

'Feeding the peoples of Europe" : transnational food transport infrastructure in the early cold war, 1947-1960

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Biography 4: Mobilizing Europe's Capital

Frank Schipper

There have always been those who thought Europe would best be governed by uniting Eurocrats in splendid isolation. The correspondence of Paul Hoffman, Administrator of the Economic Cooperation Administration steering the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction, contains a letter claiming 'Europe needs a Canberra center, viz. a place where people from all states of Europe would live together all the year round in order TO STUDY how to further international connections.' A loan of 1 million dollars would allow constructing the right place; the author suggested Corsica as an adequate choice. Yet often proposals for housing Europe's decision-making institutions concerned urban settings rather than marginal outposts. Becoming the residence for such organizations had a profound impact on the fabric of urban infrastructures and simultaneously gave occasion to a discussion on connections between the would-be capital and its continental hinterland.

If people were asked to identify the capital of Europe today, it is increasingly likely they would pick Brussels as their answer. The EU's complex spatial set-up with dispersed capital functions concentrated in Luxembourg and Strasbourg and countless agencies scattered around the continent notwithstanding, the Belgian capital seems to be emerging victorious out of a hard-fought competition among several contenders. In the beauty contest among the various candidate capitals of the 1950s, being a 'node' enhanced the chances of being chosen. Maps displaying the excellent air or railway links supported the bids of Nice, Strasbourg and Stresa. The massive public works projects preparing Brussels for the Expo '58, including major road works and the improvement of Zaventem airport, supported the Belgian ambition to host the European organizations.

In many ways, Geneva was Brussels' predecessor in the period prior to the Second World War. Infrastructural connections from and to Geneva were a primary concern for the League of Nations Secretariat and its various technical committees. In November 1924 Athanase Politis, vice-chair of the subcommittee for transport by rail, reported on his participation in the European conference on timetables in Naples. The subcommittee members had condemned

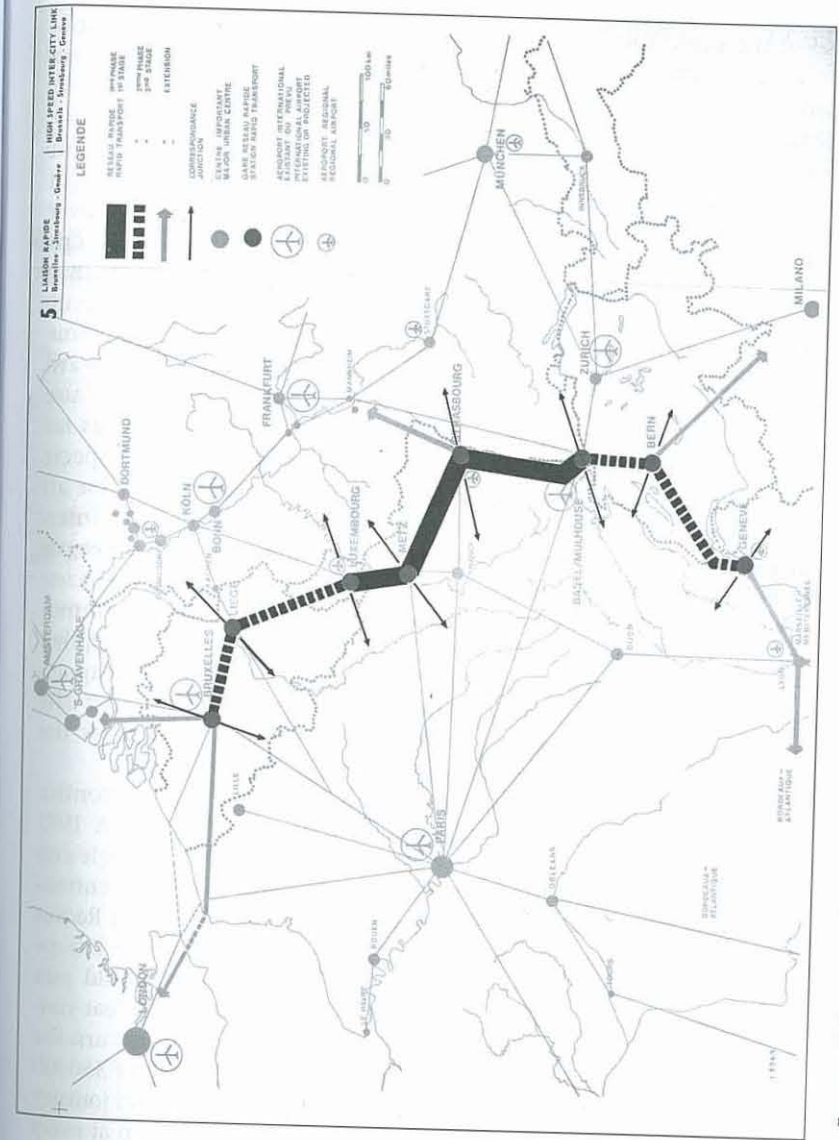


Figure B4.1 Proposed 'Eurometro' link, 1972
Source: Courtesy of the Council of Europe.

existing connections as 'inadequate' and 'inconvenient'. In Naples Politis therefore urged the delegates of the railway administrations to improve rail-road services between Geneva and the 'principal capitals of Europe' to facilitate the arrival and departure of those who came to Geneva 'to place at the disposal of the world their knowledge and experience'. Although infrastructural connections gradually improved over the years, the city of peace was by no means placed 'on an entirely equal footing with the great capitals'.

The main function of the League being the maintenance of peace worldwide, communications with Geneva under exceptional circumstances in 'times of emergency' acquired special importance. In 1925 the League had expressly stated that member states were obliged 'to do all in their power to facilitate communications with the League in every form' during a crisis. The League's Committee for Communications and Transit subsequently received instructions in 1927 to examine the subject. (Radio-)telegraphic connections in particular would enable the Council, the League's supreme decision-making body, to 'collect opinions forthwith' and 'put forward suggestions'. In February 1932 the League put a wireless station into use at Prangins in the environs of Geneva. It enabled communications as far as Argentina and Australia. Next to telecommunications, transport aspects were worth considering as well. Special measures were formulated for all modes of transport. As soon as the normal diplomatic machinery of international relations broke down, road vehicles in the service of the League should bear distinctive identification marks like a flag or an S.d.N. (*Société des Nations*) plate. All details on their itinerary should be swiftly communicated to the governments of the states to be traversed. The same applied to aircraft using the facilities of the improved aerodrome near the League's premises. Geneva's connective capabilities would thus ensure that the Secretariat would optimally keep pace with developments and allow the League to strive for a solution to any conflict that flared up.

Infrastructures even had a quality that allowed overcoming the continuing squabbles over which city to choose as a European capital. A 1972 Council of Europe report declared it would be artificial to pick a single city as a capital and warned against the 'dangerous tendency towards centralisation and concentration'. In its stead, a committee chaired by Mr Radius promoted the creation of 'Europolis', a polycentric capital for the Europe of tomorrow. A high-speed intercity link called 'Eurometro' would join Brussels, Luxembourg, Strasbourg, Basle and Geneva in a polynuclear conurbation. Eurometro's cutting-edge air cushion technology would turn the Brussels–Geneva corridor into a vanguard macropolis. At a speed of 350 kilometres per hour, the new infrastructure would shrink the overland journey to a trip of just 2 hours and 10 minutes, allowing a 2-minute stop at every station. It would finally 'put an end to the pointless disputes concerning "the Capital" of Europe'.

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