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Title : « Steaming with the Orient-Express at the turning of the 20th century : the birth of new ‘travelling elites’ ? »

« The train shook the loose glass of Gothic Swiss railway stations. For twenty-nine minutes the Simplon offered its large iron symphony. Then the baned roads and rice fields of Piedmont. Then a station leading off into nothing, a great cistern of silence and shadows that was Venice. In the morning a zinc-coloured north wind overbent the Croatian corn in the plains. Pigs, striped black and white as with racing colours, betrayed the presence of Serbia. (...) At Vinkovci we got rid of the velvet Rumanians, (...) Oriental sun beat upon the Bulgar plains (...). At last, after the desert of Thrace, under a sky full of constellations (...) the Sea of Marmara stretched before us through a breach in the Byzantine wall... »¹.

This is how Paul Morand, describes the itinerary of the Orient-Express during its Belle-Epoque, at the turning of the 19th century. One of his contemporaries, the novelist Camille Gex, chooses this train as the place for the plot of a novel, bearing its name. Beatrice Morton, the protagonist, portrayed as one of the indisputable queens of the high-society and idol of society life, disappointed by his boy friend betrayal, she wants to run away. Getting at the train station, she has no idea of where to go. One employee suggests her the Orient-Express. All of a sudden, her imagination was captured by the sight of white minarets and domes, facing the boats on the Bosphorus².

At the crossroads of technological advances, the advent of ‘leisure-time’ culture and the taste for Orientalism and adventure, the Orient-Express was created in 1883 by the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits* (CIWL). It was conceived and established by a Belgian civil engineer, Georges Nagelmackers. Anxious to emulate his American idole, George Pullman, who had developed in the 1860s, a railroad sleeping car, known also as palace car, he needed all his skills as deal-maker and negociator to make arrangements with various mistrustful railway administrations across Europe, during a period of exacerbating interstate rivalries and acute nationalism³. This process took several years and required finding solutions to problems ranging from technical details of locomotive couplings to regulations concerning the security of wine lockers.

When the Orient Express was launched, on June 1883, the train, consisting of three coaches, two sleepers, and a dining-room, departed from the Gare de l’Est in Paris and ended up in Constantinople (Istanbul), via Vienna, Budapest, and Bucharest. A connection from London and Ostend on the Belgian Channel coast, the Ostend Vienna Express, was added in 1894. A service linking Calais with the Mediterranean, the Train Bleu, soon followed,

¹ See Paul Morand, *Fancy goods, open all night stories*, New York, New directions, 1984 (1900) (translated from french by Ezra Pound).

² See Camille Gex, *Orient-Express*, Paris, 1929, p.42.

³ For the visionary Belgian entrepreneur, as well as for progressist thinkers in the first half of the 19th century, the railroad appeared as the technical guarantor of democracy, harmony between nations, peace and progress.

whereas since 1894, travellers with destination the Ottoman capital, were supposed to be hosted at the Pera Palace, another legendary ‘encounter arena’ bringing together members of older and new elites. When the Simplon Tunnel opened in 1906, the direct Orient Express was initiated, going through Lausanne, Milan, Venice, Zagreb, Belgrade (where branches from Athens and Munich linked up with the train) and Sofia. By the outbreak of the WWI, there was a variety of ‘Orient’ and other express, allowing passengers to reach cities such as Berlin, Copenhagen and Moscow, usually with a connecting service to part of the main Orient Express service.

At the eve of the First Balkan War, the Orient-Express stopped at Budapest⁴. The onset of the Great War in 1914 saw Orient Express services suspended once more. They resumed at the end of the conflict in 1918 and flourished during the interwar period. On May 1921, an agreement had been reached between the railway companies interested and the Compagnie des Wagons-Lits, providing that the Simplon Orient-Express was to run daily⁵. On 1929, it was a five-day delay in a snowstorm at Çerkezköy in Turkey that inspired Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*. The outburst of the Second World War in 1939 interrupted again the service, which did not resume until 1945.

