

Book Review

del Nido, Juan Manuel. *Taxis vs. Uber: Courts, Markets, and Technology in Buenos Aires*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021, 238 pages.

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Jacques Rancière views politics as an arrangement to deal with differences within a common place (Rancière 2000). Therefore, politics is not a place of agreements. On the contrary, a healthy political situation is one in which people debate, show discomfort, and refute each other. In this “distribution of sensible,” Rancière argues that there are relations between shared sceneries and the division of exclusive parts. This distribution includes how people engage with legislation, institutions, other people, and situations they may face. Politics is thus a social experience.

However, there are situations where political engagement does not occur, even as public debate rages. In *Taxis vs. Uber*, Juan del Nido discusses how the population of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires engaged in post-political reasoning when a debate about Uber began in the Argentinean capital in 2016. The book draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Buenos Aires between July 2015 and August 2016 and again in 2017. While most of the people this ethnography is about are middle class, it is not a study of the middle class so much as a study of the kind of thinking del Nido encountered among people who fit a certain socioeconomic definition of the middle class.

The political context presented in *Taxi vs. Uber* concerns the arrival of Uber—a global multinational corporation that offers shared rides—to Buenos Aires, where taxi drivers had an “alleged” monopoly on transportation in the city. Against this backdrop, del Nido discusses how a myriad of moralities (such as choice, freedom, and competition) are mobilized by the subjects interested in these issues. Ultimately, this debate could be reduced to a simple question: What do people want? Taxis or Uber? However, reducing a complex discussion

in such a way flattens the contradictions that emerged from the debate. Over eight chapters, the author presents the arguments, contradictions, and tactics, along with the post-political rationalities of the controversy.

To understand how this post-political view was woven into the social fabric, del Nido argues that neoliberalism, as a governmental and philosophical project, would have discursive affinities with this way of thinking. In other words, the market could be a framework for understanding society (Dardot and Laval 2009; Foucault 2004), where the relationship between subjects would be described as zero-sum equations, flattening the complexity of decision-making processes. In the events presented in *Taxis vs. Uber*, this context produced an avoidance of the distribution of meaningfulness, resulting in a public rejection of the taxis. That is, “part of the taxi industry’s frustration emanated from the fact that they were the main, or most visible, casualties of an order that resisted actual, genuine social engagement or disagreement—or, in other words, that resisted being politicized” (del Nido 2022 140).

The first section of the book consists of the first three chapters, which delve into the taxi industry in Buenos Aires. Del Nido introduces his central theme, which is the reasoning, arguments, and fears that have written off the taxi industry. The first chapter, “The Terms of Engagement,” explores the history of the taxi as a public service in the capital and the relationship between *propietarios* and *choferes*. The second chapter, “An Intractable Question,” follows a group of about twenty participants to the union’s headquarters, where they undergo physical analyses and examinations as part of the process to obtain a license to drive a taxi in Buenos Aires. The examinations are portrayed as a method of problematizing the bodies of taxi drivers, where a whole moral and political economy is mobilized by the subjects involved. The third chapter, “A Most Perfect Kind of Hustling,” explores the ethical flexibility of taxi drivers who want to earn extra money, which has given the taxi industry in Buenos Aires the epithet of “mafia.” Del Nido argues that the Buenos Aires taxi fleet is the result of moral economy, politics, and bureaucracy spread across many institutions and subjects and that there are drivers whose bodies have become manageable and predictable according to the criteria applied by the exams and training, and there are people whose behaviour is not framed in this convention within the scenario of the vehicle, where drivers and passengers follow other moral economies.

The chapters in the second section examine the rhetoric embedded in public life about this transformation, which is explored in subsequent chapters. Once the legitimacy of the taxi industry in Buenos Aires was built on the history

of the activity and the bureaucracy of licenses, the union mobilized to take Uber to court as soon as the company arrived in the capital. The rhetoric used by both sides is analyzed in the fourth chapter, “On Gladiatorial Truths.” While the taxi union used the legal argument, accusing Uber of being an illegal taxi company, the mobility start-up moved the discussion to a moral ground, where freedom and consumption would be its core ideas. Del Nido presents the concept of gladiatorial truths, which he claims “obscure rationalities, processes, and techniques of production and subsume political economy considerations to the consumption bottom line” (del Nido 2022, 89). This shift in argument defines the market and not the legislative aspects as the arena of dispute, while using consumer behaviour as the moral compass of the debate.

