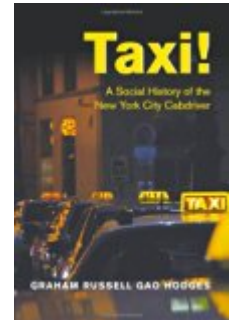


Graham Russell Gao Hodges. *Taxi! A Social History of the New York City Cabdriver.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. viii + 225 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-8554-9.



Reviewed by Anne Leonard

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Although taxis and their drivers are part of urban culture everywhere, and they are widely mythologized and celebrated in the popular imagination, taxis and hacks have a special relationship with one urban place in particular: New York City. Rather than debunking it, Graham Russell Gao Hodges celebrates the mythology of the cabdriver while also providing a history of political, economic, and social agents that have affected this industry. This book is meticulously researched, with careful attention given to the uneven progress of union organizing throughout the twentieth century and to depictions of cabbies in popular media and contemporary folklore.

Hodges organizes this book effectively; each chapter corresponds to roughly one or two decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The origins of the first automobile-powered taxi fleet stem from the efforts of one businessman, Harry N. Allen, who in 1907 launched the first fleet of gasoline-powered vehicles after experiencing the then-exorbitant charge of five dollars for a three-quarter mile hansom cab ride (equivalent fare for such a ride in New York City

today would be about four dollars). Hodges meticulously recounts the tale of Allen's first fleet and its breakdown amid labor upheaval. Only a few years after the profession of cabbie was invented, popular media began to reflect many aspects of this new profession. Hodges recounts nearly one dozen early silent films (from 1916 to 1920, well before the Hays Code) that portrayed cabbies variously as heroes, criminals, and bootstrap successes.

The 1920s and 1930s are treated in successive and engrossing chapters. The 1920s, marked by the Jazz Age, the Harlem Renaissance, and finally the onset of the Great Depression, saw a chaotic flourishing of the taxi trade. Hodges describes the unsuccessful struggle to unionize drivers in the post-World War I period, but most fascinating is the uncovered personal narratives of individual cabbies, whose "working-class attitudes" displayed a renegade streak and an intense pragmatism (p. 29). The exuberant energy spent pursuing illicit thrills (often facilitated by taxi rides) came to an end at the end of 1929. This year ended an era in many urban places as the Volstead Act at-

tempted to curtail nightlife, a critical industry in New York. Hodges describes the next decade as the industry's search for order amid tough economic times and drastically increased competition among drivers, as the ranks of drivers swelled yet the disposable income of New Yorkers and tourists shrank. A 1934 strike turned violent, despite various promises of taxi drivers' associations to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia that peace would prevail. Toward the end of the 1930s, the influential Transit Workers' Union (TWU) successfully bargained a contract that provided minimum daily rates for over fifteen thousand drivers. The TWU accomplished more for New York's hacking workforce than other unions had, but compared to benefits it secured for mass transit workers, its gains for cabbies were modest.

In addition to a workforce swollen beyond demand as fortunes--and fares--dwindled and out-of-work men turned to driving, many new cabbies joined the trade because their livelihoods in hospitality or beverage industries were severely curtailed under Prohibition. In the collective urban imagination, cabbies were constantly moonlighting in bootlegging and prostitution both as a way to supplement their incomes and in the pursuit of illicit recreation. Cabdrivers were frequently enlisted in entrapment methods of Prohibition enforcement. The age of the "taxi dancer" flourished at this time as well. Like a taxi driver, the taxi dancer was paid for time spent providing services; her workplace was a dance hall rather than an automobile. Cabbies brought customers to taxi dance halls and were themselves customers after long shifts. The two chapters that cover the 1920s and 1930s address well the role of the taxi in that unique outlet provided by a large city: vice. Hodges's careful documentation includes even small trends that would later preserve street culture of mid-century New York. New York City photographers (Weegee, Berenice Abbott, and others) often focused their lenses on cabdrivers, creating images that documented the speed, bustle, and

modernity of the early and mid-twentieth-century city.

