

HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE, A COUNTRY FULL OF EMPTY HIGHWAYS

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Spain, "a beautiful country full of empty highways", [they say that said](#) a former German foreign minister. A provocative phrase, but one that invites us to think about the reasons why we are where we are in the midst of circus and with unemployment rates that are completely far from the European average. What has happened? Quite simply, what the author of the article recently published in El País shows, [Jose Ignacio Torreblanca](#), titled '[Hardware](#)' and '[software](#)'.

While in the last twenty years we have used European funds and the public budget to disproportionately increase road infrastructure (and secondly, high-speed rail infrastructure), other countries are now reaping the rewards of their commitment to other smarter forms of development. This is the case of Denmark, with which the author illustrates the example, a good measure of things. This country decided years ago to stabilize its educational system and focus public investment on this, and today it is, as they say now, more resilient to the crisis:

In 2009, Spain not only invested three times as much in infrastructure as Germany (1.79% of GDP compared to 0.69%), but as we have learned from the Ministry of Public Works himself, these investments were made without "the analysis of the demand forecast to assess the economic viability of the works or the study of maintenance needs".

So while the Government spent a part of the 17,200 million annual budget for nice infrastructures such as a high-speed double entrance to Galicia or Cantabria, Spain continued without a public network for early childhood education (0-3 years), had a network of Primary schools that mostly date from the sixties, supported a school failure of 30% in Compulsory Secondary Education, had a Vocational Training victim of historical neglect, did not have any of its 77 universities among the top 150 in the world and was satisfied with employment services incapable of managing the training retraining of the unemployed in an agile and flexible way to guide them to new jobs.

Now we see how mayors demand the State permanently "*make me a ring road*" and regional presidents demand their high-speed line yes or yes. Will we ever see a mayor yell "*I want more scholarships for my youth*"? Difficult. Socially, a **concrete culture** is established that makes us think that only hard infrastructures are the engine of development; they will say that it is a legacy of past hardships, but we have long passed that threshold. The economic theory of regional development has shown that there is a limit from which infrastructure by itself ceases to be a [determinant of economic development](#) and social progress because its benefits are marginal compared to [opportunity cost of that investment](#) (stop making investments with higher returns in the long term) and the [economic costs of these infrastructures](#) (the negative externalities so well studied by transport economics).

A report entitled [Socio-economic analysis of PEIT 2005-2020](#) gives some Figures on the size of the commitment that has been made to infrastructures and how the comparison with Europe reflects this oversizing:

✘ *Motorways and dual carriageways in Spain increased from 2,008 kilometers in 1980 to 9,571 in 2001. In percentage terms, this increase was 376%.*

(...)

If the objectives set out in the PEIT are carried out, by 2020 Spain would have a 15,000-kilometre motorway and expressway network, becoming, with 370 kilometers of expressways per inhabitant, the first country in the European Union in this section. Other countries such as Italy, France and Germany would be more than 200 kilometers away, and the United Kingdom more than 300.

(...)

For decades, state governments have been defending the theory that identifies investment in transport

infrastructure - with the highest possible construction parameters - as the main instrument for promoting development. This theory has been assumed by the autonomous governments and by businessmen. To the point that any proposal for transport infrastructure with lower parameters is identified with marginalization and comparative grievance. But public opinion does not agree with giving infrastructure the highest priority. Among eight priorities, it values this as the last in public investment (CIS, 2005). On the other hand, such a theory is not supported by empirical evidence and is contrary to the opinion of most economists (especially in transportation economics).

The thought of cement is installed in the collective subconscious -and the companies of the infrastructure sector installed in the circles of power and influence- and as long as we do not stop thinking that we have crossed the threshold from which the new infrastructures only generate a benefit marginal less than the cost they entail, we will not advance socially. We have built more highways than are needed and we have a huge gap in our public welfare and education system. Of course, the highways are the best in Europe.

Given all this, is it possible to imagine other uses for roads and highways? In other words, will they be there forever or is it possible to imagine that one day, who knows, they could [reused](#) for other uses? Everything is possible. What [we have seen](#) with [old quarries](#), with old urban elevated railways (the well-known case of the [High Line](#) New York), with airports (the case of [Tempelhof](#), in Berlin), and, why not, with motorways. There are already some more or less finished examples. [Parco Solare Sud](#) is a project that seeks to recover the space occupied by the so-called South highway, in Calabria (Italy). More advanced is the case of the [Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project](#), which has recovered (through the demolition of the elevated infrastructure and the discovery of the riverbed that was buried under the old highway, almost 6 kilometers that are now occupied by a [public space](#) in the Korean capital. These are just two examples, but I'm sure we can think of more. Let's find them.....

Opening photo taken from the blog [Ciudad Posible](#).

Table taken from the report [Socioeconomic analysis of PEIT 2005-2020](#)

Photo by [Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project](#) Taken from the project entry on [Wikipedia](#)< /a>.

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