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For a social history of shared taxi services: some notes

Hans-Liudger Dienel, Richard Vahrenkamp

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This special issue of *The Journal of Transport History* focuses on the history of shared taxis, aiming to uncover the complex and partly forgotten history of this service. Parallel to the rise of the passenger car in the twentieth century, taxi services developed (or shifted) from using horse-drawn carriages to using automobiles. In urban transport, taxis services are defined as filling the gap between systems of urban mass transport and the development of motorized individual car ownership. Historical analysis of the taxi business is limited to few places only,¹ such as the well-organized taxi service in Manhattan, recently investigated by Graham Hodges.² In contrast to this geographical limitation, the global scope of the special issue covers case studies in Africa, Latin America and Europe.

Taxi services, and, to a greater extent, shared taxis services, have been a long neglected field of research. In general, most aspects of the history of taxi services are still unwritten. While both individually owned and individually used motor vehicles, as well as public mass transport, have attracted much scholarly attention, taxis services have been seen as marginal. Historically, most urban mass transit companies were large, hierarchical and powerful and displayed great political influence. In order to keep their strength, they fought competitors and eventually gained a monopoly, crowding private bus lines and shared taxis out of the market.³ In the 1930s, the private light railway company in Hamburg even crowded out bicycle traffic in the city to secure its profits.⁴ This led both to a *damnatio memoriae* for the taxi service in general and the rise of the shared taxi experience in particular. There are many reasons for this research gap. For one, the taxi and shared taxi industries tend not to be organized within large corporations. Because of that, there is a lack of corporate archives, which somehow prevented historiographic activities, for historians prefer thematic fields with easily accessed archival sources. Additionally, the taxi industry has historically employed workers mainly from lower social strata and immigrants,⁵ a situation which reinforced its marginality within the transport sector and its historiography.

Furthermore, in terms of the shared taxi, it is problematic to simply define the subject of study: the expression covers a whole range of formats. We can loosely define shared taxis as a service run in big sedan-style motor vehicles (or minibuses), carrying different customers together and stopping on demand, usually along a predefined route or inside an area of the city. This service is typically performed by self-employed drivers, who use their own automobiles, together with an assistant who collects the fee, with the latter often open to negotiation. Nevertheless, in some cities and regions, there are also centralized companies who own or de facto control large fleets and employ the drivers and fee collectors. Most shared taxis operate in larger cities, and some also connect cities to their hinterlands.

Taken together, these factors – the flexible and malleable definition, the lack of written records, the social status of the drivers – make the shared taxi industry a sort of semi-clandestine shadow economy, with no timetable, no records and sometimes even no legal framework. As such, this topic demands that scholars, like the authors of this special issue, use less classical sources like oral history, newspaper articles and big transit suppliers' reports in their research. In addition, some of the authors here presented used sociological and anthropological approaches, through which they were able to define the multifaceted and alluring history of the shared taxis. The history presented here touches many flourishing research fields, from urban studies to urban sociology, from transit to transport planning and from economic history to development. It is in this landscape that we need a better appraisal of the shared taxi business and a better definition of its history and geographies.

Adding to this perception of illegitimacy, the shared taxi service has long been depicted as an ancillary service, relegated to those areas and continents where a proper, 'modern' transport service was not yet developed, or where widespread poverty demanded such a development. Labelled as marginal and residual, shared taxis have thus been deemed as a 'global south' solution. This turns out, however, to be a false perception. As Adam Hodges points out, shared taxis were a success story in the car-friendly and market-minded United States, where 'jitney buses' began operating in 1914.⁶ In this respect, the trajectories of the shared taxi service in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are also quite remarkable. Anecdotal evidence suggests a black market rides economy in the Soviet Union and in its satellite countries. At the same time, Soviet leaders fantasized about large fleets of rental cars providing motorized transport and fulfilling the 'communist ideal' of free rides, as party leader Nikita Khrushchev envisioned in 1958 as an alternative to individual car ownership.⁷ Following Khrushchev's vision, the German Democratic Republic established a rental service for passenger cars in 1960 with an expected ratio of one hundred cars per one million inhabitants.⁸ Because of the small number of cars provided, however, the concept flopped. Facing these large and open issues, the aim of this special issue is therefore not to provide a comprehensive analysis, but rather to open a new avenue of research. In doing so, as guest editors, we ask for future research on other shared services, such as shared bicycles, etc.

Moving back to shared taxis, the first city investigated in this issue is Paris. In his contribution, Mathieu Flonneau describes Paris as the world metropolis of taxis: since 1890, Paris has had a leading role in the production of passenger cars that were primarily used as taxis and during First World War transportation by taxi aided the French in victory during the famous 1914 Battle of the Marne. In his paper, Flonneau describes the dispute of the powerful Parisian Société des Transports against taxis and shared taxis: the elites of small towns in the Paris hinterland tried to maintain the service against the restrictions imposed by the national and urban regulators. Flonneau describes how the investigators of the Société des Transports spied on shared taxi operations and argues that the weak response of courts to pursue violators of the regulations set up in 1934 to coordinate transport, in fact favoured the Société. Flonneau's paper supports the claim that strong urban mass transport companies pushed out shared taxis in Europe.