From Edmont About’s *De Pontoise à Stamboul* (1884), till Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), a series of travellers, real or fictional, contributed to the reputation of this train and the hotel found in its terminus. The aim of this paper is on the one hand, to study the sociological profile and social coexistence of passengers leading to the emergence of new spaces of elites’ sociability and mobility. On the other hand, it seeks to analyze how this socio-cultural phenomenon and its actors, have been perceived by contemporary societies, especially the French and the British ones.

In order to answer to these questions, my principal sources are, travel memoirs, articles published in the general Press, in French or British newspapers, photographic archives of CIWL, literary documents, novels or theatre plays inspired by the Orient Express’ ‘adventures’. The glamorous and rich history of this legendary train, has indeed frequently lent itself to the plot of books which are precious sources for cultural history.

⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette*, Thursday 17 October 1912

⁵ *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wednesday 25 May 1921

An encounter arena between 'old' and 'new' elites

On Saturday 21 October 1905, the OE had been detained near to Belgrade, because of an accident which befell a freight train. Among the passengers, there were also the two daughters of the tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria, with their suite and a number of Englishmen bound for Constantinople. Serbia's King, Peter the first, « visited the Princess by noon.»⁶, we can read in the *Scotsman*. Some years later, another member of Balkans' ancient aristocracy, the Rumanian prince Stirbey, was travelling in the OE, when he informed an Austrian police agent before reaching Salzburg that a Rumanian fellow-passenger had confessed to having received money in Bucarest to poison him on the journey, « but would not do it ; the man who was arrested at Salzburg, declared that the Prince's story was a fable... »⁷.

As a matter of fact, monarchs, aristocrats, noblemen and noblewomen, patronized indeed the Orient express from its very beginning. Among them, we can mention headstates, such as the the King Leopold of Belgium (see photo below), the King of Albania Zog, the shah Reza Pahlavi, the King of England, Edouard VII, the king of Rumania, Carol 1st, the tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria, the Ottoman sultan Abdül-Hamid. Besides these representatives of ancien regime elites, members of new era elites, were also using the Orient Express as a means of transport and sociability. These new elites were belonging to different spheres of political, economic or cultural life and they were made up by presidents, businessmen, diplomats, journalists, senior civil servants or artists.



The King Leopold of Belgium (source : digital archives of CIWL)

⁶ *The Scotsman*, Saturday 21 October 1905

⁷ *The Scotsman*, Thursday 26 February 1931



American President Roosevelt, 1909 (source : digital archives of CIWL)

Concerning the media elites, John Dos Passos, travels in the early 1920s with Mrs Wellesley, who writes for the *Atlantic Monthly*⁸. Edmond About, was one of the French journalists, to have been invited to take part in the inaugural journey of the Orient-Express in 1883. In his memoirs, *De Pontoise à Stamboul*, draws up an exhaustive list of the privileged passengers. Nagelmackers the founder of the OE, was sitting next to the Belgian Minister of civil engineering. M. Grimpel, from the French Ministry of Finance, was chatting with M. Von Scala, a senior civil servant of the Austrian railways, accompanied by her wife and her sister-in-law⁹. We could also come across M. Wiener, general secretary of the *Chemins de Fer orientaux*, brother of the French-Austrian scientist-explorer who came close to rediscover Machu-Picchu during his explorations in Peru. Arriving at the Bucharest train station, Edmond About, meets Frédéric Damé, a young Parisian journalist, who had founded a French-speaking newspaper, *L'Indépendance roumaine*.

One of Edmond About's fellow passengers, was Henri Opper de Blowitz. The king of correspondents, left Paris in 1883, for Constantinople, on the inauguration train of the Orient-Express. On his road to Istanbul, in order to interview Abdül-Hamid, Missak-effendi, the first Secretary of the Ottoman Embassy in Paris, « a delightful man, a clever diplomatist, always pleasant and amiable, as well as a good linguist and an excellent functionary », had travelled with him¹⁰. Eugène Guibout, a french physician, met during his journey in 1887, a distinguished Catholic from the town of Alep, whose mission was to bring back to Istanbul,

⁸ See John dos Passos, *Orient-Express*, Monaco, éd.du Rocher, 1991 (1927), p.17.

⁹ See Edmond About, *De Pontoise à Stamboul*, Paris, 1884, p.19-20.

