

Taxi! A Social History of the New York City Cabdriver. By *Graham Russell Gao Hodges*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. viii + 225 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, Cloth, \$25.00. ISBN: 978-0-801-88554-9.

Reviewed by Clifton Hood

Although historians have produced countless books on canals, railroads, electric railways, and private automobiles, they have given taxis short shrift. That is unfortunate, for, as Graham Russell Gao Hodges reminds us in this slim volume, all it takes is a taxi strike to demonstrate their indispensability to daily life in New York and a few other densely populated American cities. Taxicabs not only account for a large share of the passenger trips in these big cities and contribute significantly to urban problems like traffic congestion and air pollution, but they also constitute an important element in metropolitan political economies, since they exist at the nexus of municipal regulation, lobbying, and labor disputes. In his most penetrating observation, Hodges notes that taxis also constitute a rare zone of social interaction between their predominantly middle-class riders and working-class (and increasingly immigrant) drivers, and they accordingly figure prominently in popular representations of contemporary urban life.

Instead of a history of the industry or of its urban environmental impacts, Hodges provides a social history of the New York City cabdriver. He does this in seven chronologically organized chapters. Hodges begins his study in 1907, when, he says, the advent of the taxi meter and of reliable gasoline-powered cabs led to the creation of the prototypical “taxi man”—in the early days, a second- or third-generation ethnic who belonged to the lower-middle or the working class, received low wages, and encountered great competition for fares. Each chapter covers a ten- or twenty-year span and follows a similar thematic pattern. In each one, Hodges begins by examining the particular political and economic factors that were critical in a given time period, recounts stories about and memoirs by cabbies, and then segues into a discussion of the images of New York City taxi drivers that appeared in the popular media of the era, such as plays, films, and television. Casting a wide net, he explores such topics as the changing business structure of the industry, the paramount role that municipal regulation played in configuring the

trade and in determining cabbies' opportunity structures, the chronic failure of union-organizing campaigns, and the shifting ethnic and class makeup of cab drivers and their varying life goals, working conditions, and mentalities. He also pays close attention to recent controversies over cabbies' refusals to pick up African Americans.

Hodges is not a naïve urban observer, and he offers some shrewd insights about the city's street culture, but the repetitive structure of the book quickly becomes tiresome, as every chapter has the same format. Its choppy organization also makes it difficult for the reader to be sure of the scope and magnitude of the changes that have occurred over the years. Another problem concerns the author's use of popular culture. In view of his sensitivity to the class dimensions of this topic, and particularly the tendency of middle-class New Yorkers to project their fantasies onto hack men, it is surprising that Hodges is never entirely clear about whether cultural productions like films constitute evidence of what outsiders thought about cabbies as exemplars of ethnic, working-class New York, or whether they reveal something about cabbies' own lives and attitudes, or whether the external and internal imageries might interact in some way.

And yet there is much in *Taxi!* that should interest business historians. New York City's taxi industry can be conceived as a market that has been constituted and shaped by the municipal government and by private enterprise and that functions as a public utility. In 1937, the municipal government limited the number of taxi licenses, or medallions, that the police department could allocate and fixed the proportion of medallions that were to be allotted to the owners of large fleets and to individual drivers, a step that was designed to reduce ruinous competition while preventing monopoly. This regulation famously had the unanticipated consequence of vastly increasing the value of the medallions. Yet the municipality has also formed and re-formed the industry, both through its myriad regulations and fees and through its authorization in recent decades of nonmedallion car services that operate at the higher and lower spectrums of the marketplace: gypsy cabs for African American and other minority neighborhoods and radio limousines (or "black cabs") for corporate clients. In addition, the industry's business structure has undergone major changes as it shifted from the large fleets that predominated early in the twentieth century through their control of hack stands, to the owner-drivers who flourished after World War II, and then to the mini-fleets that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, thanks to 1979 regulatory changes that permitted the daily leasing

of cabs and legalized medallion brokering, the industry is organized into fleets whose owners rent their cars out to the drivers, who must pay a leasing fee and purchase their own gasoline but who get to keep any money that they earn beyond those substantial initial outlays

Other scholars have told parts of this story before, but Hodges's important contribution lies in bringing taxi drivers to the forefront of the discussion. With the structural changes that have occurred in recent decades, he reports, native-born cab drivers have left the trade and have been replaced by new immigrants from India, Pakistan, Russia, and Africa. Because their hours of work are so long, their pay so low, and their working conditions so poor, Hodges concludes that taxi driving has been degraded to the "status of an international proletariat" (p. 147). Hodges's view of cabbies as victims who are almost always at the mercy of larger forces and who have little to show for their labors beyond their own voices and stories may be depressing, but it is one that is hard to quarrel with.

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