these early days of seeking private-sector efficiencies, tensions existed between the desire to seek alternative, non-public-sector ways of organising public services and the recognition of the role British Railway plays in terms of a social good:

“The activities of the British Transport Commission as at present constituted are so large and so diverse that it is virtually impossible to run them effectively as a single undertaking [...] There has also been [...] confusion in judging between what is economically right and what is socially desirable (Ministry of Transport, 1960: 4).”

As the reorganisation moves forward, the Beeching (1963) report recommended for a rational carving up of the railway infrastructure. It became clear that official review of British Rail followed a typical process of managerial change, where a troubled past is framed as the point of origin and the promises of a better, bolder, more competitive future logically laid out.

“The thought underlying the whole Report is that the railways should be used to meet that part of the total transport requirement of the country for which they offer the best available means, and that they should cease to do things for which they are ill suited [...] The proposals for reshaping the railways are all directed towards giving them a route system, a pattern of traffics, and a mode of operation such as to make the field which they cover one in which their merits predominate and in which they can be competitive (The Beeching Report, March 1963; p. 57-58).”

Reactions to the Beeching (1963) report and emotions in that time: Whereas the reorganisation of the British Rail was meant to reap economic benefits of cost savings and increased ‘profitability’, the responses from the travelling public and local businesses relying on the railway infrastructure spoke of a different story. So, whilst the Beeching (1963) considered the economic effects of reshaping the railway infrastructure for British Rail, the reorganisation did not anticipate the unintended effects on the contraction of local businesses. Consider the two quotes extracted from a research report into the perceptions of members of the public in Norwich to the Beeching (1963) report.

“Some people, especially farmers, have suffered financial loss because of the closing of a branch line. Not surprisingly, they are very resentful. Other people bear a grudge against the Railways because their branch lines, though still open at least for the immediate present, are so inconvenient (Research Projects Limited, 1963: 10).”

“People deduce what British Railways think of the passengers by the way the employees are dressed, the way they do their job, the way the trains are cared for, the sort of amenities provided on the train. It all adds up to the fact that the Railways don’t care much about the passengers – certainly not as much as they used to years ago (Research Projects Limited, 1963: 3).”

Reactions were also rife in the national press with caricatures of the privatisation of the railway industry commonplace in broadsheet newspapers (see Figure 1 below). Letters were

also sent in by members of the public to voice concerns over the shrinkage of the railway provision. Anger and resentment appear to characterise the mood of the times. Consider this letter from the Managing Director of a logistics company published in the *Times* newspaper in November 1964:

“At the time of the railway reorganization, the new highest Railway Executive issued instructions, limiting the number of containers in various railway stations so that each container was to be kept in constant use – in theory sound, but in practice unworkable for the daily fluctuation in trade.” Letter by Robert Fisher, Managing Director of Robert Fisher (Packing and Shipping) Times: 3 November 1964

This subsequently led to an internal response by Eric Merrill, Public Relations Manager at British Rail. Note especially the gravity of the situation demonstrated by the message ‘This is not a PR problem’ underscored by Eric as depicted in Figure 1 below.

“I am particularly worried about containers. The demand for them is greater than the supply – and we have surely contributed knowingly to this demand by what we have said and published and are still saying and publishing about railway services to-day and in the future [...] As the Board’s policy is not to build any more conventional containers the shortage will presumably continue until Liner Trains relieve the pressure. What worries me is that by that time we may well have lost a great deal of business and, in the process, engendered a lot of ill-will. Mr. Fisher’s letter is a symptom of this. This is not a PR problem” Letter from Eric Merrill, public relations manager to the British Railways Board – 6 November 1964.

