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The privatisation of British Rail and its impact on staff



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Picture from Ken Loach's movie, *The Navigators*, 2001.

Introduction

Just after Second World War, the Labour Government of Clement Attlee began a large nationalisation plan of Britain's strategic sectors to rebuild the country after the war. Heavy industry, mines, energy, telecommunications or even transportation went into Government's hands. It is also in that same context that the National Health Service saw the light : it was the beginning of the Welfare State. Concerning railway transportation, British Railways, who became British Rail in 1965, was created in 1948 by the melting of big private railway companies. Before that date, the British territory was served by different private companies, each one having its main station in the capital city. That heritage is still visible in London where there is no central station but several dead end stations. British Rail, the new nationalised company quickly had to face the fierce competition of road transportation and many restructurations. The arrival of Margaret Thatcher 10, Downing Street, succeeded by John Major, marked the return of the Conservatives. If British Rail seemed to escape the massive privatisation waves of the 1980s, the nationalised company nevertheless had to behave almost as a private one. For British Rail, a long march to privatisation began right to the Railways Act of 1993 that put an end to the nationalised railways. The aim of this work will be to show how the staff employed by British Rail lived that privatisation process, what the new working habits adopted by the company were and how the strong corporative spirit of the railways survived or not. Britain's railway case is particularly interesting because it represents a unique experience in Europe in terms of railway reformation. To this day, Britain's railways remain a fascinating textbook case in the actual railway context in Europe.

I - A long march to privatisation during the British Rail years

1 -The Beeching Report : the decline of British Rail

Since the end of the Second World War, road transportation won over the railway. Lorries became more efficient and faster, allowing to move heavier loads. The road network also improved thanks to numerous investments that allowed an important development of traffic. For some sectors of industry, road transportation became better than train for its greater flexibility. Indeed, for small or medium size shipments, a lorry can offer door-to-door service whereas by train, you have to go to a station both to send and receive the freight. The cost of transportation is also reduced by needing less middlemen. Nevertheless, the railway remains competitive in mass transportation for heavy industry for which a great quantity of goods has to be both supplied and sent. Usually, large industrial complexes are directly connected with the railway network through private sidings, thus permitting to load and unload inside the factory.

Small lines were much more involved by the issue of freight in the least populated areas of Britain. Those small lines with small traffic were not concerned by mass transportation but by a very heterogeneous type of transportation, that is much better transferred to the road. The same question occurred for passengers. Even though private cars had not yet boomed out, in the immediate post-war, buses developed on country roads. We must also take into account the rural exodus that attracted people to settle in large cities, reducing the number of travels in rural areas. It brought up the issue of profitability. Maintaining train service for a small number of passengers led the authorities to rather choose buses in the less populated areas.

British Railways had to adapt to that new fierce competition of the road. Richard Beeching, chairman of British Railways, published *The Reshaping of British Railways* on March 27 1963. This report prescribed a comprehensive reorganisation plan : 5000 of the 17830 miles of lines of the British railways network were to close. 2363 of the 7000 stations of British Railways also were to

close.¹ The consequences were of course heavy for the railway staff working on those lines. Many retiring workers were not replaced and those who kept their jobs were inevitably transferred to other stations and depots. Other railwaymen were dismissed. They were given a severance payment amounting two thirds of their weekly salary for each year on duty. Between the nationalisation of 1948 and the early 1960s, the railways staff dropped by 26%, from 648,000 to 474,000. However, this policy aiming directly at their working tool did not generate any labour disputes. Furthermore, in these areas, passengers did not seem significantly disappointed by switching from train to bus services. Indeed, in the 1960s, the train was no longer in its golden age and was regarded as outdated. In rural areas, private cars took over the train for the daily short travels. Yet on main lines, train remained an appreciated means of transportation, both safe and fast. Even if it gave up small lines, Richard Beeching's *Reshaping of British Railways* encouraged developing main lines which meant for example electrifying the West Coast Main Line.

However, that report clearly favored road transportation. *The Reshaping of British Railways* was even suspected of corruption. In fact, Ernest Marples, Minister of Transport in those days, was a major shareholder of his own civil engineering company, specialised in large road construction projects. This pro-road policy lasted until the early 1970s. It went with a thorough restructuration of the British railways network that reduced dramatically. Then, the oil shock of 1973 changed the story. The so called outdated railways regained in favour. The hoped for cost reductions from this plan were not as exceptional as expected. British Railways still experienced heavy losses. The *1968 Transport Act* even implemented a subsidy plan for loss making train services when they were needed to integrate isolated regions. The wave of secondary line closings substantially slowed down in the early 1970s. This policy led during the 1960 decade goes against a common belief according to which the privatisation of British Rail in 1993 was responsible for the closing of many lines. In fact, these closings had occurred much earlier when the railways were still nationalised. It is amusing to note that, David Croft and Richard Spendlove created a TV series

¹ Aldcroft, Derek. *British Railways in Transition*. London: McMillan and Co Ltd, 1968.

called *Oh, Doctor Beeching*, broadcasted by the BBC between 1995 and 1997. This series was about a small imaginary line in 1963, threatened by the Beeching plan. It showed a renewed interest for this period at a time when the British railways were going through the privatisation and the tough debates generated in public opinion.

2 - The Thatcher years

At the General Election in 1979, the Conservatives succeeded the Labour Government of James Callaghan. Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990 and had a strong impact on Britain in the 1980s. Her terms were in total fracture with the policy led this the end of the Second World War. During both Margaret Thatcher's terms, state intervention in economy and social policy was very seriously questioned. Concerning the industrial activities, nationalised under the Labour Government of Clement Attlee, a massive privatisation plan for state owned companies was launched in the second part of the 1980s.

In 1979, there was a strong social protest during the winter². Margaret Thatcher felt more than ever motivated to reform an economic model she considered as totally shrunk. Many strikes broke out in number of activity areas in Britain. Not only British Rail staff went on strike but also public servants, municipal officials, miners and even funeral services. Only emergencies were taken care of in hospitals and corpses accumulated in morgues. In February 1979, wage agreements considerably increasing salaries, discredited the government in the eyes of a part of the population, as an obvious sign of laxness. The labour term was ending in chaos, which comforted Margaret Thatcher in her reforming ambitions. A first obstacle for Margaret Thatcher was the unions, strongly represented in the nationalised industries. In 1978, thirteen million people were unionised, meaning half the active population of Britain. Indeed, their image in the opinion had been seriously

² Winter of Discontent: 30 years on, BBC News website, visited 10 April 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7598647.stm>

damaged by their wrestling match against the Callaghan Government at the beginning of 1979. They still represented an opposition force to which Margaret Thatcher had no intention to submit. It was her inflexibility toward union pressure that gave her the nickname *Iron Lady*. The *Employment Act* of 1980 reduced the power of unions : for example, picket lines were forbidden and workers were liable to heavy penalties if they did not respect those new rules. Another act, passed in 1982, compelled the unions to hold elections every five years. The *Trade Unions Act* of 1984 aimed at making the election process for their leaders more democratic and transparent. These measures allowed to reduce the influence of unions before leading the massive campaign of privatisation of nationalised companies.

Privatising these companies led to reducing public spendings and at the same time feeling the Treasury thank to the product of their sale. Moreover, selling those companies that the Conservatives considered as centres of union opposition made possible to reduce the power of unions. More than fifty state owned companies such as British Steel, British Gas, British Telecom or even CEGB³ Electricity were sold to private investors.⁴ In 1990, two thirds of state owned companies had been privatised, meaning about a million jobs. Just like the National Coal Board and the Royal Mail, British Rail temporarily escaped that wave of privatisation, we will develop that later. Although British Rail remained in the hands of the state, its management necessarily had to adapt to the private sector, foreshadowing an unavoidable privatisation.

