Pinch on Del Nido, 'Taxis vs. Uber: Courts, Markets, and Technology in Buenos Aires'

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On April 12, 2016, Uber arrived in Buenos Aires, changing the transportation industry in Argentina. While many scholars have studied algorithmically driven platforms, such as Uber, and what it’s like to work in the gig economy, Juan M. Del Nido’s book, Taxis vs. Uber: Courts, Markets, and Technology in Buenos Aires, has a different object of study. Del Nido studies reasoning, particularly how a segment of middle-class Argentinians reasoned about why Uber should be legitimized when it arrived in Argentina. This book is less about taxis and Uber themselves but, rather, about the framing and lines of reasoning that were used in the conflict over these two industries.

In this ethnographic account, Del Nido artfully demonstrates how people use what he calls “postpolitical reasoning” to frame the conflict between taxis and Uber. He defines postpolitical reasoning as “the logics, rhetoric, and affects that people mobilize to imagine, legitimize, and argue for a common experience where a certain kind of disagreement is foreclosed” (p. 8). Through interviews, archival resources, participant observation, and other ethnographic tools, Del Nido tells the story of this pivotal time in Argentina, which reveals much about the difficulties of having a meaningful disagreement in late-stage capitalism.

The book is organized into eight chapters, with the first three focusing on the taxi industry in Buenos Aires before Uber’s arrival. Del Nido starts off by describing the path to becoming a taxi driver and the role of taxi licenses in authorizing the service of driving someone for money. One of the strengths of this book is how Del Nido embeds his account in the current political realities in Argentina. Argentina in 2015 was facing high inflation, restrictions on imports, and failing infrastructure, which all worked to produce an unrelenting anxiety among the middle class that they were becoming poorer and more underdeveloped as a nation. Del Nido contextualizes these anxieties in relation to the Argentinian political movement of Peronism and shows how Peronism’s connection to the taxi union played an important role in the eventual conflict between taxis and Uber. The segment of the middle class Del Nido speaks about throughout the book rejects political meddling and dismisses the monopolistic taxi industry and, instead, have worldly aspirations aligned with the Globalist Left, including techno-idealism. These views were fundamental in setting the stage for Uber’s legitimation in 2016.

Chapter 2 details how the government, the taxi union, medical professionals, and others tried to
address the fundamental question: who gets to drive a taxi? Consequently, taxi drivers’ bodies became ranked, sorted, and regulated through medical and psychological tests that would determine who could drive a taxi. Chapter 3 segues into the taxi transaction and notes that taxi cars are one of the most identifiable and embedded industries in Buenos Aires yet, at the same time, are anonymous and interchangeable, with “no past and no future” (p. 72). It is unlikely any passenger and taxi driver will meet again, reducing accountability, leaving both the driver and passenger suspicious of the other.

The remaining chapters focus on Uber’s arrival, the subsequent protests from the taxi industry, and the ways the middle class reasoned about why Uber should remain. One of the most powerful postpolitical arguments for Uber’s continued existence in Argentina, detailed in chapter 4, is the notion that “the people” wanted it. Who was anyone to question the people’s freedom of choice? Uber itself leaned into this reasoning, hosting such campaigns as the #RightToChoose to further warrant their presence. The politics of Uber’s presence was turned into a moral question about choice. Ultimately, empowerment in late-stage capitalism meant more consumption alternatives and free economic choice.

Another facet of postpolitical reasoning was employing the idea of competition as a solution to political problems. Del Nido describes this, along with the ways Uber was perceived as direct competition to taxis, in chapter 5. Uber was framed as an unstoppable and successful outsider disrupting the monopolistic taxi industry mafia. In chapter 6, Del Nido explains how Uber’s app creates an “ordered, orderly experience,” with users framing Uber’s algorithm for rides as efficient and relating to supply and demand (p. 140). Yet deciding who is allowed to drive, whether for taxis or Uber, is an inherently political exercise, as is made clear in chapter 2. Taxi drivers argued that Uber, like them, should be subject to local laws and regulations. Yet entering an Uber meant being ordered by Uber’s terms. The app’s rating system determining who could drive, despite being inscrutable, was perceived as objective, and as fostering accountability and responsibility.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on attempts to ban Uber in Buenos Aires and on Uber’s response. Uber continually dismissed the courts and reassured its users through social media public relations and promotions on the app that they were there to stay. These chapters also unravel how the taxi industry tried to resist being written off by others and how the ruling Argentinean administration at the time reinforced postpolitical reasoning and assisted the middle class in ignoring the taxi industry’s protests.

Del Nido’s argument is well demonstrated in his description of an infographic titled “Taxis versus Uber” published in March 2016 in La Nación, a culturally conservative and economically liberal news source. This title created a direct comparison between these two industries and flattened this conflict into a clear-cut binary that ignores the political and local dimensions. Ultimately, as Del Nido sums up, “Uber was inside and among us but outside of the system of meanings we shared” (p. 125).

Postpolitical reasoning made it hard for the taxi industry, or anyone who opposed Uber and its logics, to be heard. In the Argentinian economy, the taxi industry became the “part with no part” (p. 24). Del Nido argues that “equality in principle and equality in fact were separable politically in ways that moral economy no longer had a viable grammar for” (p. 111). Postpolitical reasoning was hard to disagree with, and, under its logic, if you didn’t like Uber, you could simply choose not to use it.
Del Nido’s contributions in this book go far beyond the conflict between these two industries, and postpolitical reasoning is widely applicable in thinking about how new innovations are legitimized. Moreover, Del Nido skillfully demonstrates the importance of studying something as intricate and complex as reasoning itself, and doing so ethnographically, by tracing how nonexperts make sense of economic and political processes. As new technological innovations continue to penetrate our society, it is vital we understand how they are legitimized, especially if we want to have the grammar to challenge them in any meaningful way.


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