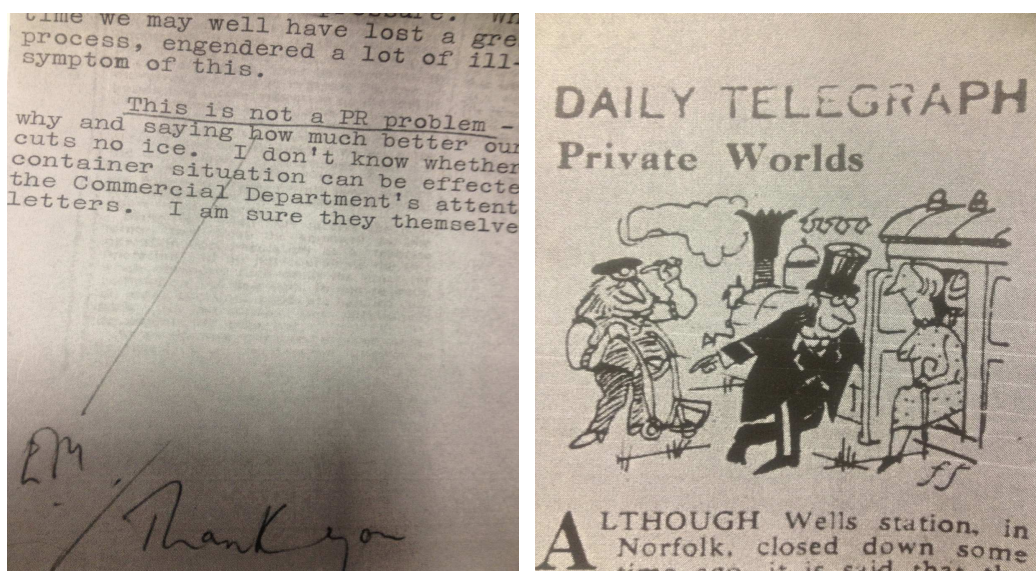


Figure 1. Reactions to railway closures following the Beeching (1963) report. (Left: Extract of memorandum sent by Eric Merrill to the British Railways Board, 6 November 1964; Right: Graphic published in the Daily Telegraph, 31 October 1964).

Yet, it would be naive to think that such problems were not anticipated during the review process. Indeed, we uncovered numerous letters sent in by various business representatives warning against the proposed recommendations contained in the draft Beeching (1963) report, including the two quotes below on how closure of railway lines could lead to detrimental effects on a growing tourist market:

"The seaside resorts such as Bridlington and Scarborough will close down. Anyone who wants to go from Hull to Scarborough will have to go via Selby" Yorkshire Post – 16th March 1963

"Against what has been called the realities of railway finance, it must place, with such force as it can convey, other realities which are equally important to the national interest. [...] In particular the Board would urge second thought on the cutting of the links between Girvan and Stranraer, and Stranraer and Dumfries. These closures would have a disastrous effect not only on the fast growing holiday trade of the south-western counties but on the tourist traffic to the north of Ireland by the short Stranraer to Larne route." Response by the Scottish Tourist Board to the draft Beeching Report.

Yet, it would seem from the following quote that the government of the day had already committed a decision on de-nationalising the railways whether there was a business case to be made outside the confines of British Rail to account more fully the consequences on the wider economy. Thus, reforms are not always about upholding the values of economic efficiency and continuous improvement, but rather driven by ideological concerns.

"The Holding Company had been going into this to see how far they could replace the services [...] Sir Philip Warter added that it was vital not to allow local authorities to run subsidised bus services in substitution for the closed railway lines. If there was done they would do it where they thought fit and it would ruin the chance of the Holding Company and their associates providing comprehensive coverage." Extract from the note of the Minister's meeting with Sir Philips Warter and Sir Reginald Wilson (Chairman and Managing Director of the Transport Holding Company) on Wednesday, 13th March, 1963.

Opposition also came from within government, as shown in the following quote taken from a response by a regional county council expressing concerns over the reorganisation of railway infrastructure and spillover effects on other modes of transportation.

"[...] unless major road scheme in this area are expedited, the road situation will become chaotic and desperate, a situation which can only lead to more congestion and more accidents, and would seriously jeopardise Lancashire's industrial future by constricting goods and business traffic." Response by Lancashire County Council in a letter to the British Railways Board, 6 August 1963.