3 - The restructuration of British Rail

In the 1970s, Britain started drastic cuts in public spendings so as to reduce the deficits in the public sector. British Rail couldn't escape that and had to adapt to the situation by reducing operational costs and increasing fares. This did not encouraged people to use public transports.

³ CEGB : Central Electricity Generating Board

⁴ Osborne, Alistair. "Margaret Thatcher: one policy that led to more than 50 companies being sold or privatised", *The Telegraph*, 08 April 2013.

Indeed, as fares raised, the quality of service dropped through lack of investments. Moreover, the most powerful road lobby did not act in favor of railways. British Rail had to adapt to that new context through new reorganizations of the company. The reformation process was going to be accelerated by Margaret Thatcher's arrival and the Conservatives' come back.

So far, British Rail was divided in six major geographical regions, each of which had its director, himself reporting to the central direction in London. That geographical structure was considered obsolete as not allowing an easy accounting management. Indeed, in 1982, British Rail's accounts were still in the red and a new organisation was implemented. The six regions remained but British Rail was divided by type of activity. The aim was to provide each entity financial independence, so that good results in one sector should not have to compensate losses in another one. As for passengers, three sectors were created. Network South East (NSE) was responsible for all the very dense network of South East England around London. Intercity handled fast main line trains and Provincial managed all the regional services. As for freight, two entities were created : Trainload Freight and Railfreight distribution, both resulting from the split between mass transportation and packet transportation. From now on, the rolling stock and infrastructures belonged to each sector. Agreements were made when infrastructures were used by different actors of that new organisation. Each entity reported to a Business Manager responsible for its financial results. British Rail remains a public company, but private sector management methods began to appear, strongly encouraged by the neoliberal policy of the Thatcher government. As a result, as early as 1980, British Rail got rid of numerous subsidiaries and only kept its purely rail activities. The maritime subsidiary of British Rail, Sealink, or even British Rail Hovercraft were sold to private investors, leading to 300 persons made redundant. Travelers' fares, in charge of catering in stations and on the trains was also sold and split into two companies : Train Catering and Station Catering. British Rail's real-estate was also involved : hotels and disused stations were sold. In France, that management by kind of activity only appeared in the early 2000s in a very similar aspect.

Despite this new organisation, British Rail did not achieved satisfactory results. In year 1988-89, staff costs reached 57% of the expenses of the company.⁵ Central Direction then tried to reduce staff costs to a minimum by increasing productivity. The railwaymen were asked to reconsider their working habits, mostly concerning shifts. In July 1982, a strike broke out when the drivers were asked to work nine hours a day instead of seven⁶. But the drivers were afraid of loosing their job if they did not resume work and their union, ASLEF, gave in : they accepted the new rule. Margaret Thatcher still was very popular and public opinion was rather satisfied to see the drivers resuming work, as they were already considered as highly privileged. In that same period, the number of guards on trains was reduced by the Driver Only Operation System. This allows a train to run without guard, doors closing being done by the driver. In France, this diver operation system appeared only in the early 2000s on suburb and regional trains thanks to the delivery of new rolling stock.

At the eve of privatisation in 1992, an opening to competition was experienced. The private bus company Stagecoach, resulting from the privatisation of the National Bus Company, proposed seated accommodations on the overnight train to Aberdeen⁷. Indeed, British Rail only wanted to keep sleeper cars on this route. Those Stagecoach carriages were nevertheless incorporated into a British Rail Intercity train. The Intercity network contracted considerably during the year 1992. Direct services from London to Shrewsbury or Blackpool were eliminated. The main issue on those non electrified branch lines was the necessity to use a diesel engine for the final run. The shunts were considered as too expensive in staff for trains with insufficient occupancy. Those loss making services did not represent an interesting market for the private sector.

Margaret Thatcher's government was very satisfied with that new organisation. The result were satisfactory, specially with the economical independence of Railfreight and Intercity in the year 1988-89. Nevertheless, some union leaders suggested that those good results might have been

⁵ Nussbaumer, Marc. *Tensions et conflits autour des chemins de fer britanniques au 20e siècle*. Besançon ; presses universitaires franc comtoises, 2000

⁶ 6.7.82. BR drivers strike, Youtube, visited, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7eXkHi0XNQ>

⁷ Rail 92' Inter-City, Youtube, visited 17 May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-SwKh5GRBg>

rigged so as to make those activities more attractive for potential buyers in the perspective of privatisation.

4 - The Railways Act of 1993 : the privatisation of British Rail

Despite the numerous restructurations of British Rail in the 1980s, and the fact that the company started operating with private sector methods, Margaret Thatcher still did not privatise railways. The relationship of the British with British Rail remained rather contradictory. Even though many users agreed to say that British Rail services were a disaster, they still were very attached to the notion of public service as represented by that company, still surviving privatisation. Truly enough, in the early 1990s, the British railways were in a critical condition, mostly in the NSE network in the London area. Thousands of British Rail users were daily confronted with outrageous fares, old rolling stock, overcrowded and often delayed trains. Margaret Thatcher also knew that privatizing British Rail would be a very difficult challenge due to the complexity of the system. She hated the idea and even replied to Nicholas Ridley, the Minister of Transportation from 1983 to 1987 that privatising the railways would be the political Waterloo of this government.⁸

The equally Conservative John Major succeeded to Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister from November 1990 to May 1997. Concerning railways, John Major was personally quite determine to privatise, there was no other solution for him concerning British Rail.⁹ In November 1993, the British Parliament passed the Railways Act opening the door to rail privatisation. Through this law, the quality of rail service were going to be improved by introducing competition and bringing in private sector investments. In fact, during the 1980 years, the ground had been largely prepared to introduce that competition of the British lines. The Railways Act was only effective from April 1994. Due to the losses of some sectors of British Rail, it was impossible to

⁸ "Railways privatisation would be the political Waterloo of this Government. Please never mention the railway to me again." Margaret Thatcher.

⁹ "The question is not to know if we should privatise it or not, the question is to know how and when." John Major.

sell the company as a whole. British Rail was fragmented and sold by sectors, each one being handled separately in accordance to its characteristics.

The Government mostly wished to put an end to the vertical organisation of British Rail¹⁰ that was in charge of both infrastructure and operation. The European Directive 91/440 about railways in the European Community, passed in 1991, was applied to Britain. Among other things, this directive led EU members states to separate infrastructure management from transport operation, so as to favor competition. Railtrack was created on April 1, 1994. This British Rail entity, intended to be also privatised very soon, was in charge of the British railway infrastructure. Tracks, signals, catenaries, bridges, viaducts, station and depots became Railtrack property. The staff working on network management were transferred from British Rail to Railtrack. The maintenance of installations remained within British Rail through its branch offices. Soon after, maintenance opened to the competition of other companies and the British Rail branch offices were soon privatised. The Conservative Government put pressure on Railtrack so that track maintenance should be, whenever possible, trusted to private subcontractors. We will take up this subject again later. Swedish railways were the first to adopt this organisation, but transport operations remained to the historical operator but still opened to competition. In France, RFF¹¹ was created in 1997 but there never was a real split between transport operation and infrastructure management, as railway staff in charge with infrastructure remained within SNCF¹².

