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Claremont McKenna College

Regulating Rideshare in Progressive Era California Cities: Jitneys in San Francisco and
Los Angeles 1914-1919

Submitted to
Professor Lily Geismer and Professor Tamara Venit-Shelton

by
Nate Huntington

for
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Introduction: Jitneys, Uber and the “Right to the City”

Urbanists often romanticize a time before cars, when trains and trolleys shaped city life and movement. Today, cars' consumption of space and fuel make their inefficiencies clearer by the day. Cars have become a symbol of individualism and privatism, as a single car often transports only one person. However, for a moment in the 1910s, with the rise of jitneys, cars served the transportation needs of the public and challenged corporate control of transportation. Emerging in Los Angeles during the summer of 1914, jitneys pooled passengers going to a similar destination. Jitney operators followed streetcar lines, slightly deviating from the route to provide flexibility to passengers. The cars carried four to twelve people, ranging from a five-seater Model T Ford to larger busses. The jitney attracted passengers because it offered the first affordable way to ride in an automobile, something previously reserved for the wealthy. The masses suddenly had a new and fast way to move around dense parts of cities.

Existing discontent with streetcar companies contributed to the popularity of the jitneys. Up until the 1910s, private streetcar companies offered the only means of mass “public” transportation. Many decried the streetcar’s crowded cars, political strength and violent labor suppression. Jitneys tapped into this hostility, offering rides for the same price as the streetcars. The price is where the word “jitney” comes, being slang for “a nickel.”¹ These nickel-cabs offered a new form of public transportation that challenged the hegemony of streetcar companies, offering a more democratized form of movement. Their popularity took off after 1914, with many referring to the period as “the jitney

¹ “The Jitney,” *The New Republic* 2, no. 15 (February 13, 1915): 43–44.

craze.” The “craze” waned in the later years of the 1910s. While certain operators continued to drive their jitneys, the sheer number of jitneys roaming cities dwindled dramatically by the late 1910s. This thesis focuses on why the jitney craze ended so abruptly in the specific geographies of Los Angeles and San Francisco.



Figure 1: Jitneys in San Francisco Lined Up at 18th Street and Castro Street Looking North, 1915, SFMTA Photo Archive | SFMTA.com/Photo, selection of image number U04909. Reprinted with permission of the SFMTA.

Across the country, municipal governments dealt with the “jitney question.” Cities passed regulations that restricted the number of jitneys that could operate, requirements for drivers, and many other forms of formalizing the movement. Some of these regulations represented the interests of streetcar companies, while others came from a genuine concern for public safety. In the urban West, where streetcars often shaped the

development of young cities and garnered an outsized place in local politics, the jitney became a particularly contentious issue due to its rapid success.² In the West of the early 20th century, Progressive city governments assumed a larger role in trying to act in the public's interest and jitneys became central to questions about what urban transportation should be like. San Francisco and Los Angeles embody this trend, but offer different tales of how jitneys came and went during this period.³

In a 2016 TED Talk Travis Kalanick, the former CEO of Uber, offered his own version of the fate of the jitneys. Claiming that jitneys were an Uber “way before Uber,” he portrayed the jitney craze in a romantic light, arguing that state regulation, backed by streetcar companies, caused the popular jitneys to be only an ephemeral fad.⁴ Kalanick aimed to use this historical example to argue that the government should not regulate

² Carlos A. Schwantes, “The West Adapts the Automobile: Technology, Unemployment, and the Jitney Phenomenon of 1914-1917,” *Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 16, no. No. 3 (July 1985): 308-310.

³ Existing scholarship on the jitney is somewhat sparse. In his article entitled “The West Adapts the Automobile: Technology, Unemployment, and the Jitney Phenomenon of 1914-1917,” Carlos Schwantes provides the most extensive coverage of the jitney craze as it pertains to the West. Schwantes examines why the jitney originated and had particular success in the Western United States. He cites a public yearning for alternatives to street railways and a mix of unemployment and increasing affordability of automobiles as primary drivers of its rise. He focuses on regulations broadly, comparing different cities' responses to the “craze,” pointing to occasions when cities squashed the jitney quickly and others where jitneys found success. Regulations and a better economy by the time of World War I are the primary reasons the craze faded by the 1920s. Donald Davis examines response to the jitney across North America in his article “The North American Response to the Jitney Bus,” while also focusing on Toronto in another article. Two other sources examine the jitney craze at a local level, with Julian Chambliss focusing on Atlanta and Adam Hodges focusing on Chicago. Chambliss and Hodges exhibit why looking at the jitney at a local level is so important because it can illuminate the specific demographic, social and labor histories of each city. Utilizing this approach of looking at specific cities with Schwantes understandings of the West pushes this paper to look at what made regulation of the jitneys such an important issue in the context Progressive era cities of urban California. Carlos A. Schwantes, “The West Adapts the Automobile: Technology, Unemployment, and the Jitney Phenomenon of 1914-1917,” *Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 16, no. No. 3 (July 1985): 307–26; Donald F. Davis, “The North American Response to the Jitney Bus,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 333–57; Donald F. Davis, “Competition's Moment: The Jitney-Bus and Corporate Capitalism in the Canadian City, 1914-29,” *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire Urbaine* 18, no. 2 (1989): 102–22; Julian C. Chambliss, “A Question of Progress and Welfare: The Jitney Bus Phenomenon in Atlanta, 1915-1925,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2008): 486–506; Adam Hodges, “‘Roping the Wild Jitney’: The Jitney Bus Craze and the Rise of Urban Autobus Systems,” *Planning Perspectives* 21, no. 3 (July 2006): 253–76.