¹⁰ See A. Opper de Blowitz, *Memoirs of M. de Blowitz*, New York, 1903, p.242.

the son of Amil pacha, one of sultan's most intimate consultants¹¹. During the snowstorm that paralysed in 1929, the OE for fifteen days on the Thracian plain, 50 miles from Constantinople, Rene Giloux, a diplomatic courier, on his return to Paris from Turkey, tells a graphic story of the ordeal of his fellow passengers¹². For his part, the British Ambassador in Constantinople reported the safety of Major Custance, the King's Messenger, who was on this OE. On the same train we could also find Mrs Poole, an English girl, who was going out to Constantinople, to become private secretary to Sir George Clark, the Ambassador¹³. Very often, journalists and diplomats were travelling together on the OE, especially during major political events or turmoils in the international relations. At the eve of the First Balkan War, the director of *Le Matin*, Stephane Lauzanne, is on the OE, next to senior civil servants getting back to the Ottoman Empire, war correspondents directing themselves to the battlefields, diplomats returning to their countries. Leon Pissard, general manager of the Ottoman Public Debt, travels with Alidor Delzant, Raymond Poincaré's secretary, Lionel James, *The Times* war correspondent, Georges Raymond for the *L'Illustration*, coming back from Tripolitaine where he had covered for his newspaper, the Italo-Ottoman conflict. At Bucarest, M. Gregueil, secretary of France's Embassy, announces them the proclamation of war between Turkey and Bulgaria, the ally of Serbia. Henceforth, there was no doubt any more : « Balkans will be torn apart. The war correspondents who were afraid of an ultimate settlement, they are feeling better !.»¹⁴.

Another category of OE passengers are made up by famous artists or writers. Sarah Bernhardt, Greta Garbo or Agatha Christie¹⁵ are some of them. The OE is also used by Third Republic's educational elites. In a telegram sent by the Quay d'Orsay to the French ambassador at Bucarest, is notified that a group of professors appointed to Rumanian school establishments, were bound to leave Paris with the OE¹⁶.

Numerous are also the businessmen who are travelling with the legendary train. Next to the most famous ones, who contributed to the construction of its legend, such as the 5% tycoon, Galouste Gulbenkian or the king of the armements, Basil Zaharoff, the French physician Eugène Guibout, informs us that he made a nice acquaintance with Casimir, « a Parisian travelling to the Ottoman capital, in order to take care of his financial interests »¹⁷. The American novelist John dos Passos, travels with an agent of Standard Oil¹⁸. The OE is also a meeting point for financial transactions. On August 1896, in the Queen's Bench Division, Mr Justice Wright, had before him the case of Ellesmere v. Maimon. Plaintiff was Louisa Ellesmere, a married lady, and the defendant was a Paris financier, Bernard Maïmon. The action was to recover 375£ under an agreement. Plaintiff first met the defendant in the OE and lent him money to assist him in negotiating a railway concession in Albania. « On October 15th last an agreement was entered into by which the defendant undertook to pay the plaintiff

¹¹ See Eugène Guibout, *Les vacances d'un médecin*, Paris, 1880-1892, (vol. 8), p.14

¹² *Belfast News-Letter*, Friday 22 February 1929

¹³ *Sheffield Independent*, Tuesday 12 February 1929

¹⁴ See Stephane Lauzanne, *Au chevet de la Turquie : quarante jours de guerre*, Paris, 1913, p.13-14.

¹⁵ See Constantin Parvulesco, *Orient-Express, un train de rêve*, Boulogne-Billancourt, ETAI, 2012, p.153

¹⁶ Foreign Affairs Minsitry Archives : 142/missions scientifiques : telegram, Paris, August 20th, 1920, n°827

¹⁷ Eugène Guibout, ...*op.cit.*, p.14

¹⁸ John dos Passos, ...*op.cit.*, p.17

£3000 by half-yearly instalments of 375£. The first instalment was paid, but the second, due in April, was not»¹⁹. On October 1928, Mr Hirschler, an American business man, was injured in a collision between the OE and a fast train from Sibiu at Recea, in the Brasov district²⁰. Almost thirty years ago, on June 1891, the OE was the target of a breathtaking attack by brigands looking for ransom. The Englishman reported to have been captured in the attack upon the train, « turns out to be the British amabassador's cook, who is an Hungarian », we could read in the *Daily Telegraph*²¹. According to the articles published in French and British newspapers, the brigands intended the capture of Mr Ralli, a financier, who was supposed to be on the train, and of Edgar Vincent, governor at that time of the Imperial Ottoman Bank, whom the newspapers had announced as leaving the same night.