Concerning passenger services operation, the Government chose the franchise system. Franchises aimed at delegating the operation of a passenger service to a private operator, the TOC¹³, by a contract between the Franchise Authority and different private companies. A franchise is a contract for the operation of one or several services for a given period. From 1994 on, twenty-five new companies appeared providing rail services in Great Britain. Tickets sales provided the major

¹⁰ The Trouble With Our Trains, Youtube, visited 11 May 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-GUP0in_v0

¹¹ RFF : *Réseau Ferré de France*

¹² SNCF : *Société Nationale des Chemins de fers Français*

¹³ TOC : Train Operating Companies

part of their revenues making certain Intercity lines profitable and worthwhile for the private sector. But other services were not profitable and remained subsidies by the state as public service. Nevertheless, they were operated by private companies. British Rail rolling stock was transferred to three private companies for rent. The TOCs signed a rental contract with one of those companies for the time of their franchise so as to have the necessary rolling stock. The TOCs can also rent from Railtrack stations or parts of them and manage them, although some station are used by several TOCs. For freight transportation, the Railfreight part of British Rail was divided into three geographical companies that were soon privatised. Other freight operators were able to develop as long as they negotiated contracts with Railtrack to use the network.

To begin, British Rail staff was transferred according to their initial assignment and assigned to the same jobs by the new operators or new companies created from the dismantlement of the ex-public company. Privatisation generated over a thousand companies in all sectors of activity. That privatisation is very specific, compared to other national companies previously privatised. Indeed, British Rail did not keep its structure and was sold by pieces.

II - New management methods and union struggle

1 - The railway culture

British people's relationship to the railway is quite different from that of the French. If the train is seen as a simple way of transportation in France, the same would not apply to Britain where it occupies an important place in popular culture.

In France, the public immediately relates the train to the national railway company : SNCF. It is quite understandable considering that SNCF has had a monopoly on national rail transportation for passengers since its creation in 1936. The link between French people and their national railway company is very ambiguous : they love to hate it. That company is part of their

everyday life, bringing them to work or, on the contrary, to their holiday place. But numerous strikes and the job security status of French railwaymen are the targets of many criticisms, especially now that Europe is in economic crisis. That company in which unions occupy a prominent place is difficult to reform and often considered as a dinosaur from a previous age.

In Britain, the point of view is quite different. The British love trains. Unlike in France, the railway is not seen as a railwaymen's affair. After the Beeching Report in the 1960s, many small lines were closed and a lot of them were restarted by amateurs for a touristic exploitation. Today we find in the United Kingdom more than 170 heritage railways. If plenty of retired railwaymen get involved in the rehabilitation and maintenance of former lines, many rail enthusiasts take part even if they are not railwaymen or retired ones. The British are great fans of heritage railways and some touristic lines run all year round. If the circulation of steam locomotives of course attracts a large public, it is also amusing to note that some heritage lines try to replicate the British Rail years atmosphere by running 1960s diesel engines. We can see there a nostalgia for past times. Indeed, just after the privatisation of British Rail, a massive policy of renewal of the rolling stock was led, sending to the scrapyards old series, some of them dating from the 1950s. Those trains that were hated by the passengers in the early 1990s, today, make the happiness of rail enthusiasts in heritage railways.

We can also notice there are many television documentaries about the railways. Through several reports, the BBC showed interested in the late 1980s and early 1990s when British Rail was in its last hours of existence. Ever since, television documentaries clearly show their will to show interested in how the staff feel at work. Old black and white movies such as *Night Mail* in 1936 showed the railway as the pride of the British nation. The employees filmed at that time showed how proud they were to serve their country through the railway. About sixty years later, the documentaries about British Rail present employees worried about the future of their company and changes in their jobs. On a lighter note, the children's series *Thomas and Friends*, broadcasted since 1984, reveals how much the British are attached to the railway. The main character, Thomas, is an

anthropomorphic locomotive living all sorts of adventures on the imaginary Sodor Island's railway network. Nevertheless, this series was known to be strongly moralizing. Indeed, Thomas the engine bitterly regrets each time he disobeys. Hierarchy and obedience are very present in *Thomas and Friends*, reflecting the political context of the Thatcher years. However, many British children discovered their passion for the railway through this series.

Another very British phenomenon deserves our attention : trainspotting. Trainspotting is an activity, or rather a sign of idleness and sometimes, mental illness, consisting in waiting for the passage of trains along railway lines. Trainspotters generally concentrate their passion on a specific type of rolling stock of which they know all the characteristics and specificities. They are generally very well informed concerning timetables of trains they want to "spot". There are many websites and forums on which trainspotters share their pictures and opinions. Some of them do not hesitate to travel all accros the country by train, looking for this or that railway curiosity. For example, the Glenfinnan viaduct in Scotland, on the West Highland Line, is a reference for the British trainspotters. Overtime, that hobby became the symbol of idleness so trainspotting is not highly regarded in Great-Britain. The movie *Trainspotting*, from the eponymous novel, does not deal with rail enthusiasts but with young drug addicts in a poor Edinburgh area in the 1980s. In British minds, the word immediately sounds like boredom and laziness.

It can be said that the place occupied by train in British culture clearly dominates its equivalent in France. Even if the services proposed by British Rail and its private successors were easily criticized, the sympathy British people have toward their trains remained intact. The railway companies are easily hated but not the trains themselves. That particular relationship of the British with their railways is a direct heritage from the Golden Age of trains.

2 - The railwaymen's spirit

The upcoming of railways in the 19th century gave birth to a new community among the working class : railwaymen. New cities and districts were created to house the railway employees. Railwaymen can be thought of in terms of community just like miners. Indeed, mining and railways cities shared a common point : they were built close to worksites which were not necessarily next to downtown. As for railways, whether in France or Britain, marshaling yards and depots were usually rather far from towns, due to the extent of their infrastructures. Moreover, until the 1960s, very few railway employees had a personnel car, so that they had to be able to reach their working place by bike or on foot. Those isolated urban areas developed their own shops, schools, medical centres. From a geographical point of view, the idea of community makes sense.

As a rule, most railwaymen's children also became railwaymen, and most often married someone inside the same corporation. In such communities, daily life depended on the railway rhythm and the solidarity developed between railwaymen went far beyond working hours. By living in the same district, all railway families shared the same life and also the same disadvantages and the same anxieties. Working the railway has always implied flexible hours and work on holidays. Alas, accidents at were very frequent in depots and marshaling yards when safety procedures were nothing compared to nowadays. It's only from the 1970s that staff working in dangerous zones started being equipped with orange visible clothes. Those accidents made solidarity strong between families who systematically helped one another.

Another very important aspect of this community spirit lies in their working tool itself. Even today, the railway still provides very specific jobs that are not always perceived by the public. Before the nationalisation of the railways, the working tool provided great pride, mostly among driving crews. Each crew was responsible for its locomotive and was rewarded by bonuses according to the care given to their engine. There was a true competition between crews and even depots concerning for instance the performances achieved in schedules and coal savings. This turn

of mind slowly disappeared together with steam traction in the years following World War II. The spreading of diesel and electric traction completely changed the management of locomotives. The new engines were no more attributed to one crew. The trio composed of the driver, the fireman and their engine was to disappear. At first, the no longer useful firemen were reclassified as co-drivers but often they became drivers themselves. One man driving generalised on the British and French rail as early as the 1970s.

Solidarity between railwaymen mainly comes from teamwork. Among railwaymen just as among deep miners, serious work directly guarantees security for colleagues but also for transported goods and persons. In many railway jobs, a worker knows that being careless can lead to the death of co-workers. This culture of security is a historical notion in the railway. We will see that later, when mentioning the generalisation of subcontracting in infrastructure works when British Rail was privatised. Hard working conditions also created strong cohesion between railwaymen, especially when the job implied outside, physical and even dangerous work. Staff working on tracks or marshaling yards often made strongly linked teams. As jobs became less strenuous, improvement in working conditions for many railwaymen led to the disintegration of this solidarity.