⁴ Travis Kalanick, *Uber's Plan to Get More People into Fewer Cars*, TED, 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/travis_kalanick_uber_s_plan_to_get_more_people_into_fewer_cars.

Uber or else Uber would have a similar fate to the jitneys.⁵ Kalnick's depiction of the jitney craze gets part of the story right. Like Uber in the early 2010s,⁶ municipal governments served as main regulatory bodies for the jitneys. But, that is where the similarities between Uber and jitneys end. When Kalanick made his claim, Uber was already a heavily capitalized business running a deficit to expand in the US and world. Uber had the power and resources to lobby local governments and utilize cash to rewrite rules in their favor. In fact, Uber's action more closely resembled the early 20th century streetcar companies than the jitneys. On the other hand, jitney operators organized to gain collective power against the power of streetcars.

The issue of organized labor points to the greatest difference between Uber and jitneys. In response to municipal regulations, the jitney operators formed associations to gain political power. Eventually, certain drivers dissatisfied with the associations looked to organized labor for support and formed unions. In contrast, in 2020, Uber, along with other "gig-companies," spent \$204 million dollars to create a new category of employment in California with the primary goal of denying their workers the ability to form a union.⁷ Uber won a ballot proposition just as streetcar companies won votes of direct democracy over the jitney, having the money and power to influence dominant modes of communication. Whereas Uber intentionally atomizes drivers to keep them from organizing, disparate jitney drivers sought came together to form political power.

⁵ Around the same time as Kalanick's speech, several newspapers published articles comparing Uber to jitneys. See Michael Farren and Matthew Mitchel, "Op-Ed: If You Like Uber, You Would've Loved the Jitney," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2014; Ron Grossman, "Before Uber There Was Jitney," *Chicago Tribune*, March 9, 2014, sec. , News.

⁶ Nestor M. Davidson and John J. Infranca, "The Sharing Economy as an Urban Phenomenon," *Yale Law & Policy Review* 34, no. 2 (2016): 215-218.

⁷ Aarian Marshall, "With \$200 Million, Uber and Lyft Write Their Own Labor Law," *WIRED*, November 4, 2020.

The importance of the jitney, nevertheless, extends beyond today's "rideshare" politics and toward a larger discussion of how active municipal governments should be in promoting public welfare. Leading up to the jitney craze, both San Francisco and Los Angeles grew in their capacity to enact their own public policy. The passage of "home-rule" charters gave their local governments the ability to have a more active role in shaping urban life. During the Progressive Era, local governments, especially in the West, began taking a larger role in ensuring the needs of the public. Local governments questioned whether private "public utility" companies for water, energy and transportation best served the public. San Francisco claimed water from Hetch Hetchy for the city and became the first city to municipally own a streetcar line in 1912. In Los Angeles, the private-public partnerships continued to provide most utilities, but still, the state grew significantly. Rather than relying solely on private development by larger landowners that provided transportation, energy, and water to subdivide new settlements, the municipal government became increasingly active in infrastructure projects, having a significant role in procuring water from the Owens Valley and establishing the Port of Los Angeles.⁸

This thesis argues that the regulation of the jitney craze from 1914-1919 provides an important avenue for understanding the growth of San Francisco and Los Angeles's state power to facilitate the economic and spatial trends of city life. Chapter One looks at the burgeoning power of San Francisco and Los Angeles's local governments before the jitney craze. It focuses on debates around urban planning and questions about municipal ownership following the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco. Then, shifting to Los

⁸ Steven P. Erie, "How the Urban West Was Won: The Local State and Economic Growth in Los Angeles, 1880-1932," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (June 1, 1992), 519.

