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Driving Lives: An Ethnography of Chicago Taxi Drivers

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Driving Lives: An Ethnography of Chicago Taxi Drivers

Taxi drivers are central to the transportation systems of major urban areas; drivers' work lives exemplify contemporary labor conditions; their personal networks and associations demonstrate the social dynamics of a global city—and yet, taxi drivers' experiences often remain hidden from public and scholarly view. The research project from which this paper derives, part of an ongoing collaboration with the United Taxidriviers Community Council (UTCC), a grassroots drivers' rights organization in Chicago, hopes to redress this omission by chronicling the everyday lives of drivers, in their individual careers and when they come together as a community, by examining drivers' experiences at multiple scales, from the small intimate space of a cab's interior to the broad dynamics of the global economy. As drivers chart their transnational courses, map the city in which they live and work, and claim territory for themselves and their concerns, they transfigure the spaces, both material and metaphoric, of the global workforce.

Globalization: Flexibility and Fixity:

The social scientific literature on globalization is of use in addressing Chicago's taxi drivers, as much for its internal tensions as for its insights. One powerful model for theorizing "the global" stresses fluidity and flows, the salience of the profound mobility of people, things, and ideas for contemporary experiences and cultural forms; this approach further suggests that

the disjunctures between flows of people, media images, technology, money, and ideologies are a hallmark of the “disorganized capitalism” of the late 20th-early 21st centuries (Appadurai 1996). This “disorganization” may in fact be patterned around a logic of “flexibility” (Harvey 1989; Inda 2000) as regards production and labor—indexed by increased outsourcing, subcontracting, and temporary positions. In contrast to this image of globalization as flux, movement, and the dissolution or transcendence of boundaries, other scholars emphasize that only certain regions and certain people experience the globalized world in this fashion—for others the contemporary world is experienced in terms of distancing, exclusion, disconnection, even as awareness of life at the cosmopolitan center has increased via the global circulation of media and commodities—a condition the anthropologist James Ferguson describes as “abjection” (1999). Social scientific discourse about “the global,” however, at times uncritically embraces liberatory metaphors such as “circulation,” with its connotations of healthy blood flow and evenhanded exchange, its implications of vigor, creativity, and enrichment. “Circulation” addresses movement of goods and people but does not concern itself with “struggles over the terrain of circulation and privileging of certain kinds of people as players” (Tsing 2004).

Cities may be especially important sites for examining the dynamics of flux and fixity, openness and constraint of a globalized world, because they are sites of linkage between global macroprocesses and the particulars of human experience. Fruitful approaches to theorizing the city stress “view[ing] the ‘urban’ as a process rather than as a type of category” (Low 1996). In this sense the city is not a geographically delimited area, but a set of overlapping spatial claims and contestations. Operating in such zones requires, of immigrants especially, that they be “flexible citizens” (Ong 1999), striving to acquire the economic and cultural capital that will allow them to navigate and survive the political-economic and socio-cultural landscape in which

they find themselves. The ways Chicago taxi drivers map the city reflects and informs cartographies of class and identity, access and exclusion, center and periphery, mobility and stasis. The urban landscape must be read carefully, and worked diligently, for its potentially lucrative contours to be revealed. Indeed a long-time driver I spoke with recently likened the skills of taxi driving to chess playing. Effectively making a living with a taxi, he suggested, required not just knowing the city as a geographical space, the grid of street names and numbers, neighborhoods and landmarks, hotels and hospitals, nor just knowing the best routes to get a passenger from one location to another, but having a strategy, knowing the city as a shifting, temporal space composed of interlocking parts and envisioning a sequence of moves that might add up to a lucrative shift. My interest in this paper is to examine the work lives of Chicago taxi drivers as a window on the global city and the possibilities and limitations it presents.

