

## SHADES OF INFORMAL IN TRANSPORT PROVISION. UNLAWFUL, UNCAPITALIST OR JUST OPPRESSED? (ALTERNATIVELY: IS UBER INFORMAL?)

Author: **PRISCILLA CONNOLLY**

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, Av. San Pablo 180, Col. Reynosa Tamaulipas, Azcapotzalco, México 02200 DF. pcd@correo.azc.uam.mx

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Most of the theoretical and empirical work on informality has focussed on urban housing settlements, employment and small traders. One notable exception is Hernando de Soto's inclusion of a chapter on Lima's transport in his 1986 book *El Otro Sendero*. The chapter ends with the following questions (de Soto 1987, 141, own translation)

- Why have the *informales* been unable to obtain legal recognition by any means other than civil disobedience?
- Why are they only given de facto recognition when they serve some precise state objective, but never receive permanent recognition, which would make them definitively independent?
- When they do eventually receive some kind of formal acceptance, why does this bankrupt them?
- Why is Peruvian society incapable of identifying the concrete causes of the transport chaos and just blames the *transportistas*, so unpopular right now?

How de Soto uses these questions to justify his neo-liberal political ideology is something that was widely disputed at the time; it is certainly not my intention to reproduce the criticisms here. However, the questions that he (and, more importantly, his research team) draw from their analysis of Lima's transport are relevant to the issues raised in the introductory notes to the RC 21 session "Informality, Transgression and Urban Governance". How does city governance selectively rely on service providers operating under conditions generally considered to possess varying degrees of informality? How is informality constantly (re-)produced and negotiated and how does this condition the way power (I would add class power) is exercised in cities?

My paper seeks to elaborate on these questions by looking at the history of public transport in Mexico City, especially the role of taxis and their close relatives, the collective taxis (*colectivos*, *peseros*, *combis*, *microbuses*), which now move over half

the population to their daily activities. Like the Lima case, this history well illustrates the process of selective outlawing-recognition-legalisation-re-outlawing of taxis and *colectivos*, the enormously important role of government in their development, the high stakes involved in these power relations, as well as the social stigmatisation of the *colectivos* as “chaotic”, unsafe, unsustainable, for which they are relegated to the realm of the subaltern. But the story also reveals an uneven resistance to the generalisation of capitalist relations of production, in particular, to the penetration of finance and informational capital into the transport sector. This shows up particularly well in the recent experience of transforming the traditional *colectivos* organisations into registered companies operating the BRT system: with mixed results. The reaction by drivers and transport leaders to recent stop-gap policies tackling the recent air pollution crisis in Mexico City also highlights the opposing interests at stake. A public discourse that stigmatises the *colectivos* paves the way for the technical fix solutions provided by transnational communications and automotive industries, without addressing the fundamental issues about the environmental impacts of transport. Finally, the conflict between the taxi organisations and Uber cars uncover the fiction that informality is about illegality and lack of government control.

Although my analysis is based on transport in Mexico City, it is hoped that, like the Uber conflict, my examples will help identify and shed light on similar situations, both historical and present-day, in totally different contexts. Here I identify closely with Lesemann (2012, 43) when he suggests: “as soon as we become aware of the manifestations of ‘informality’, we discover that these get to work, apparently less extensively, in societies in the global North”.

The arguments presented in my paper are not drawn from a specific research project, but rather, are informed by the accumulated results of research, both my own and other people’s, especially a number of case studies carried out over thirty-five years by my undergraduate and graduate students at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Azcapotzalco. And, of course, much of what I have to say is inspired by my every day experience as a user of public transport in Mexico City.

References:

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