The bulk of Press coverage on the Orient-Express, suggests that this was a train solely for the rich. As a matter of fact, the comfortable couchettes were indeed occupied by diplomats, affluent traders, aristocrats, and royal families members, who were served attentively by a vast array of well-trained staff. A first class of accomodation, costed 300 francs for a single journey from Paris to Constnantinople, which was equivalent to around two weeks' wages for a manual worker of the day. Nevertheless, second and third class carriages attached to the train were also used extensively for shorter journeys by poorer people traveling in cramped conditions. But even within the first class compartments, not all passengers were belonging to wealthy elites. On January 1929, when the Orient Express reached the Turkish frontier, the strange sight of a traveller gesticulating wildly to the guard of the train, dressed only in his jacket and shirt caused considerable amusement. The traveller, a Swiss, explained to the guard, that having bought a new suit of clothes at Constantinople and wishing to avoid paying duty customs at the frontier, he had shut himself up in his compartiment and proceeded to put on his new clothes. He threw the old suit which he had taken off, outside the carriage window on to the railway line, some miles from the Sirkedji, the Constantinople terminus of the OE. When however, he opened the new parcel containing his new suit of clothes, he found that his tailor had only sent a jacket and vest and had forgotten to send a pait of trousers²².

Next to individual accounts for passengers travelling with the OE, there are descriptions in travel memoirs, newspapers articles or literary works, which show us the social and geographical diversity of people within this train. At the dawn of the 20th century, Paul Morand observes during his journey « usual French dressmakers and, less elderly, millioners (...) returning to Constantinople with a new lot of models (...) »²³ as welle as Sepharade Jews getting back at the Jerusalem of the Balkans, the city of Salonika. The correspondent of the londonian newspaper, *The Sphere*, draws a panoramic social fresco of the OE mixed public : « Here is a naval captain who has just retired. He goes to seek a quiet heaven in England where he may anchor for the rest of his ife. Here are some French, a few Italians. Here is an English diplomat, and here a white-faced nervous Austrian who wanders up and

¹⁹ *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 13 August 1896

²⁰ *Gloucester Citizen*, Saturday 27 October 1928

²¹ *Jersey Independent and Daily Telegraph*, Saturday 06 June 1891

²² *Nottingham Evening Post*, Monday 21 January 1929

²³ See Paul Morand, ...*op.cit.*

down the corridor chafing at the slowness of the train, which stops at almost every little wayside point(...) »²⁴.

The novel of Graham Greene *Stamboul train*, published in 1932, focuses on the lives of individuals aboard the train in its three-day journey from Ostend to Istanbul. Among the central characters, we can find Richard Czinner, a doctor, school teacher, and revolutionary communist leader. He was born into a working-class family, but through the sacrifice of his parents became a physician, who served the poor people of Belgrade. Carleton Myatt, a Jewish currant trader from London travelling on business to Istanbul. Mabel Warren, a journalist who recognizes Dr Czinner, and is following him to report on his activities for a popular London newspaper. Coral Musker, is a chorus girl, traveling to a new job she has been offered as a dancer in Istanbul and Josef Grünlich, a thief, who boards the train in Vienna, after a burglary ended in murder.