Drivers' Lives: Freedom and Constraint:

Drivers come to the profession from multiple directions and with various intents, and those who stay do so for a range of reasons. Many praise the work for providing “freedom” and “flexibility”—for immigrant drivers (as the vast majority are), this allows for extended trips to home countries without jeopardizing the possibility of work upon return. The “freedom” the job allows is often described in terms that interchangeably address both the lack of more typical employment hierarchies and the physical and spatial mobility the job entails. Drivers relish “calling my own shots” and “being my own boss,” as well as “being on the move.” These are individual who don’t want to be “stuck behind a desk,” or “cooped up in an office,” with “a boss hovering over me,” and with all the limitations on autonomy and mobility that such descriptions imply. On a daily basis, one can work when and if one wants. As one driver described it: “you’re

free, nobody can tell you when you work. You pay your lease and you do what you want to do.”

A number of drivers describe being originally drawn into driving because its flexibility complemented other endeavors, especially going to school—students could work nights, weekends, and summers as needed—although these “temporary” positions in some cases ended up continuing for years or decades.

However, drivers also describe the work as a “trap”—a dead-end job that, especially during the recent economic downturn, has necessitated seven-days-a-week, twelve-hours-a-day labor to make ends meet. It is a “sweatshop on wheels,” a “penal colony” that requires tremendous toil without providing any true security. For immigrants especially, this sort of work underlines the precariousness of their situation—one driver described the appealing sight of people jogging along the Chicago lakefront only to remark that because he had to work constantly, “unfortunately I have no chance to enjoy that American life.” The freedom of taxi driving, then, is a double edged sword. As one driver said: “it’s a strange kind of restricted freedom, you kind of have freedom and you kind of don’t, because it’s a certain kind of wage slavery that has the *illusion* of free time and free reign to take off when you want to.” If in the short term it takes much of one’s time, in the longer run the work extracts an even heavier toll—several drivers remarked on the early deaths of long-term drivers after years of long hours, with no benefits or insurance, daily dangers, and no chance of retirement; as one said of the work, “it beats you up.”

The majority of drivers, whether they felt generally satisfied or generally dissatisfied with their work, agreed that it is a harder life now than it was in the past—it is both more competitive, “cut-throat,” “dog eat dog,” and more heavily regulated, and therefore entailing greater pressure and anxiety. Many reported having to work many more hours now to make ends meet, the result

of a glut of taxis and low fare rates. If in the past it was a decent job that allowed one to make a living by working reasonable hours, now it required nearly constant work and even then did not ensure sufficient income. Drivers suggested that they have been turned into pure money-makers for the cab companies, who extract escalating lease fees from drivers who increasingly can not find enough fares to make a living, and the city, which has intensified the stringency of its rules and regulations and the magnitude of fines for their transgression. “Cabdrivers,” one driver said, “are like an ATM machine for the city—whenever they need money they just go and get it.”

The Back Seat-Front Seat Divide: Relationships with Customers

The social relationships around driving are equally fraught with ambivalence. Drivers relish their interactions with customers, and often mention this as the component that makes the work enjoyable and worthwhile—the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences with people from all over the world. From this vantage there is a cosmopolitanism to taxi drivers’ lives—evinced by their own transnationality and their roles in the movement of people across Chicago and between Chicago and the rest of the world—they are a node in a global transportation system and the human exchanges that occur along those trajectories can provide a satisfying sense of engagement, of being at the center of an increasingly small world. Many drivers have spent time living and working in multiple countries and/or find interest in cross-cultural exchange, qualities they note as preconditioning them for the job.

Many drivers’ accounts of their interactions with customers bespoke a desire to make a real, human connection, and many described intense and intimate exchanges with passengers, about politics, religion, familial troubles, personal crises; drivers were often present at and involved in significant moments in people’s lives—for example, more than one driver described

conveying a distraught woman away from a failed relationship late at night. The interior of the cab, it seems, feels like an intimate space and allows for, at least in that moment, a familiarity of exchange not usually afforded strangers in public. A taxi driver providing transportation at the end of a long night can feel not unlike the act of a friend seeing one home.