This sense of solidarity was very favourable to the development of unions. As a rule, it is true that railways are bastions of unionism, mostly in nationalised companies. However, the two main railway unions in Britain existed much before nationalisation in 1948. The oldest one created in 1865 is ASLEF¹⁴, the train drivers' union. The other union, the NUR¹⁵ regrouped the majority of British Railwaymen. It was formed in 1913 and lasted until 1990. It melted with the National Union of Seamen and became the RMT¹⁶. The nationalisation British railways and the creation of British Rail contributed to develop unions in the company. It will be interesting to notice that in the 1980s, anti-unionism measures passed by the Thatcher government impacted the corporation spirit inside British Rail.

¹⁴ ASLEF : Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen

¹⁵ NUR : National Union of Railwaymen

¹⁶ RMT : National union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Unions.

By comparison, we can notice a major difference between British and French rail communities : the Second World War. In France, contrary to their British colleagues, railwaymen in the brand new SNCF were strongly involved in the conflict. Among the Railways, Resistance was strong and well organised. The aim was to disturb as much as possible the German occupiers who were very dependent on rail transportation. Solidarity among French railwaymen strongly developed during the war years. Indeed, any resistance action such as sabotage often led to an immediate execution. Moreover, stations and depots were regularly bombed by the allies and many residential railway areas were destroyed by bombs. It was hard for Resistant railwaymen to destroy their own working tool which they often deeply cared for. According to different sources, between 1600 and 2000 French railwaymen thought to have died executed or deported.¹⁷ Unionism strongly developed in the French railways during that time and even today, strong corporatism in SNCF is a heritage from Resistance. In Britain, railway solidarity couldn't be built on such a tense period, even if the British rail network suffered Luftwaffe bombings during the Blitz.

The reorganisation of British Rail in the 1980s and its sectorisation did not favour solidarity between railwaymen. Indeed, even before the 1993 privatisation, each business sector operated independently from one another. Further than reorganising the company, the government also aimed at weakening the corporative spirit in the railways. We will further that this new organisation tended to make the employees more individualistic so as to break collective spirit. Also during that period, wages inequalities between services were noticed. Contrary to their other colleagues, British Rail travelling staff were given some advantages with the only aim of creating gaps between employees.¹⁸ Once again, the ground was carefully prepared for privatisation.

¹⁷ "*Rappelons-nous des 2 500 agents de la SNCF victimes de la répression des nazis et du régime de Vichy dont 1400 en déportation ou en Allemagne*" Guillaume Pépy, CEO of SNCF, May 10, 2016

¹⁸ BBC Inside Story 1991 - *British Rail Leeds to London*, Youtube, consulted 23 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1XIrHcV6dA>

3 - A new approach to work at British Rail

As said, British Rail temporarily survived the wave of privatisation led by the Thatcher government. Still the percentage of State subsidies granted to British Rail came down to a minimum. In 1989, Italy invested as much as £4.2 millions in railways, Germany £3.7, France £3.5 as against £0.5 millions in Britain. In view to its coming privatisation, British Rail had to be as profitable as possible and costly financially independent. Even though it remained State owned, British Rail had to adopt private management methods. First, the staff had to conform to a new way of working. The corporative spirit of the railway was affected by work reorganisation at British Rail.

The aim for the Thatcher government was in the long run to privatise British Rail. Now the company had to appear profitable to be interesting for the private sector. But at the start of the 1980s, British Rail still was still losing money. That was what justified the adopting of sectorial management. That new organisation recommended some form of decentralisation and proximity management. From then on, each line and station were individually managed. One of the principal means to reduce the deficits was to cut staff spendings. Railwaymen were asked efforts, particularly concerning working time flexibility. The head of the company also encouraged dialog between the staff and the hierarchy, it was called participative management.

The British Rail company magazine, *Railnew*, was given free to the employees who were invited to express themselves in its columns. The staff could write about their working conditions in the "Platform" section. In that way, the central direction showed interest in its employees and seemed to take their remarks into account so as to improve their working conditions. Nevertheless, it was clearly established that the *Railnew* editors had the right to reformulate any received letter. Some railwaymen were quite aware of the demagogical aspect of Platform. Indeed, if 36% of the employees were favourable, 43% saw it as a way to avoid real issues. 21% had no opinion and

some were not even aware the magazine existed¹⁹. Some said about *Railnew* : "It really is a propaganda exercise, the optimistic content is ludicrous ; It is Government and BR propaganda".²⁰ Indeed, such serious issues such as coming privatisation and its consequences or security problems linked to the lack of investment were never addressed. The employees can only feel the demagogy in it all. The new policy wished a closer link with customers, but in fact, the resentment of the public toward British Rail was growing. Railwaymen daily had to face both the numerous technical problems and their consequences for users. Being unable to provide an efficient service, mostly on the Network Southeast lines, was really frustrating for the staff. Even though British Rail obeyed government directives, the field staff were the ones who faced passengers' anger. The central direction made training films for the staff attracting their attention on non attained objectives such as for example punctuality²¹. Privatisation was never clearly pronounced as a word but the objective was clear. Railwaymen were called to be actors in a great change without knowing what it meant for their jobs. Employees had to have a monthly interview with their boss . According to Marc Nussbaumer, a specialist of this topic and author of *Tensions et conflits autour des chemins de fer britanniques au 20e siècle*, the aim of those interviews was to keep the employees submitted.²² Indeed, during those interviews, the manager used to totally agree with the employee, who could then believe he had won the favor of his boss. Here again, the aim was to reduce the solidarity between rail workers.

The new recruiting policy at British Rail encouraged giving responsible positions to junior executives just out of school. Until then, an employee who had started as an apprentice could reach a responsibility job thanks to career progression. It was an advantage to have managers with a very good knowledge of the company and on-the-ground realities. Being managed by someone with a

¹⁹ Survey carried out by Marc Nussbaumer for his book *Tensions et conflits autour des chemins de fer britanniques au 20e siècle*. Besançon: presses universitaires franc comtoises, 2000

²⁰ Words quoted by Marc Nussbaumer in his study for the project of his book *Tensions et conflits autour des chemins de fer britanniques au 20e siècle*. Besançon: presses universitaires franc comtoises, 2000

²¹ Network Southeast film *About Time* , Youtube, visited 14 May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqd0FOESotA>

²² Marc Nussbaumer, *op.cit*, p 58.

real experience in the company was reassuring. The recruiting of young managers considerably slowed down workers' careers. Moreover, those young people lacked experience in the railway world and their theoretical training was often confronted with reality. It was also profitable for the heads of British Rail to recruit persons with no sentimental links with the company. Such a phenomenon was obvious in France when La Poste was partially privatised. Recruiting young managers allowed to apply reforms without feelings. This "invasion" of young managers was badly received by railwaymen.

The new working methods introduced at British Rail during the Thatcher years aimed at changing the corporative codes that were strong in railways. That type of management made railwaymen more individualistic at work in order to break the corporative spirit. Once fragilised, the dismantlement of the company became easier to achieve. Also, we realise that the 1993 privatisation was nothing but the end of a long process aiming at tearing the railwaymen turn of mind.

4 - 1984-1985 : railwaymen support the miners

In 1984, preparing the privatisation of the National Coal Board, Margaret Thatcher's government led a massive spendings reduction plan by closing many loss making pits. Thousands of mining jobs were threatened. The charismatic leader of the NUM²³, Arthur Scargill, saw there an opportunity to confront Margaret Thatcher's policy and engage mineworkers in a strike which was to last about one year. The government forecasted the strike before announcing the pits' closure plan and huge coal stocks were constituted in the whole country. Moreover, it was decided to wait until the end of 1984 winter, when coal demand would slow down, to make the statement official. The strike began in march 1984 to end one year later, in march 1985. The miners resumed work without

²³ NUM : National Union of Mineworkers

anything in return. Those events were seen as a sweeping victory of Margaret Thatcher over strikers and unions. The NUM did not manage to avoid the pit closures²⁴.