On the one hand, the public debate about the authority of the taxi industry in Buenos Aires increased because Uber’s activities were perceived as illicit by taxi drivers. On the other hand, the company’s discourse of innovation was an alibi for the accusations of clandestine activities, since the modernization was not foreseeable in the legislation. In short, Uber’s outsider status undermined the taxi drivers’ union in the eyes of the public, a theme explored in the fifth chapter, “The Stranger Who Remains as Such.” Uber enacted the rule of a strange king (Sahlins 2008) and was accepted as a legitimate competitor from the outside, bringing technological modernization, while residents engaged with the platform to enact their supposed freedom through consumption.

The presence and legality of Uber in Buenos Aires triggered a moral debate about personal autonomy to work and consume as one wishes. This binary perspective was communicated through a rhetorical grammar that oversimplified the issue. “A Copernican Phantasmagoria,” the sixth chapter, details how this grammar was embedded in software, user experience, and algorithms, creating a post-political rationality that prevented debate and left the public to determine the truth. Uber and the union lost their roles as protagonists, and the public became responsible for deciding the company’s legitimacy. However, the union attempted to use the legal system to halt Uber’s activities, but the Argentinean legal system was unable to contain the company within the confines of the law. In “The Political on Trial,” the book’s seventh chapter, the trials of strength are explored, and it is shown how they strengthened Uber’s public position. Legal efforts to stop the company’s operations in Argentina were often unsuccessful due to limitations in jurisdiction, language, and infrastructure in Buenos Aires. This chapter demonstrates how these trials of strength (Latour 1999) allowed Uber to thrive despite the opposition.

The disputes between taxi drivers, Uber, consumers, unions, and many other actors were part of a larger scenario in Argentinean politics, a country that has a constant history of crises that vary from economic, energetic, and political. The complex situation of Uber was the subject of the presidential campaign of Mauricio Macri, who was elected on a technocratic and post-political platform, emphasizing the discourse of normalization and reconstruction of an earlier, not “hyper-politicized” life. The affinities between Macri’s and Uber’s politics, and how the company adapted to them, are discussed in the eighth and final chapter, “The Scarlet P.” Uber concatenated many ideas, such as modernization and autonomy, which is what del Nido called indexical reflexivity, “an active, strategic performative work, visible and intelligible to, and aimed at, those whose categories organize the distribution of the sensible that explains away one’s condition of disagreement” (195). Through this methodology, Uber has endured disputes with the taxi drivers’ union and avoided the political debate, while pursuing a moral one.

In the end, in *Taxis vs. Uber* del Nido explores some of the implications and consequences of neoliberalism. The ethnography focuses heavily on the first moments of Uber’s arrival, and there are some middle-class characters there. However, it is not a book about the middle class, but about a type of rationality that is commonly found among people who are considered as being in that economic status. In his ethnographic approach, which focuses on the contradictions of rationality, del Nido shows how this reasoning flourishes through equipment, software, legislation, algorithms, and a large network of infrastructure. Those who wish to understand how this post-political reasoning is assembled and articulated in contemporary life will find in this book how the sensibility (in Rancière’s sense) of ethnography makes it possible to follow the contradictions that people engage in.

The book provides an insightful analysis of the politics of public transportation in Buenos Aires. The author explains how the arrival of Uber in Buenos Aires sparked a discussion about the role of taxis in the city and how this discussion was characterized by post-political reasoning. Del Nido’s ethnographic fieldwork highlights how the taxi industry had a central role in the social weaving of the Argentinean capital and how its relationship with the government, bureaucracy and other institutions shaped the moral and political economy of the city. Through his analysis of the debates surrounding the arrival of Uber, del Nido argues that neoliberalism and its focus on the market as the framework for understanding society have contributed to the post-political

rationalities that were prevalent in the debate. In conclusion, this book is significant for social sciences as it provides an insightful understanding of the politics of public transportation and how it reflects broader social and political trends.

References

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