Because cabs blur the lines between private and public space, they therefore engender both heightened intimacy and, at times, a readier effacement or dehumanization of drivers. Drivers too feel this contradictory intimacy and revulsion toward their passengers: “Some people are nice and sweet and I hate even to let them go, I tell them, please, stay, talk to me, I don’t take money from you...and some of them are unbelievable, arrogant and nasty and sometimes horrible.” Even with the “sweet” ones, drivers related that it was difficult to establish ongoing relationships with people met as passengers: “we’re in a risky situation with passengers,” one driver suggested—temporary friendships and attractions and suggestions of further contact often faded when drivers tried to follow up. Drivers, then, must hone their abilities to navigate these complex social exchanges.

The physical barrier of the durable plastic shields that transect cab interiors, walling off front from back seats, materializes the contradictions of these relationships: even as drivers recognized shields as needed protection from violence, they bemoaned them as uncomfortable, decreasing visibility, and acting as an impediment to conversations with customers: “the driver’s in a prison, the passenger’s in a prison, there’s no chance for interaction.”

Yet the hazards of driving and the need for the shields are real. Taxi Driving is one of the most dangerous professions in the U.S., according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and all drivers have stories of threats or experiences of physical violence. Unlike in other dangerous professions, such as police officer or fireman, taxi drivers’ weathering of violent encounters is

not valorized nor even recognized. Last year, a young taxi driver was beaten by several men, permanently disfiguring his face. Despite recent legislation that makes battery of an on-duty taxi driver a Class 3 felony (legislation achieved through driver lobbying), the crime was classified as a misdemeanor. At the trial last month, the judge asserted that the driver was not a “credible” witness and the charges were dismissed. More mundane threats to drivers’ well-being and working conditions come weekly to those who work the city’s bars, ferrying drunk and disorderly customers home, even at the risk of the verbal and physical belligerence that characterize their patronage.

In addition to the complex and risky nature of their one-on-one interactions with customers, drivers are sensitive to more general public perceptions and discourses regarding themselves and their work. Representations and popular lore about drivers seem to demonstrate their association with two ends of the socio-economic spectrum—as a sign of urban, moneyed mobility, the luxury of privacy and speed in a crowded city, and also of danger and dereliction, the underside of the city as social space and imaginary—thus drivers are not uncommonly petitioned for access to drugs and prostitutes. As commonly, drivers are simply invisible to the public—an expected yet unremarked component of the urban landscape, their individual labors and stories of struggle effaced by the urgency of getting from here to there.

Mapping the City: Strategies and Colleagues

Working successfully as a taxi driver entails reading and working the urban landscape carefully. Drivers employ a range of strategies—while some work at a smaller, denser scale downtown, others look for longer, though less frequent fares at the airports, and others go to less-served neighborhoods where there are fewer passengers but less competition from other cabs.

The learning curve is long, several drivers suggesting it took 5+ years to establish a rhythm. It is only after this much time, that one can picture pretty much any location and conjure any route a passenger might require.

The key to working well is to keep the cab in perpetual motion and always full—getting passengers in and getting them out and on to the next fare. As drivers point out, however, though an ideal from a work perspective, this pattern is inherently undercutting of social exchange among drivers—the more efficiently drivers work, the lonelier the job becomes. Cellphones can provide a technological fix allowing drivers to stay in touch with a circle of driver friends, for routing assistance, safety, and companionship throughout the day, but drivers often pay the price of passenger complaints and reduced tips. The stereotype of the taxi driver talking incessantly into a cellphone headset is one that is often used against them.

The need to keep moving in order to make money, coupled with the independent contractor position of most drivers, also comes to erode the boundary between driving and civilian life. Most drivers work on leases and so must invest money up front in claiming the cab for a certain amount of time (12 hours, 24 hours, a week) within which they must make the money that will pay back the expenses plus, hopefully, make them a profit. The challenge, as one driver noted, is that: “every time you park that cab, you feel guilty, because you’re paying for that time, and here you are sleeping or going to school or having dinner with your friends, and that cab is sitting there...looking at you, saying hey, I could be making \$30 dollars an hour and what are you doing having a life. I really had to struggle to get over that mindset...” Stasis, then, becomes a problem—even as human relationships, at work and at home, demand it. Ironically, for all their mobility, one of the most common complaints drivers make is that the physical inertia of the job takes a serious toll on their bodily health—sitting behind a wheel for 12+ hours

a day, they say, “wears you down,” leading to aches and pains as well as more serious health problems and even premature death.