That long conflict was marked by many acts of violence. Through their unions, British Rail employees showed solidarity with the striking miners. Even if stocks were built, the coal had to be moved to the coal-dependent industries. Foreign coal was also shipped, particularly from Poland. The main coal users in Britain were power stations and steel industry. Coal required mass transportation for which railways was the most adapted. The NUM knew that British Rail played a key part in coal supply and that an alliance with ASLEF, the train drivers' union, could change the story. For railwaymen, rallying the miners' cause was a way to demonstrate their opposition toward Margaret Thatcher's government. Many ASLEF train drivers refused to drive coal trains during the strike. Parts of coal transportation have therefore been transferred to non-striking National Coal Board lorry drivers and to private companies, moving under police escort. British Rail heads saw this solidarity strike with a jaundiced eye and several drivers received disciplinary layoffs when they refused to drive coal trains. In fact, British Rail feared to lose the lead market of coal transportation. The risk was to see coal moving finally remaining in the hands of road transportation.²⁵

However, there arose a difficulty. Coal using industries, such as steel works, are non-stop operation factories : a supply of coke is vital for the survival of their ovens and furnaces. The NUM was aware of that issue and some coal trains were allowed by strikers to maintain the minimum activity required in those factories²⁶. To go through striking pickets, NUM members escorted trains to certify that the cargo was approved by strikers. The aim was to keep the factories intact without any industrial production.

²⁴ Adeney, Martin and John Lloyd. *The Miners' Strike, 1984-5: Loss Without Limit*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1986.

²⁵ In 1919, a long railwaymen strike broke out and lorries were requisitioned to transport post war rationing. Road transportation gave full satisfaction and some markets never came back to the railways. Thanks to that strike that lorries began to prove their efficiency.

²⁶ Douglass, David. "I want to live, I want to give. I've been a miner for a heart of gold", *The ASLEF journal*, February 2014, p.12.

The cooperation between railway unions and striking miners only had a symbolic effect but no real efficiency. Indeed, the huge coal stocks constituted before the strike and the use of lorries jammed the collaboration strategy between miners and British Rail strikers. However, this sign of solidarity between the two corporations remains today in unionists minds. Even if the 1984-1985 strike is a bad memory in Great Britain's industrial history, actions carried out jointly by the NUM and ASLEF sometimes turned funny. During the strike, police lines blocked every access roads to pits and factories to prevent the building of pickets. David Douglass who was a NUM secretary tells

" Ray Buckton, general secretary of ASLEF, discussed with me a wild scheme to have 2,000 Doncaster pickets board empty freight trains headed past Ollerton and Harworth, with a view to them teaming from the wagons as the trains slowed past the pits whose roads were sealed off by armies of police. He suggested I was 'quite mad' but said he wouldn't be looking and the driver, he was sure, wouldn't notice 2,000 unofficial hobos²⁷ in the box cars. "²⁸

5 - The great signalmen's strike of 1994

The 1993 Railways Act came into force on April 1, 1994. A first change in Britain's rail system organisation was the enforcement of European directive 91/440. Let's not forget that the aim of the directive was to separate train operations from infrastructure management. A division of British Rail, Railtrack, was created on April 1, 1994. As a first step, Railtrack remained under government control, its privatisation having been achieved only in 1996. All rail infrastructure property was therefore transferred to that new British Rail entity, as well as all the staff responsible

²⁷ In United States, hoboes were vagabonds going from town to town, hiding in freight trains.

²⁸ Douglass, David, "From coal miner to railwayman with gratitude and respect", *The ASLEF journal*, February 2014, p.14.

for network control and operation. It was then that a salary conflict broke out between signalmen and their new management.

For several years, signalmen had been asking for a pay rise, an 11% increase in this case. Considering responsibilities and time constraints, being a signalman was seen as a badly paid job. Moreover, for years, large productivity gains had been made on their working time flexibility. The RMT union chose to launch the strike at a strategic moment. Indeed, in 1994, the first franchising experiences were just beginning on some routes and the signalmen's strike had a big impact. This was a delicate exercise for the RMT. The number of union subscribers had significantly melted for several years resulting from the drop in railwaymen numbers during the Thatcher era. From 1988 to 1994, British Rail's workforce passed from 155,000 employees to 133,000.²⁹ Furthermore, it was the first strike experience in Great Britain's new rail context. The main RMT negotiator, Vernon Hince, was pleased with the participation rate to the strike that broke out in June 1994. According to him, 100% of the 4,000 RMT affiliated signalmen went on strike. He also noticed the come back of about four hundred ex-RMT members who also got involved in the strike. A ratio of five to one signal box employees voted for work stoppage.³⁰ Railtrack's response was immediate. Striking railwaymen were threatened to lose their jobs if they did not immediately resume work. Such measures in France would be impossible. British Railwaymen, contrarily to their French colleagues, were not protected by a status, even if British Rail provided a certain job security. This topic will be developed later. Railtrack managers made a sort of employment blackmail to break the strike.³¹ Pressure was put on local managers to force them to operate signal boxes abandoned by strikers. Many refused, arguing that they often did not have enough experience on those positions and feared committing security mistakes. British Rail went so far as to offer Railtrack to "lend" managers in order to occupy vacant positions.³² Some British Rail executives received letters asking them to

²⁹ *Annual Report and Accounts*, British Rail Board, 1988-1989 to 1993-1994

³⁰ Nussbaumer, Marc. *Tensions et conflits autour des chemins de fer britanniques au 20e siècle*. Besançon ; presses universitaires franc comtoises, 2000

³¹ "Liars : Proof Railtrack does bully its bosses", *Daily Mirror*, 12 August 1994.

³² "BR asks for volunteers to beat strike", *The Weekly Telegraph* n°163, 24-30 August 1994, p. 2.

volunteer and receive a signaller training. TSSA,³³ the managers' union, refused for the same security reasons. That strategy of both British Rail and Railtrack heads aimed at making opposition between railwaymen, but also between the two unions, RMT and TSSA. TSSA did not only support striking signalmen but threatened to go on strike as well. What remained of railwaymen solidarity resisted that attack led by Railtrack and British Rail. Moreover, public opinion largely supported strikers. But Railtrack engaged in an anti-strike campaign in Britain's press³⁴ to apologise and denounce the strike, trying to sway public opinion against rail workers.³⁵ James Marsh, a signaller on strike, wrote a letter to *The Independent* newspaper expressing his regrets for the inconvenience caused by the strike.³⁶ But he also underlined that the new organisation would force signalmen to work on Sundays and bank holidays without any financial compensation. As a comparison, James Marsh showed that a lavatory attendant at Waterloo Station was paid £181.42 a week whereas himself got £156.42 a week for the same working time.

On September 28, 1994, a compromise was found between Railtrack and the signalmen on strike. A salary increase of 2.5% is granted to signal box staff. Even though they were asking for a 11% increase, an agreement was found. It can be explained by the fact that British Rail pension fund was to be redistributed on September 30, 1994. The pension calculation was based on the salary at that date and it was important for the signalmen to obtain a pay rise, were it far below their expectancies. Even if union leaders had expected a total success of that strike, they had to abide by Railtrack's last word. The RMT probably hoped to unify railwaymen before Britain's railway fragmented in many companies.