Angeles, it considers the history of private development and labor context leading up to the emergence of jitneys. Chapter Two examines the beginning of the “craze,” looking at early public perception and the response from local governments. This chapter also examines how jitney drivers aimed to gain political power through associations and eventually unions. Chapter Three focuses on how drivers sought to assert themselves as gaurentees of the public benefit, as did their opposition of streetcars and business owners. This battle for the public benefit played out as who should have access and control of public space. Chapter Four examines how the national and international shock of World War I played on these specific geographies of California. It shows that while intimate regulation of space by municipalities proved detrimental to the jitney, global forces eventually marked an end to the “craze.”

The battle between city officials and jitney operators connects to the question of who gets to define urban space, theorized by Henri Lefebvre as the “right to the city.” Put simply, Lefebvre defines the “right to the city” broadly as the “transformed and renewed right to urban life.”⁹ To Lefebvre, that right should be defined by those who inhabit urban space, especially workers.¹⁰ Applied to the jitneys, the “right to the city” becomes a question of who is able to operate transportation services freely on city streets. Both jitney operators and streetcar companies claimed this right, arguing that their service better met the needs of the public. The “right to the city” is embedded in the language of

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996 [1968]), 158; Kafui A. Atttoh, “What Kind of Right Is the Right to the City?,” *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 5 (October 1, 2011): 673-676; Geographer Kafui Atttoh notes now Lefebvre’s notion of the “right to the city” is conceptually vague in what constitutes a right and for whom. This has led the concept to be invoked by many interest groups and academics at different times to assert what they believe is foundational and necessary for urban life.

¹⁰ Ibid.

both sides and thus is a useful framework to analyze differing perspectives on how urban movement should be controlled.

The attempts to define city streets is core to the story of the jitneys. Operators asserted themselves as constructing a vision for urban space where cars dominated the streetscape, yet empowered workers to serve the transportation needs of the public, especially those that lived in dense parts of the city. These Progressive era municipalities responded to the jitney “craze” by imposing spatial restrictions on jitneys, ensuring public officials and private corporations the right to shape future transportation in their cities as opposed to the collective power of jitney drivers. This choice meant relying on centralized public transportation, whether privately or publicly owned, rather than adopting automobiles in a way that gave workers control over city streets. By de-valuing how jitney operators sought to utilize automobiles for public mobility, city officials in Los Angeles and San Francisco ensured that cars would become an individualized form of transportation that held a competitive instead of complementary relationship to public transportation.

Space is not static, but rather is something that is constructed. Evoking much more than geographic location, space constitutes the interactions and interrelations between actors in a given place. Geographer Doreen Massey offers several key propositions for how we should conceptualize space:

First, that we recognize space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny...
Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity...
Third, that we recognise space as always under construction.¹¹

¹¹ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 9

This thesis focuses on the “interactions” at the scale of the city in order to address several questions. How did jitneys change how people moved around cities? What new interactions occurred? How did jitney contend with existing transportation systems? In regards to the “existence of multiplicity,” attempting to draw out a narrative and conclusions from the jitney “craze” will often flatten the diversity of experiences and perspectives. The main “trajectory” that will be examined is how jitney operators viewed themselves as part of greater labor and transportation trends. Lastly, thinking about space as “always under construction” is especially important for this paper. Municipal governments of the Progressive era grew as the primary bodies in charge of governing urban space, claiming power in how people moved and interacted within cities. When the jitney operators redefined streetscapes and labor control of transportation, they offered a new construction of space for urban life. The cities reasserted an existing production of space that maintained the power of streetcars as the dominant object of transportation within cities.

Framing space and time in the context of modernism provides what is unique to the question of mobility during this period. As with all forms of transportation, jitneys moved people through space in a given amount of time. Part of their selling point was that they could compress the two concepts, moving people from one place to another faster than streetcars. David Harvey labels this acceleration in movement the “space-time” compression.¹² Harvey notes how a certain space-time compression existed from 1848 onward. Technologies such as trains, the telegram and, later, automobiles brought a speeding up of the movement of people and information. This brought a “crisis

¹² Harvey David, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990),

in the experience of time and space” that peaked around 1910.¹³ This “crisis” produced two responses: “the spatialization of time (Being)” and “the annihilation of space by time (Becoming).”¹⁴ The former called for a localized viewing of modernity. The latter suggested that space had been made irrelevant by faster movement, calling for a more internationalist response. This second idea frames the space-time compression leading up to World War I as facilitating a post-geographical world, making local distinctions less important than global trends. Still, neither idea of space-time in modernity dominated the other. Instead, “while celebrating universality and the collapse of spatial barriers, [Modernism] also explored new meanings for space and place in ways that tacitly reinforced local identity.”¹⁵ Jitneys capture this defining tension of modernity. In one respect, they celebrated the ability to compress space and time, “annihilating space” through quicker movement. On the other hand, operators felt deeply defined by their relationship to the cities they worked in. When regulating streets became a tool of reining jitneys in, operators rallied around their ability to define the space of the city. In all their complexity, jitneys are representative of this definition of modernism by embodying the tension of compressing space and time while also trying to form their own production of space.