Drivers also know and follow the ways the landscape of the city’s ridership shifts over time. Several older drivers noted that in the 1970s, a driver could work the south side of Chicago to good effect, for example serving the patrons of dance clubs and bars on weekend evenings. Now, they said, except for the occasional dispatch call, the south side is not a source of fares. Over historical time, the cab industry in Chicago has gone from being an elite mode of transportation, to being accessible to the broader public, and back again (Gilbert and Samuels 1982). And the city’s particular interpolations of class and neighborhood, and their shifts over time, are closely related to the ways taxi drivers perceive and enact their routes. The metering system too informs these patterns by emphasizing distance, not time—thus it facilitates downtown travelers, who may take a long time to go a short distance in heavy traffic, rather than riders from outlying neighborhoods, who may need to travel farther. In some cases, “underserved” neighborhoods respond by spawning entrepreneurs who make their “gypsy cab” services available to those who know them.

The nature of the cab driver population has also shifted over time. Those who worked in the 1970s reported that in that era a significant percentage of drivers were U.S.-born whites and African-Americans, a demographic that gave way to an increasing number of immigrant drivers over the 1980s, 90s, and 00s. As of a 2008 study, drivers are approximately 90% foreign-born (Bruno 2009). Although they share many of the same concerns as a labor force (relationships with taxi companies, difficulties making a living, lack of bodily protections in the form of health care and freedom from violence, etc.), yet taxi drivers are a diffuse community, intersecting often

at airport holding lots and downtown hotel cab stands, but also splintered along lines of national or regional origin and scattered by the inherent independence of the work itself.

Yet drivers reported relying heavily on colleagues to learn and survive the business. Although there is now a two-week mandatory training course for new chauffeur licensees, drivers both new and old reported significant informal training and support by peers—including tips on where to find customers, directions to various locations, and interventions when a driver's safety was compromised. Communications technologies (CB radios in the past, cell phones today) played a significant role in these peer exchanges. Face-to-face contact, at particular restaurants, and especially at the taxi holding lot at O'Hare airport, are also important for relationship building.

Governmentality: Institutions and Economics

The institutional arrangements within which taxi drivers conduct their work have also shifted significantly over the last thirty years. In the mid-1970s, the two large, virtually monopolizing cab companies, Yellow and Checker, whose trajectories constitute the history of taxicabs in Chicago, moved from a commission-based employee model, in which drivers were paid a minimum wage plus a commission based on the fares they brought in (and were protected by a union), to a lease model, in which drivers act as independent contractors, paying lease fees up front and hoping to make their expenses plus a profit through fares and tips. Although, in theory, the employee-commission model provided more security, graft in the system meant that drivers did not always get the commissions they deserved. It was possible to make more money as a lessee, those who had worked under both systems suggested, although drivers were vulnerable to the idiosyncracies of the market and were left utterly without leverage. Even

defending their corner of the market, from limo drivers, from the Airport Express shuttle, from hotel doormen and airport starters who took bribes for fares, was difficult because there was no institution to defend them and their interests—the cab companies already had their money, extracted from the drivers themselves in the form of lease fees, and therefore had no reason to pursue these issues. The shift from commission to lease was related to the shift in the driver population from largely U.S.-born to largely composed of immigrants—as the security of the job decreased, it became less desirable and more often taken up by workers whose options were more limited.

Drivers describing relationships with the affiliations they work under often described less than desirable conditions and treatment as an almost inevitable result of the conflicting interests that inhered in the relationships. For example, companies tried to limit their expenditure on repairs and maintenance as much as possible, even as drivers required a decent vehicle in order to make money. At the end of the day, the companies were concerned with their medallions and their leases, and the ins and outs of daily work as a cab driver was not really their concern.