³³ TSSA : Transport Salaried's Staff Association

³⁴ "Railtrack apology priced at £100,000", *The Weekly Telegraph* n°162 17-23 August 1994, p.10.

³⁵ Whitfield, Martin. "Railtrack hopes for reversing strike fades", *The Independent*, 13 August 1994.

³⁶ Shingleton, K.D. "Letter : Why I'm on strike, a signaller accuses Railtrack of shoddy treatment", *The Independent*, 22 July 1994.

III - Since 1993, a new work environment in Britain's railways

1 - Passing from British Rail to a multitude of companies

As previously seen, the 1993 Railways Act led to the privatisation of British Rail, but mostly to its dismantlement and the dispatching of staff in the new companies. Not only did they have to face uncertainty concerning their jobs but also the tearing of the great railway family. Even if cohesion had worsened in the last years, British Rail remained a national company. Before April 1, 1994, all railway employees in Great Britain shared belonging to British Rail, but this last bastion of unity vanished with the Railways Act.

The first steps in British Rail's dismantlement were the creation of a new infrastructure management company : Railtrack, created on April 1, 1994. As said, all the staff in charge of network operation and maintenance became Railtrack's employees. At first, Railtrack was to remain a public company but its privatisation had already been decided for 1996. The aim here will be to determine how staff would be impacted by privatisation. As an example, we will focus on track maintenance workers whose working conditions changed the most. When Railtrack was created, the aim was to keep minimal staff. Employees holding specific positions such as signalmen remained in Railtrack but for as for track maintenance staff, situation became much blurred. At first, they remained British Rail staff working for Railtrack. Local British Rail track maintenance offices were made to compete with private companies before, in turn, being privatised. In any event, the government asked Railtrack to use subcontractors as much as possible for track maintenance works. Since 1994, many track maintenance companies appeared.

Historically, track workers teams were known to be environments in which railway solidarity remained deeply rooted. It can be explained by several reasons. Track maintenance is a physical and dangerous job, implying to work outside and very often at night. Each track worker knows that he has to be impeccable concerning security. However, track jobs are relatively

unknown outside the rail community. Generation after generation, working habits and specific vocabulary³⁷ appeared between those railway workers. When they intervene on tracks, railwaymen obey very strict security procedures and place themselves under the authority of the local signalman. Applying those procedures can be seen as a constraint but it guarantees a safe environment for track workers. Until 1994, security was also ensured by those teams being constituted of skilled railwaymen who perfectly knew how to behave in railway premises.

From 1994, everything changed. In fact, government's pressure on Railtrack to encourage subcontracting urged private civil engineering companies to take the opportunity of that new, very promising market. But a major issue rose. Indeed, until 1994, British Rail had a monopoly on railway maintenance. Those civil engineering companies had no experience in railway infrastructure. On subcontracted railway works, only work supervision was done by Railtrack experienced railwaymen. Ex-British Rail track maintenance offices were privatised and taken over by those civil engineering companies. As a result, it brought skilled railwaymen trained by British Rail into the new working teams. However, it was very difficult for those who had begun their career at British Rail to work with new colleagues who had no experience in the railway. Contracts were attributed to the cheapest companies who did not hesitate to regularly call upon unskilled interim staff. A very good illustration of that situation is Ken Loach's film *The Navigators*. The plot of the movie, released in 2001, is supposed to take place in 1995 just after privatisation. The story follows a team of navigators³⁸, working for an ex-British Rail track maintenance office in Yorkshire. Through that film, Ken Loach clearly takes a stand against rail privatisation. His choice to focus on navigators can be explained because those railwaymen had to face a worsening of their working conditions after privatisation. The competition between ex-British Rail colleagues is well depicted, as track maintenance offices were taken over by different companies. Ken Loach also

³⁷ Marin, Yvette. *Citoyenneté et Communauté*. Besançon: Presses universitaires franc-comtoises, 1998 (See annex page)

³⁸ The term 'Navigator' comes from the beginning of railways during the 19th century when workers who built navigation channels were hired on railway lines construction to dig trenches. They kept the name of 'navigators', still used today for railwaymen working on tracks.

denounces managers' cynicism as they take advantage of staff productivity, insisting on the fact that British Rail time was out. For local managers, the situation was also very uncomfortable. Indeed, they were responsible for applying unpopular reforms asked by the new shareholders and, on the other hand, they had to face staff's unhappiness. Of course, security was affected by post-privatisation changes. We can notice in *The Navigators* that the new bosses of railway engineering companies pressured their employees so that they did not waste time in safety procedures. A scene shows workers changing sleepers on a railway line. When an ex-British Rail track worker asks if the signaller is well informed, the boss simply replies : "F***k the signaller! Do your job!" The movie ends with the dramatic death of a railwayman, hit by a train while working at night under a bridge. Even though Ken Loach was clearly against Britain's rail privatisation, the particular attention he paid to details and realism in *The Navigators* shows the film's objectivity. Many testimonies of British Rail staff were used to make that film as realistic as possible.

Lack of experience concerning the subcontracting engineering companies made the post-privatisation very difficult. Many accidents occurred and work quality was often far from being irreproachable. With time, some companies, specialised in railway works, got enough experience. Today, about twenty track engineering companies can be found in Great Britain.³⁹ They were often formed by the merging of smaller companies.

2 - Privatisation : the issue of railway safety

During the 1980s, British Rail safety worsened. Because of insufficient investments, at the dawn of privatisation, Britain's railway network, was little by little degrading. Sweden had been a forerunner in rail privatisation in Europe. In 1988, the Swedish government applied the separation of network management from trains operation. It was the origin of European directive 91/440,

³⁹ Railway technology website, visited 6 June 2016, <http://www.railway-technology.com/contractors/engineering/>

effective since 1991. The national Swedish railway company SJ⁴⁰, was also privatised but it kept its structure. Britain was the second European country to privatise its railway system but in a more radical way. If the Swedish railways case remained unnoticed in European public opinion, the same cannot be said for British Rail privatisation in 1994. Indeed, the years following the dismantlement of the ex-national company were marked by a series of dramatic accidents that made railway privatisation a very sensitive topic.

Today, if we ask someone what rail privatisation in Britain means to him, the most current answer is : train accidents. Truly, the second part of the 1990s and the early 2000s saw several major train disasters in Great Britain. A majority of them were caused by technical failures of the railway network, pointing the opinion's finger at privatisation. However, as observed earlier, privatisation just results from a long degradation process that began in the early 1980s. The tragic series of rail disasters in Great Britain was previous to 1994. A strong increase of rail incidents can be observed over the 1980 decade.⁴¹ The worst accident occurred on 12 December 1988 at Clapham Junction, a London suburb. A cabling mistake during the installation of a new signaling system led to the back collision of two overcrowded trains themselves then hit by a third one running in the opposite direction. Thirty-six people were killed and more than 500 injured⁴². It was found that the British Rail employee who installed the cabling was in his thirteenth week of seven working days. Moreover, his job had not been verified by another person before putting the installations into service, as wanted by protocol.⁴³ That accident revealed how British Rail had massively reduced the number of employees during the Thatcher years.

The 1994 privatisation was supposed to both improve quality and bring new investments to enhance railway security. Railtrack, the new infrastructure management company, remained public for some time but, as intended by the government, the company was floated on the Stock Exchange

⁴⁰ SJ : *Statens Järnvägar* Swedish Railways

⁴¹ Accident Archive, Railways Archives website, visited 2 June 2016, <http://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/eventlisting.php>

⁴² Sharrock, David. "From the archive, 13 December 1988 : Thirty-six die in worst rail crash in 20 years" *The Guardian*, 13 December 2010.