Another novel of the Interwar period, reflects the socio-geographical diversity of OE passengers. Agatha Christie gets Hercule Poirot, her internationally famous detective, boarding the Orient Express in Istanbul. Taking his place in the wagon-restaurant, he stares at his fellow travellers : « At the table opposite him there were three men. They were, he guessed, single travellers graded and placed there by the unerring judgment of the restaurant attendants. A big, swarthy Italian was picking his teeth with gusto. Opposite him, a spare, neat Englishman had the expressionless disapproving face of the well-trained servant. Next to the Englishman was a big American in a loud suit-possibly a commercial traveller. (...) At a small table, sitting very upright, was one of the ugliest old ladies he had ever seen. It was an ugliness of distinction, it fascinated rather than repelled. (...) round her neck was a collar of very large pearls which, improbable though it seemed, were real. Her hands were covered with rings. (...) That is Princess Dragomiroff, said M. Bouc in a low tone. She is a Russian. Her husband realized all this money before the Revolution and invested it abroad. She is extremely rich. A cosmopolitan. (...) At the next table, a small one, sat Colonel Arbuthnot, alone. (...) » At the far end of the dining room, was a couple leaning forward and talking animatedly together. The man wore English clothes of loose tweed, but he was not English. The young woman opposite him was dressed in a tight-fitting little black coat and skirt, white satin blouse, small chic black toque perched at the fashionable outrageous angle. (...) She was smoking a cigarette in a long holder. Her manicured hands had deep red nails. She wore one large emerald set in platinum. Hungarian Embassy, I believe, he said (...) ».

Writing in *Le Figaro*, at the aftermath of his journey, Georges Boyer tells his readers that, « when the journey began, the majority of passengers did not know each other. At the end, all these people of different ages and social positions, were sharing sentiments of sympathy and were sorry that these charming relationships had to come to an end »²⁵. Echoing these thoughts, Hercule Poirot tells his friend, the wagon-lit director, as they survey browsers and sluicers in the Orient-Express's dining car, that « All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At

²⁴ *The Sphere*, Saturday 17 February 1923

²⁵ Georges Boyer, « L'Orient à toute vapeur », *Le Figaro*, 20 octobre 1883

the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never, perhaps to see each other again »²⁶. Such comments, bring this encounter arena near to Erving Goffman notion of total institution, where usual divisions between different social spheres, break down ²⁷. As sociologists Chris Rojek and John Urry have pointed out, traveling place venues, may acquire many of total institutions' characteristics. However, they are differing from classical asylum-like institutions, in that the exposure of individuals is short term.

No matter how entangled passengers lives' become aboard the OE, there are still some codes of behaviour, perceived or acting as distinction signs. Thus, despite its efforts to conceal his socio-professional origins, an ambitious French burglar, had been arrested at Orsova in Hungary, on February 1888. He was trying to escape from his country, after the great jewel robbery of the Boulevard de la Madeleine. During his journey on the OE, he entered freely in conversation with his fellow travellers, and « to inspire further confidence, he paraded on his coat, the 'red ribbon' which has lately been in such a bad repute. A curious part of his conduct was that he introduced himself at the dining table of the train restaurant in his own name, Renard. At the repast, he entered into the most minute details of an imaginary career and stated that he was the proprietor of a Republican Newspaper, published at Royan »²⁸. Besides common behavioural codes, a taste for luxury and comfort, were also shared by OE travelling elites.

²⁶ See Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, Penguin, 1948 (1934), p.26.

²⁷ See Erving Goffman, *Asylums :essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*, New York, 1961

²⁸ *Lancashire Evening Post*, Thursday 09 February 1888

A place of luxury, cosmopolitanism and sensualism

« I travel by the Orient Express, incontestably the best train in Europe » wrote Frances Elliot, in her *Diary of an idle woman in Constantinople*, on 1893. This luxury train offered its passengers a comfortable travel from Gare de l'Est to the Sirkeci station. Comfortably warmed, brilliantly lighted, « with its snug beds and soft linen, its well-kept table and choice wines, and its select company of prosperous travellers »²⁹, the OE was a showcase of luxury and confort, at a time, when travel conditions were still rough and dangerous.