From the drivers' perspective, the city, via the various organs that regulate the taxi industry (the Department of Consumer Services, the Department of Aviation, the police, etc.), follows the same philosophy. The city massively increased both the number and value of medallions (whose prices have tripled in last 5 years—to the current price of \$150,000), effectively driving smaller companies out of the business and seriously compromising the abilities of individual drivers to remain solvent. In addition, tickets directed at taxi drivers by the DCS and the police are especially gouging, running as high as \$1000 (the maximum fines were tripled in 2008, from \$25-350 to \$75-1000), and are often perceived by drivers as capricious. New and immigrant drivers are especially vulnerable to these extractions either because their

inexperience makes them more likely to commit violations or because their status makes them less likely to resist egregious tickets.

Many drivers believe that they are being ticketed simply for doing their jobs. For example, although drivers are legally allowed to stop in a loading zone for a “reasonable” amount of time, they often find that a passenger with a credit card, or who needs assistance with luggage, can lead to tickets from the officers who stake out such places in order to catch taxi drivers in particular. The fines levied against cab drivers are multiple times the fines charged non-professional drivers for the same infringements.

Taxi drivers who receive tickets for violations of chauffeur regulations must appear at 400 W. Superior, the City’s Department of Administrative Hearings. Many drivers describe 400 W. Superior as a kangaroo court, a place where drivers are guilty by definition and resistance is futile. Indeed the precise nature of this court, legally speaking, is ambiguous: according to its own literature, the Department of Administrative Hearings is an independent department of city government, the first unified municipal administrative adjudicatory system in the nation, and serves as a “quasi-judicial tribunal.” After going through the metal detector at the entrance, one enters one the small hearing rooms, set up as a typical courtroom, with a raised judge’s bench at the front, facing podia for prosecuting and defending parties, and a gallery of wooden bench seats for those in attendance or awaiting their turn. These particular hearing rooms also have a smaller chamber at the back by the entrance—where drivers check in with their paperwork and where, as a matter of course, they are asked by the state’s attorney on duty, if they would like to “make a deal.” Drivers can settle for a smaller fine or take their chances going before the judge, which, if they lose, will lead to a considerably larger fine. As many have learned, winning a case is nearly impossible. Those who try usually lose and will often cease to resist thereafter.

Especially for immigrant drivers, who may feel even less secure about legal proceedings and their own status, it is often deemed preferable to settle, even when one feel unjustly accused. The system, as drivers clearly perceive, is designed to elicit and institutionalize their acquiescence. As one driver said: “Their way of keeping you from fighting anything is when you do, it still don’t matter...we’ll just double it or triple it on you and you won’t do that again and you’ll tell your buddies and everybody’ll be good little lambs and just come in and pay their fines.” Besides the threat of an almost inevitably higher fine, 400 W. Superior exerts its power by claiming drivers’ time—settling is quick, pursuing your case in front of a judge takes time, and in a business where being on the street collecting fares is the only way to make income, the loss of time can take a considerable toll. The time sink wears drivers down. As one driver described of his experience of arriving to find some 30 drivers waiting for hearings: “after four hours, they could have accused me of shooting Kennedy and I’d have said, yes, I did it.” As one corner of the social and spatial world that taxi drivers inhabit, 400 W. Superior, and the punitive forces that emanate from there, loom large in driver imaginaries of nature of their work and social status (or lack thereof).

Conclusion: Global and Local

As a population, transnational taxi drivers are usually addressed as an instantiation of large-scale movements across geopolitical borders and into global cities, and Chicago drivers also have stories that speak to this scale—the Pakistani driver who arrived in Chicago eager to meet Al Capone, stories of whom he had read, in Urdu translation, in his youth; the Kyrgyz and Ghanaian immigrants who arrive in Chicago with the manual from Harold Washington College’s taxi training course already in hand—having been sent the materials by those of their community

who made the transition before them. Such examples speak richly to global urban imaginaries. In this paper I have addressed space and mobility at the smaller scales of neighborhood and vehicle. For it is in the micro-negotiations and navigations of proximity and distance, intimacy and estrangement, friendship and alterity, that taxi drivers live those global forces.

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