⁴³ Early, Chas. "December 12, 1988: 35 killed in Clapham Junction rail crash" *BT News*, 12 December 2015

in May 1996. The expected investments did not appear and security went wrong. Two major accidents occurred on the Great Western Main Line⁴⁴ in 1997 and 1999. On September 19, 1997, in Southall, an express train from Swansea to London Paddington collided with a freight train. Dazzled by the sun, the driver at the head of the passenger train did not see a red signal and continued. The AWS system⁴⁵, intended to stop trains if a signal is passed, did not work. Seven people were killed and more than 140 were injured. Two years later, on October 5, 1999, a collision between a London suburb train and an express from Cheltenham to London Paddington killed thirty-one persons and injured more than 500 others. Here again, a passed signal was the origin of the disaster. Indeed, the driver of the suburb train should have stopped at a signal but he did not. That zone was known to have a very confusing signaling and the AWS system should have been installed, but Railtrack had postponed the works for cost reasons. The offending driver, killed in the collision, had finished his training only two weeks before. Those two accidents brought to light the poor condition of Britain's rail network after privatisation. Instead of stopping, the degradation process worsened. The signal passed at Southall disaster had been passed eight times in the previous six months, without Railtrack having taken any measures.⁴⁶ One year later, the Hatfield derailment was the spark that ignited the fire. On October 17, 2000, an Intercity train from London to Leeds on the East Coast Main Line⁴⁷ derailed as it was running at 180 km/h, killing four people and injuring seventy. A broken rail was the origin of the disaster. A huge campaign of track inspection was led throughout the whole rail network and revealed its catastrophic state.

Despite showing record profits, Railtrack proved it had under-invested in security since its creation in 1994. The Hatfield derailment and the huge track refecton costs that followed threw the company into economic difficulties. One year later, on October 5, 2001, transport secretary Stephen

⁴⁴ The Great Western Main Line is the line from London Paddington to Cornwall.

⁴⁵ AWS : Automatic Warning System

⁴⁶ Shute, Joe, "Paddington rail disaster: 'Her last words to me were goodbye, Daddy' ", *The Telegraph*, 28 September 2014.

⁴⁷ The East Coast Mail Line links London to Scotland.

Byers officially announced Railtrack's bankruptcy.⁴⁸In 2002, a new network management company appeared : Network Rail⁴⁹. Despite being private, Network Rail had the British State as only shareholder. Network Rail's income is 50% state subsidies and 50% train paths paid by Train Operating Companies. In 2003, Network Rail even reintegrated maintenance operations.⁵⁰It was seen as a step backward after privatisation failures. Nevertheless, it had been necessary to have several train disasters before seeing the governments become aware of the urgency of the situation. Even though the creation of Network Rail was not a real re-nationalisation of Britain's rail infrastructure, the State re-established its control in railways. The results were rather satisfactory. Indeed, since Network Rail succeeded Railtrack, rail security in Britain has clearly improved.

3 - Anti-privatisation reactions

British Rail privatisation was far from being unanimous in Britain's public opinion. It is true that even before its privatisation, British Rail was regularly under the attack of customers' critics. As previously said, the progressive decay of Britain's rail infrastructure during the Thatcher years prevented any quality improvement. In fact, anger against British Rail did not target the company itself. Through British Rail, the transport policy led by the Conservatives was criticized. The government withdrawal in rail policy could be seen daily in delays, overcrowded trains and numerous technical incidents. The double arrow company was even sometimes nicknamed British Fail by desperate users.

Since the early 1980s, some associations appeared to denounce the impact of Margaret Thatcher's liberal policy on railways. *The Better Rail Campaign* was the first to fight for a real public service in railways. That group was made of railwaymen unions' and users' associations trying to lobby at the Parliament. Indeed, even if British Rail remained state owned, its privatisation

⁴⁸ "Blood on the track", *The Economist*, 11 October 2001.

⁴⁹ Our history, Network Rail website, visited 30 May 2016, <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/729.aspx>

⁵⁰ "Network Rail takes over track maintenance", *The Guardian*, 24 October 2003.

looked inescapable. At the beginning of the 1990s, privatisation became more precise and pro-public service campaigns intensified. Save Our Railways⁵¹, another pressure group, led awareness actions in stations. The protestors were disguised in executioners wearing John Mc Gregor⁵² masks. They denounced British Rail's killing by the Major government. However, those actions did not stop the privatisation process wanted by the government and British Rail ended in 1994. It is interesting to notice that despite the general disapproval of both staff and the opinion, British Rail was privatised without any social conflict between railwaymen and the government. The only strike was the 1994 signalmen dispute and it had no link with the dismantlement of the ex-nationalised company. It was just seen by unions as a good opportunity to be heard.

The Railtrack fiasco and the rail tragedies between 1997 and 2000 motivated anti-privatisation groups to continue their fight for public owned railway. Even if the creation of Network Rail was followed by huge investments in railway safety, privatisation remained a failure in the eyes of many train users in Britain. In 2014, a survey suggested that the public supported rail re-nationalisation by a margin of 60% - 40%.⁵³ In 2009, the *Bring Back British Rail* collective was founded⁵⁴. Their logo is inspired from the British Rail one, but its two arrows are inverted, implying the necessary step backward for Britain's rail system. That collective is very dynamic on social networks such as Facebook or Twitter but also on the spot, through demonstrations in stations. They claim for lower train fares and the return of British Rail as a nationalised company. On the last point, they recently led actions concerning the East Coast franchise on the line from London King's Cross to Scotland. Indeed, until March 2015, this franchise was held by the British State that took it over in 2009. In March 2015, the private group Virgin won the contract on the East Coast route.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Launet, Edouard, "Spécial GB. Privatisation à risque pour British Rail. Major a tenu sa promesse juste avant les élections. Mais à quel prix..." *Libération*, 30 April 1997.

⁵² John McGregor was Minister of Transports between 1992 and 1994.

⁵³ De Castella, Tom, "Would it be realistic to renationalise the railways?". *BBC News Magazine*, 3 March 2015.

⁵⁴ Bring Back British Rail website, visited 3 June 2016, <http://www.bringbackbritishrail.org/>

⁵⁵ Calder, Simon, "Virgin takes over the East Coast Main Line". *The Independent*, 1 March 2015.

4 - Rail in Britain : brief comparative remarks

Even though railway scenarios of both France and Britain are two very different cases, some interesting similarities can be observed. British Rail and SNCF, as two public companies, were created in a close context. Indeed, before nationalising their railways, Britain and France shared a railway system based on several big private companies, each one operating its network from the capital city. British Rail and SNCF were created under left wing governments, just before second World War for SNCF and right after for British Rail.