Advertisement poster of the CIWL (source : digital archives of the CIWL)

Its dining car was made up of three compartments. The first one was a saloon reserved for ladies. The second one was a lunch room. But it also served as a saloon where passengers could browse a book, read their newspaper, smoke a cigarette, converse with each other, or just sip their coffee sitting in a comfortable armchair. The third one was the dining room. French physician, Eugène Guibout, is highlighting, the hygienic and daily life comforts offered

²⁹ *London Evening Standard*, Monday 25 March 1889

by the Orient-Express³⁰. Georges Boyer, journalist of *Figaro*, praises the quality of dishes served in its wagon-restaurant. The marquis de Beauvoir in 1898 compares the cuisine of OE to the one served in gastronomic temples such as Paillard, or the Café anglais³¹. At the turning of the 20th century, the Orient-Express is perceived as the absolute reference of and for luxury. John Dos Passos, in his journey in the Southeastern Europe during the 1920s, he travels with a French dandy, whose motto is : « Looking out for luxury, you have always to look out for luxury »³². For his part, French novelist, Albert Flament, highlights in his essay on palaces and sleeping cars, that luxury trains passengers were travelling for style, because ordinary people could not afford it ; by egoism, in order to escape from the daily tedious social or family tasks and from boredom³³. The correspondent of *Leeds Mercury*, writes in relation to his flying trip to the East, that it constitutes the last expression of perfection in travelling : « The narrative of the journey reads in many parts like the story of a royal process. No sooner had the train moved out of the Northern Railway station, than a troop of silent waiters, issued from the obscurity of the moveable kitchen, headed by a dignified butler, who announced the dinner was served. »³⁴ Nevertheless, this time among the travellers were not only members of the old aristocratic elites, but also representatives of Republican elites.

For both categories, luxury was a product and sign of wealth, a wealth which went beyond the satisfaction of regular or objective needs. The need for luxury, pushes people to consume the extravagant, the less common, the best, which is associated with the esthetic pleasure, or the exhibition of power based on the accumulation of wealth. Edmond About states the luxurious toilettes or the dining car provided with everything and even with the superfluous³⁵. Expressed into terms used by Bourdieuan sociologists, travel as well as taste, has obviously a purpose that goes beyond its own satisfaction ; it therefore should be understood as a key ingredient in elites' social life in that it suggests a distinctive virtue and act as a signifier of status.

Following the anthropological approach of Mary Douglas, *In the World of Goods*, where they presented goods as an 'information system'³⁶, I would like to advocate that travelling with the OE, constituted a consumption practice, revealing itself as a ritual of symbolic communication which gave place to the formation of an encounter arena where different categories of social, economic, political or cultural elites, both born with golden spoon or self-

³⁰ Dr. E. Guibout, ...*op.cit.*, p.11

³¹ See Jean-Paul Caracalla, « When Lucullus dined in the Orient-Express », in Paul Bianchini, *Agenda des grands express : les voyageurs des grands express*, Paris, 1989.

³² John dos Passos, ...*op.cit.*, p.17

³³ Albert Flament, *Palaces et sleepings*, Paris, 1908, p.32

³⁴ *Leeds Mercury*, 24 January 1884

³⁵ Edmond About, ...*op.cit.*, p.25

³⁶ For the historical study of consumption, the cultural turn involved a considerable shift in perspective and substance. The focus moved from the producer and retailer to the end user and to the anthropological interest in symbolic meaning and ritual practices.

made, could interact. As such, the OE, and more concretely its dining or smoking room, created identity, meaning and relationships. And they acted as means of social inclusion or exclusion. If we consider together with scholars of the cultural turn, that consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over, then the OE dining and smoking room are places where new and old elites came together, displaying each one its tendency to luxurious ostentatious state of being or the demand for comfortable state of travelling.

Another characteristic of these new travelling elites, were their assertion of cosmopolitanism and their perception as cosmopolitan. On March 1889, OE was very full. Diplomats were returning to their posts, politicians were hurrying about the new Europe, « busy with the internecine squabbles of the little States ; officers rejoining the army of the Black Sea from leave ; business men, lured in mid-winter from the ease of London, Paris, or New York by the bait of Hungarian ore or Romanian oil, or by the more shadowy promise of Turkish or Persian concessions ; women who left a trace of perfume on the warmed air, or showed the gleam of a white arm, the toss of an aigrette, through a compartment door ; sallow-faced Greeks, an enigmatic Turk or two, the nationality and profession of this cosmopolitan band of travellers were as varied as the itinerary of the train on its four-day from Paris to Bucharest. »³⁷.