The consequences of Beeching (1963) and the precursor to the next reform: As can be seen from the variety of responses to change ignited by the Beeching (1963) report, the emotional journeys in the time of the Beeching reform certainly seemed tumultuous. There was a great deal of resistance before and during the reshaping of the railway infrastructure in the early

1960s. Yet, it would appear that resistance was downplayed in the policy-makers' pursuit of the rhetoric of economic efficiencies for British Rail... although not for long! Still, the immensely negative reception to the Beeching reform meant that the pace of change intended by the Ministry of Transport (1960) had to be somewhat arrested. Notice, for example, the change of tone in the following White Paper published in 1967. Here again, the importance of commercial needs is still underlined. However, note that social needs start playing a more prominent position in the revised government intent. Such conciliatory tone provides evidence that reform is not simply a stand-alone episodic moment of change as times move towards a better future. Rather, there is often an emotive element of remembering the pitfalls of the immediate past. Thus, it is equally about avoidance of the troubled past as it is about rationally trekking into the future.

*"The Government believes that, if our transport system is to **meet the social** as well as the economic needs of the country, we shall need a substantial railway system for some time to come [...] The Government's first problem, therefore, was to determine the size and shape of the basic route system to meet both commercial and social needs. This was essential so that management could concentrate on the **improvement rather than the contraction** of the system, and provide a **first class service to the public**, as well as an **assured and worthwhile future for railwaymen** [...] It reflects the necessary running of lines which no longer meet modern traffic needs but calls a halt to the drastic reductions which would have been necessary under the terms of the 1962 Transport Act. (Ministry of Transport, 1967: 1-2; **emphasis added**)."*

Further evidence of how social issues become more significant is demonstrated in the extracts below, taken from HM Treasury's (1967) review of the state of nationalisation:

"4. In the six years since 1961 much has happened [...] Despite contractions in one or two industries, the overall capacity of the nationalised sector has been growing fast to meet increased demand [...] In consequence, calls upon scarce resources of manpower and capital are now very heavy [...] the need to measure these calls, to assess priorities, and to allocate resources upon an economically and socially rational basis has become even more important (HM Treasury, 1967)."

"7. Investment projects must normally show a satisfactory return in commercial terms unless they are justifiable on wider criteria involving an assessment of the social costs and benefits involved, or are provided to meet a statutory obligation (HM Treasury, 1967)."

5. Implications and conclusions

In this article, we have attempted to reconceptualise industry reforms through the archival case study of the British Railway Industry. We argued that reforms are often less about rational processes of change moving forward. Rather, reforms are often entangled by ideological concerns hidden away by rhetorical projection of a seemingly better future. We considered how, in the case of the Beeching reforms of the British Railway Industry, that reforms are much more continuous than episodic. Thus, given how one reform often leads on to another reform, change can sometimes be more about remembering the ever-

extending past than it is about moving positively into the future. Although the process of change – carved up in episodic moments of a chequered past, moving present, and an optimistic future – was detected in this archival narrative, we also saw how time embodied in temporally lived experiences of those involved (and affected) can serve to accelerate or arrest the pace of change. These different interpretations enrich our accounts of how institutional change happens (see e.g. Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2012). Our conclusions here suggest that reforms are not only (and often less about) rational economic performance bounded narrowly by a particular interest group within a sector. Rather, reforms are emotional as demonstrated by the responses of anger and resentment directed at the changing railway infrastructure in the 1960s, and that resistance matters a great deal.

So, what relevance does this historical case of the British Railway Industry have for our understanding of construction reforms? Clearly, the seeds of privatisation and the dismantling of public-sector provision of infrastructure were sown at the turn of the 1960s. It is interesting to note that Green (2011) appeared not to have placed much emphasis on the 1960s in his account of industry reforms. Indeed, he suggested a relatively calm decade for British construction, as he described,

“Expectations in the 1960s were indeed very different from those of today and it is perhaps in the area of employment stability where the greatest contrast lies. (Green, 2011: 12).”

The analysis of the reforms of the British Railway Industry presented in this article suggests an earlier account of institutional change that took place in Harold Macmillan’s administration in the late 1950s/early 1960s. The reality was certainly not one of stability. And so, the understanding of the relationship between the public and private as applied in the construction industry cannot really be understood fully without tracing the broader past that led us to the moving present. It is contended that the study of reforms from the standpoint of a particular industry or sector at a moment in time is not entirely adequate. Instead, there needs to be much wider consideration of the institutional context within which a particular industry operates. This necessitates an appreciation of the socio-economic and political changes surrounding the reforms, both in time (temporally) and over time (episodically).

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