When privatisation rose in the early 1990s, the British Government followed the Swedish example in privatising the national company. Truly the privatisation of SJ was rather successful, however, it is difficult to compare the Swedish rail network with the British one in terms of density and traffic. Britain remains the only example of privatisation on a large European network. As observed, British Rail privatisation resulted from a long process started with the Thatcher years. Managing the company by sector of activity, allowing to compare financial results for each branch, was also adopted by SNCF in France. That kind of management began to appear in the early 2000s on a similar model to the British one of the 1980s. Different SNCF branches appeared : *Grandes lignes*, *TER*, *Fret*, *Transilien*, *Sernam* and *Infrastructure*.⁵⁶ As well as for British Rail, each SNCF branch was managed independently of one another. SNCF staff was dispatched among the new group entities, which disturbed the unions, fearing for the future of railway jobs⁵⁷. Indeed, because of sectorial management, a driver who previously could drive all kinds of trains is now only allowed to work on regional services if he belongs to the Regional branch. The same occurs for the rolling stock, distributed between the different branches. The situations that kind of management led to were sometimes considered as absurd by SNCF staff. In 2004, freight transportation collapsed just when new locomotives had been ordered to replace the older series. Freight branch

⁵⁶ Main lines trains, Regional services (*Trains Express Régionaux*), Freight, Paris' suburban network, Parcels (*SERVICE NATIONAL des Messageries*) and Infrastructure

⁵⁷ However, carrier evolutions were still possible between the different branches.

heads decided to mainly use the brand new engines and hundreds of middle aged locomotives were stored without use. In parallel, passenger branches suffered a lack of rolling stock and were sometimes forced to cancel trains. That kind of situation is unfortunately not the only example, regularly denounced by French railway unions. Even if SNCF remains a state owned company, freight transportation was opened to competition in 2004 and international passenger services in 2009⁵⁸. National passenger routes remain a SNCF monopoly, at least until 2019. However, in 2016, the French government wishes to experiment a sort of franchise system to operate some domestic sleeper services.

Concerning the European directive 91/440, its application is different from one country to another. Great Britain chose to push the reformation to its maximum by privatising all the railway activities, which was not required by the directive. The historical operator can remain public, but competition is encouraged. To achieve that, the infrastructure management company has to be an independent organisation providing an access to the network for all train operators. In fact the real aim is to establish an accounting separation between the loss making infrastructure and the profitable trains operations. In France, RFF was created on February 13, 1997. Contrary to Railtrack, the new entity did not take into its structure the staff in charge of network operation. They remained within SNCF, working for its infrastructure branch. However, just as Britain, France opened infrastructure engineering works to competition. Today, specialised maintenance remains within SNCF but more and more tasks are subcontracted. As it was the case after the British Rail era, more than twenty years ago, subcontracting is regularly questioned in France. The dramatic derailment in Brétigny on July 12, 2013 with seven fatalities is to be compared with the Hatfield one in Britain. Indeed, those two accidents brought to light the worrying state of the infrastructures.⁵⁹ Even if SNCF and RFF immediately led a massive track refurbishing campaign, incidents resulting from the poor state of railway infrastructures have multiplied in recent months.

⁵⁸ The first private operated train was launched in December 2011 by Thello on the overnight service from Paris to Venezia. This route was before operated by SNCF and Italian State Railways.

⁵⁹ D'Allard, Marion, "Le train fou de la sous-traitance", *L'Humanité*, 16 October 2013.

For French railway unions, reducing of SNCF staff and increasing subcontracting are responsible for this degradation of our railway system.

The Railway Reform of 2014 put an end to the SNCF-RFF structure. Indeed, RFF became *SNCF Réseau*, bringing France close to the German railways model. The German *DB*⁶⁰ is an integrated company, a holding overseeing *DB Bahn* and *DB Netz*. The historical operator, *DB Bahn*, was born from the melting between eastern and western German networks in 1994. *DB Netz* is the network manager. DB is a limited company whose shares are 100% held by the German State. Since January 1, 2015, SNCF again became an integrated company when *SNCF Réseau* succeeded RFF. However, subcontracting does not seem to be questioned. Indeed, *SNCF Réseau* heads are talking about increasing subcontracting in 2016.⁶¹ One observes that, more than twenty years later, SNCF lives a scenario close to the one experienced by Britain's railways. Even if the two situations remain different, it is interesting to notice that French railways are repeating what led Britain's railways to a delicate situation after the British Rail years.

⁶⁰ DB : *Deutsche Bahn*, German railways.

⁶¹ Cognasse, Olivier, "SNCF Réseau fait la part belle aux sous-traitants", *L'Usine Nouvelle*, 4 May 2016.

Conclusion

The 1993 Railways Act that brought British Rail to its end led Britain's rail system into a troubled period. Indeed, that privatisation was a campaign promise of the Conservative Prime Minister John Major. The task was done hastily so as to be achieved before the end of John Major's term in 1997. It is not necessary to recall the consequences that botched privatisation had for employees and users. In the years following British Rail's dismantlement, privatisation was a failure. First the main expectations in terms of quality and security not reached but moreover, Britain's rail system continued to break down.

In the late 1990s, British Rail privatisation became an explosive topic in Britain but also in other European countries. Britain became the textbook case in terms of rail privatisation. The pressure put by the European Union on member states to reform their railway systems made opinion fear, at least in France, a repeating of the British case. Yet, it must be understood that privatisation has not been the triggering event of the collapsing of Britain's railways. On the contrary, the Railway Act of 1993 must be considered as the achievement of a long degradation process that started in the early 1960s. Britain's rail network is one of the oldest in Europe. Most lines were opened in the mid 19th century and it is normal that its network had to adapt to time. If the numerous small line closings that followed the Beeching report were regrettable, they were nonetheless logical in a context of road transportation development. However, despite the 1973 oil shock that gave back its legitimacy to the railway, the system continued to decline by the lack of investment and political will. The 1980s and Margaret Thatcher's ultraliberal policy did nothing to redress the fundamental issue of Britain's railway. Due to lack of investment, British Rail was not able to provide a good public service for British citizens. Worse still, saving on security was responsible for major disasters, even before privatisation. The end of British Rail and the privatisation of all Britain's rail activities were supposed to put an end to that degradation. This may seem strange because British Rail still had to adopt private sector methods since the early 1980s.

State withdrawal already showed its weakness even before the "official" privatisation in 1994. If Margaret Thatcher herself did not see how to privatise the railways, it may be surprising that her successor engaged in this very unpredictable way. The economic crisis of 1993 probably urged the Conservatives to accelerate the privatising process of one of the very last nationalised companies in Britain.

Now we have enough insight into the events to say that the total privatisation of British Rail was a failure. However, if Britain's railway system still remains a unique case in Europe in terms of private sector importance, the situation in 2016 is far from the one between 1994 and 2000. In creating Network Rail to succeed Railtrack, the British State took over network management. After the Hatfield derailment, no major disaster linked with infrastructure state was reported since 2000 due to massive investments in network refurbishing. Today, Britain's rail network is probably safer than its French equivalent. The issue of European railway systems being to provide efficient public services, the main expenses concern infrastructure to maintain networks at an acceptable level. Railway infrastructures are necessarily loss making : that is why State involvement in networks is crucial for the future of an efficient European train system.

The dismantlement of British Rail also marked the end of Britain's railway community. Indeed, since the vanishing of the nationalised company, the feeling of belonging to the great railway family seems more and more frayed. Today in Britain, the time when being a British Rail employee meant "a job for life" is clearly gone. The use of interim and the profusion of fixed term contracts since 1994 killed the corporative spirit. If some employees, recruited under British Rail still remain today, their number will fatally decrease in the next years with retirements. The last bastions of British Rail times will disappear from Britain's railway landscape. Only the double arrow logo, used since 1965, seems to stoically survive all the changes of Britain's railways.

Annexes

Pour désigner un métier :	
Black Princes	Engine cleaners
Bogie man	Carriage repairman
Desk jockey	Clerk
Engine-man	Driver
Banjo player, coolie	Fireman
Foreign Legion	Engine cleaners on loan to other depots
Brush, tail lamp	Guard
Submarine commander	Conductor
Whiplash firecracker	Foreman
Pour désigner le matériel, les infrastructures :	
Banjo	Firing shovel
Bible	The railway Rule Book
Biscuit	Signal line token
Boomerang	A return ticket
Bug dust	Small coal
Bullseye	Signal light
Cripple	Wagon of repair
Christmas tree	Multiple aspect signal

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Postcard : ASLEF strike of 1982 : waiting for a train in London