This cosmopolitan ambiance in the OE, was perceived as jeopardised during the Great War, from a franco-british point of view. The *Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*,³⁸ reports that an adventurous special correspondent of the *Petit Parisien*, succeeded in slipping into and out of Constantinople, at a time when the Ottoman state had allied itself to the Central Powers. The menu, he deplores, « was in German, the maître d'hôtel was German, and from all sides he heard only German spoken ». As a matter of fact, Orient-Express faced competition from Mitropa Gessellschaft during the Great War. Founded in 1916, it was Imperial Germany's attempt to break Nackelmacker's CIWL monopoly over long-distance European de luxe train travel. As a result, the Pera Palace Hotel, « one of those huge caravanserais where in ordinary times one meets all the cosmopolitanism and exotism of the world, where Princes rub shoulders with swindlers, and high-born ladies meet their ex-chambermaids who insult them with their extravagant luxury », was completely 'germanised', concludes the French newspaper correspondent. But what 'cosmopolitanism' stands for exactly in the OE context ?

The word 'cosmopolitan', has been used to describe a wide variety of views in moral and socio-political philosophy. A typical element of different definitions, is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their origins, are, or should be citizens in a single community. Different versions of cosmopolitanism envision this community in different ways, some focusing on political institutions, others on moral norms or relationships, and still others focusing on shared markets or forms of cultural expression. However, I think that talking about cosmopolitanism within the OE, it indicates first and above all, sharing an encounter arena by persons of different political backgrounds, various citizenships, but having in common, their belonging to old or new elites, who led an urbane life-style and were fond of traveling, cherishing a network of international contacts, or feeling at home everywhere, especially in luxurious hotels or palace cars.

³⁷ *London Evening Standard*, Monday 25 March 1889

³⁸ *Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*, 28 September 1915

In such a perspective, Paul Bourget, notes in his book, titled *Cosmopolis*, that the cosmopolitan society is mainly due to the development of transport networks, especially the railroads. Saying so, he has in mind the case of the Orient-Express, the first transnational train in Europe. Abel Hermant, the French essayist whose writings, drawing popular mores of Belle Epoque are plenty of irony, echoes Paul Bourget views and points out the link, existing according to him, between the Cosmopolis and the luxury trains, such as the OE. One of his characters, declares that « we are nowhere else feeling at home as in the Calais-Nice, the Paris-Vienne or the Sud-Express »³⁹. Behind their remarks, there is a critical approach to this phenomenon, either because they stigmatise the luxurious lifestyle of these ‘cosmopolitans’, either, especially in the case of Paul Bourget, because they consider as superficial and futile this cosmopolitan stance, compared to the ‘racialist’ determinism upon individual identities, he was obsessed with. Although both of them were assiduous travellers, used to stroll all over Europe and interact with elites from different categories and origins, they belong to the traditionalist political culture, in terms of Serge Bernstein’s taxonomy⁴⁰. Paul Bourget joined the Action Française of Charles Maurras, a nationalist, antidreyfusard, antisemitic, xenophobic political group, whereas Abel Hermant, was a collaborationist during the 2WW.

Apart from their cosmopolitan side, travelling elites with the OE were also perceived as actors of libertarian/libertine attitudes which fuelled the imagination of novelists at the end of the 19th century and during the Interwar period. Sitting in the Calais-Cologne-Constantinople Orient Express, Carleton Myatt remembered spending hours in his youth, reading railway romances-stories of king’s messengers seduced by beautiful countesses⁴¹. We catch again Lola Montez scent in Maurice Decobra best seller, *The Madonna of the sleeping cars*. Sensualist lady Diana Wynham, takes leave of her loyal secretary and lover, Prince Séliman, as she boards the Orient-Express at Paris Gare de l’Est : ‘I have a ticket for Constantinople’ she tells him. « But I may stop off at Vienna or Budapest. That depends absolutely on the colour of the eyes of my neighbour in the compartment. I have reserved rooms at the Imperial, on the Ring, and at the Hungaria, on the quay at Budapest ; but I am just as likely to sleep in some horrible hotel in Josephstadt or in a palace on the hillside at Budapest »⁴². With a string of extra-marital affairs behind her, Connie Chatterley still disdained the Orient-Express, denouncing, ‘the atmosphere of vulgar depravity on board trains de luxe’⁴³. The image of OE as a place of elites’ debauchery, reaches its pinnacle with Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Les onze mille verges ou les amours d’un hospodar* (1907)⁴⁴. His hero, the wealthy and handsome hospodar Vibescu, a title of Ancient Regime Rumanian elites, travels from Bucharest to Paris in his pursuit of hedonistic pleasures. The outrageous amorous adventures of the Balkan prince, ranging from the brothels of Paris to the bath-houses of the Orient, participated in the legend of OE as a place of sensuality and eroticism. Popular theatre plays, such as the ‘*Le contrôleur des Wagons-Lits*’ reflects and promotes this social imagery. Controller’s wife, was worrying because his husband had completely changed his mood, becoming more joyful,