Andrey Vozyanov's contribution discusses taxi services in Romania and Ukraine after 1990. These two case studies describe how the downfall of communism in 1989 led to scarcity of fossil fuel and spare parts for light trains and buses, which eventually led to the breakdown of public mass transport. Shared taxi (Marshrutkas as they are known in many Eastern European countries) protagonists took advantage of this mobility gap and developed a grassroots industry. Shared taxi customers praised

the comfort of shared taxis in comparison to public mass transport. However, in the long run, the local elite preferred the dominant transport model of Western Europe – that is without shared taxis: a model that perceived shared taxi services as a ‘Third World’ backward solution.

Looking beyond Europe, Yusuf Magudu presents the shared taxi service in the Nigerian city of Kano. Comparable to Vozyanov’s case studies, shared taxis in Kano also developed as an emergency response to the breakdown of the urban transport system, an effect of the 1980s Nigerian Structural Adjustment Programmes. Magudu explores the beginnings of the taxi service in Kano and its ethnical components, showing again the grassroots element of the shared taxi service. In this Nigerian case, the shared taxi industry developed and flourished, legitimizing itself in the urban landscape and developing an umbrella organization able to manage the growing market.

A second non-European case study is presented by Dhan Zunino Singh. His paper analyses the social history of shared taxis in Buenos Aires during the late 1920s and 1930s (named colectivos) and describes how colectivos emerged to meet the demand of transport in a developing city. Their service supported the growth of the new suburbia, which was not serviced by the privately financed transport company of Buenos Aires. However, the service also expanded parallel to the lines of the transport company and attacked their business. Passengers reported that this new type of transport was quicker and more comfortable – the taxis used large US-American sedan motor vehicles. Even female-only shared taxis were implemented, providing shelter for women from harassment on crowded buses.

The final paper in this issue is by Lela Rekhviashvili and Wladimir Sgibnev, who offer a comparative discussion on ride-sharing practices of the company Uber and the Eastern European marshrutkas. In a critical social and economic appraisal of the two services, the authors detect a trend toward lower quality of the service and lower protection for the workers in the Uber service, and demand a fresh approach to the so far too uncritically praised sharing economy.

Our aim is indeed to have this special issue of JTH as a first step toward a comparative and global history of the shared taxi business and experience. We are especially grateful to the participants of two sessions on shared taxis at the Annual Conference of T2M in Caserta 2015, as well as to those involved in the two workshops within the Marshrutka project, coordinated by Wladimir Sgibnev and funded by Volkswagen Foundation.⁹

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Notes

1N. Papayanis, 'The Development of the Paris Cab Trade, 1855–1914', *The Journal of Transport History*, 8:1 (1987), 52–65. G. Mom, 'Costs, Technology and Culture. Propelling the early taxicab, 1900–25', *The Journal of Transport History*, 24:2 (2003), 199–221.

2G. Hodges, *Taxi! A Social History of the New York City Cabdriver* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

3For the case of Paris, see M. Flonneau, 'City infrastructures and city dwellers: Accommodating the automobile in twentieth-century Paris', *The Journal of Transport History*, 27:1 (2006), 93–114.

4Ch. Strupp, *Nahverkehr und Nationalsozialismus. Die Hamburger Hochbahn AG im 'Dritten Reich'* (München, Dölling und Galitz, 2010).

5W. Sgibnev and A. Vozyanov, 'Post-Soviet marshrutkas. Flexible mobility in times of transformation', *T2M Newsletter*, 1 (2014), 15–7. As Gopa Samanta and Sumita Roy pointed out, the hand-pulled rickshaws are rarely the focus of research or debate because of their marginal status: G. Samanta and S. Roy, 'Mobility in the margins: Hand-pulled Rickshaws in Kolkata', *Transfers*, 3:3 (2013), 62–78.

6A. Hodges, 'Roping the wild jitney. The jitney bus craze and the rise of the urban autobus system', *Planning Perspectives*, 21:3 (2006), 253–76. See also R. Eckert and G. Hilton, 'The jitneys', *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 15 (1972), 293–325; B. Brownell, 'The notorious jitney and the urban transport crisis in Birmingham in the 1920s', *The Alabama Review* 25 (1972), 105–18; D. Davis, 'The jitney bus and corporate capitalism in the Canadian City, 1914–1929', *Urban History Review*, 18:2 (1989), 103–22.

7L. Siegelbaum (ed.), *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008).

8H.-L. Dienel, 'Ins Grüne und ins Blaue. Freizeitverkehr im West-Ost-Vergleich. BRD und DDR, 1949-1990', in H.-L. Dienel and B. Schmucki (eds), *Mobilität Für Alle. Geschichte des Öffentlichen Personenverkehrs in der Stadt zwischen technischem Fortschritt und sozialer Pflicht* (Stuttgart, Steiner 1997), pp.221–51, 242.

9For more details on the research project, see <http://marshrutka.net>.