The following decade brought wartime prosperity to cabdrivers who did not enlist. New private automobiles were in short supply as production was restricted (and automobile ownership has never caught on in New York City as it had elsewhere). Hodges notes that a general "tilt to the right" in 1950s society caused widespread indifference to unionization of drivers, even though "Big Labor" flourished throughout New York City (pp. 98, 100). The popular notion of the cabbie as a working-class hero and streetwise philosopher thrived in this era; Hodges meticulously compiles works of popular fiction in which class differences between drivers and fares were emphasized. Film audiences around the country learned how cab fares were supposed to act by watching Tony Curtis's Sidney Falco make deals in the back-seat yet never tip the driver in the 1957 movie, *The Sweet Smell of Success*.

The 1960s and 1970s briefly breathed new life into cabbies' efforts to unionize, and women as drivers experienced a small renaissance. In this chapter, the author addresses the surfacing of racial tension between cabbies and their customers, mostly through anecdotes from drivers and fares who experienced racism. The unregulated "gypsy" cab fleet spread throughout the city's outer boroughs during this period, providing service to city residents who, because of their geographic location or minority status, had difficulty hailing yellow cabs on the street.

In the late part of the twentieth century, the taxi industry changed as new immigrants replaced a workforce of (mostly) native-born drivers. The practice of leasing cabs altered the industry a great deal and weakened the already faltering union. Under leasing, drivers were effectively turned into independent contractors and leased cabs from the garage at a daily rate. It allowed younger, less experienced drivers quick access to an income without a great commitment to the

profession, but prevented them from earning a pension.

Throughout the book, the strongest aspect is Hodges's description of the cabbie in the collective imagination, especially as a signifier for the underworld or marginality (at least in popular media, if not in real life). Hodges weaves cinematic and literary treatments of cabdrivers throughout the text. Portrayal of the hack as an outsider culminated in Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver*. Such portrayals of cabbies in film and mass media continued to permeate popular media of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Throughout the twentieth century, most audiences for popular media had not experienced a New York City taxi ride or bantered with a hack, but a wide cross-section of society could identify with aspects of city life, including taxi rides, via their experiences as consumers of mass media. The depiction of cabbies in film and popular music is a fascinating topic that deserves its own monograph.

Hodges expresses hope for the future in the form of efforts on the part of the Taxi Workers' Alliance to improve working conditions for drivers. The author does not offer one single explanation for an entire century of failed attempts to unionize and organize for better working conditions, but careful descriptions of each decade's attempts at improving the conditions under which cabbies work reveals the complexities of economic, social, and regulatory conditions that dictated the conditions for this vital urban workforce.

Hodges's research reveals not only a rich cultural history but a complex social, political, and labor history as well. Considering the wide scope of this book, there is fairly even, equal treatment of a variety of other topics: a century of struggle to unionize and organize (a struggle as yet unresolved); the fluctuating role of legislation and government in regulation of the industry; and the role of race, ethnicity, and class among drivers and between customers and drivers. Attention is

paid to these issues, but these are rich enough areas of inquiry to warrant separate studies.

The author, himself a hack in the 1970s, does not insert his personal narrative, yet his profound connection to his subject matter is evident in the images of taxi-related photographs and ephemera; most are credited "collection of the author." Casual readers might miss the image of Hodges's 1975 hack license reproduced on the dust jacket, and never guess from his spirited yet impartial text that he was once among the ranks of his subject. One delightfully readable aspect of this book is the author's very personal epilogue that reveals his deep sympathy for the driving workforce. It also offers valuable insights into the role of the service worker in the economically hyper-stratified city. He recounts a recent ride in a New York City taxi during which he observed that the driver was having a telephone conversation while driving. Hodges discovered that the driver was conversing in Urdu with his wife in Pakistan, taking advantage of inexpensive long distance rates to inhabit multiple worlds, the domestic and the professional, New York and Lahore. The author notes that contemporary drivers are no longer waxing philosophical with their fares, but are much more likely to be contributing to home life thousands of miles away in the form of money transfers and long-distance phone calls while living a lonely existence. This small anecdote expresses much about the twenty-first-century urban service worker.

Another recent work with a similar title merits mention. Biju Mathew's *Taxi! Class and Capitalism in New York City* (2005) is not a multifaceted cultural and labor history, as Hodges's work is, but a study of the efforts of the New York Taxi Workers' Alliance to organize the labor force amid multiple ethnicities and economies of the taxi workforce in New York City of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Together, the two books explore taxi drivers as a vital part of the

city's labor force, yet nearly impossible to unify or organize.

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