³⁹ Abel Hermant, *Trains de luxe*, Paris, 1909

⁴⁰ See Serge Bernstein, *Les cultures politiques en France*, Paris, Seuil, 2003

⁴¹ See Graham Greene, *Stamboul train*, Penguin, 1975 (1932), p.121.

⁴² See Maurice Dekobra, *Madonna of the sleeping-cars*, London, 1959 (1925), p.221

⁴³ See D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Love*, 1960 (1928), Penguin, p.285.

⁴⁴ Translated in english under the title, *The debauched hospodar : memoirs of a young rakehell*.

since he began working in this train, where women can travel alone and undress themselves in their own compartments⁴⁵. Elite passengers' sexuality is also put in stage in the French theatre play *Orient-Express*. The poster of this play displays the train conductor, figurehead of the International Company of Wagons-Lits, turning his back in erotic scenes taking place in the train's compartments and implying members of ecclesiastic, military or financial elites. The stories of train attendants hiring prostitutes for bored gentlemen and even bishops by telegraphing the station ahead, were undoubtedly true, but probably not as frequent as the novelists and theatre writers would have us believe⁴⁶.

No matter how scandalous such attitudes could appear to a puritan public in France's Belle-Epoque, the fact of women travelling alone, shows us how trains such as the OE became an opportunity for women to defy masculin order and seek their autonomy as travelers, in an era where suffragette movements claiming equal civil rights for women were making their way through in several European societies.



Poster of the theatre play, *Orient-Express* of Oscar Sachs in 1895 (source : digital archives of the CIWL)

As Thomas Cecil Farrer and E. Foxwell highlight in their study on English and foreign express trains⁴⁷, « the 'emancipation of Woman' without claiming that this movement arose directly from the opening of the railways, we may firmly maintain that it has been greatly strengthened by the mere fact of railway travel. ». As far as elites encounter arenas are

⁴⁵ See Alexandre Bisson, *Le Contrôleur des Wagons-Lits*, Paris, 1900, p.2-4.

⁴⁶ See Martin Page, *The lost pleasures of the great trains*, 1975

⁴⁷ See E. Foxwell, T. C. Farrer, *Express trains, english and foreign : Being a Statistical account of all the Expresses trains of the world*, London, 1889, p.72.

concerned, trains as the OE, contributed to overcome gender-related barriers, together with socioprofessional, geographical or national ones.

Conclusion

Throwing different passengers together in a closed little society, Orient-Express, participated together with other sumptuous means of transport, such as the luxury liners, to the creation of encounter arenas for composite elites, political, scientific, artistic, economic, media. Royalty, nobles, diplomats, business people and members of the bourgeoisie met each other aboard, motivated by their desire for luxury and confort. Some of the main characteristics of this encounter arena, was its transnational, transideological, transocial character. Perceived by outside observers but also by insiders as a space of sensualism/erotism and cosmopolitanism, contrasted with puritan and nationalist reflexes, widely spread within European societies at the turning of the 19th century. Altering the term « café society », coined by Maury Henry Biddle Paul, the famous society columnist for the New York American, in order to describe 'beautiful people' gatherings in fashionable cafés or restaurants in modernity's metropolises such as London, Paris or New York, we could say that a 'luxury train society' arose with the inauguration of the OE, replacing older ways of traveling in elegant but lonely patterns for elites under for instance the ritual of the Grand Tour during the Romantic Era.

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