As might be evident already, terminology will be important for this paper. The definition of “jitney” could range from a five seater Model T, one of the first widely available cars, to larger style busses that could fit up to 12 people. Sometimes sources

¹³ Ibid, 265-267.

¹⁴ Ibid, 273.

¹⁵ Ibid.

from the time used “jitbus” or “jitney bus” to talk about jitneys. The inclusion of “bus” might seem to suggest that those sources were talking only about the larger types of jitneys, but this does not seem to be the case. “Jitbus,” “jitney bus” and “jitney” all referred to this new form of transportation that had fixed end points for routes, but was flexible to where passengers wanted to be picked up and dropped off.¹⁶ While the larger jitneys were sometimes owned and operated by bus companies, individuals operated both sorts of vehicles without any company affiliation. This thesis focuses on the owner-operated vehicles.

The term “public transportation” will be used for different means of transportation that move people in a grouped manner. Streetcar companies should thereby be considered a form of public transportation, even though the companies owned the lines and cars. Jitneys were also a form of public transportation in that they carried members of the public that may not have known people before getting in the car. Taxis and chauffeurs that offered individualized rides, as with automobiles for personal use, should not be considered public transportation. In regards to ownership of transportation, “public” ownership means that the government owns and operates that form of transportation. While publicly funded mass transit is quite ubiquitous in the US today, it was in the 1910s that city governments started owning and operating streetcar lines.

Since they reveal a different future for automobiles, the jitney deserves further analysis into how the local state shaped the future of this new technology. This does not offer romanticization of jitneys. Rather, it examines how the jitney served as a democratizing form of transportation that challenged existing power. As cars still do,

¹⁶ Donald F. Davis, “The North American Response to the Jitney Bus,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1990), 335.

jitneys caused safety and health concerns for urban life. Still, if we want to know how municipalities first adapted to car use on city streets, we cannot ignore jitneys.

Chapter 1: Streetcars, Suburbanization and the Growth of Municipal Power

The first jitney arrived on the streets of Los Angeles in the middle of 1914. The concept spread to San Francisco by the end of the year, making Los Angeles and San Francisco two of the first cities to experience the jitney craze. Jitneys introduced cars as a viable mode of transportation for a range of people, entering a debate about municipal versus private ownership of transportation, while also providing problems for local governments on how to manage congestion and movement. San Francisco and Los Angeles, where the jitney originated and experienced relative success, offer important case studies for exploring the development of this mode of transportation.

Looking at the rise of urban development and streetcars in these two cities prior to the introduction of the jitney provides a better understanding of the jitney's impact on transportation and conceptions of public space. In San Francisco, the 1906 Earthquake provoked new debates over urban planning and municipal ownership of streetcar lines. Many stakeholders saw the earthquake as an opportunity for rebuilding. Conversations around beautifying the city and challenging private ownership of transportation infrastructure became a central part of local politics. Centralized government planning based on the city beautiful ideas did not materialize as many hoped. However, the city did become the first to municipally own a streetcar line in 1913, which illustrates the expanding role of local government in urban planning, as well as existing discontents with the private streetcar monopoly.

Despite not having a major earthquake to destroy the built environment, similar conversations emerged in Los Angeles. As Progressives intended to use government to

promote social good, debates flourished about whether private companies' could serve the common good controlling public utilities and infrastructure. In Los Angeles, overall growth was a major priority of the municipal government. However, the public's satisfaction with the existing streetcar system and the government's acknowledgement of the streetcar companies' contributions to growing the city did not involve local government in transportation.

San Francisco: Rebuilding and Reshaping Transportation after the 1906 Earthquake

On the morning of April 18th, 1906, an unprecedented earthquake shook San Franciscans from their sleep. The earthquake and ensuing fire caused death and unrest, wreaking most havoc on the dense, eastern part of the city. The fire continued for several days, spreading as far west as Van Ness St., and spanning from North Beach to South of Market and parts of the Mission.¹⁷ The disaster left countless people homeless for extended lengths, many finding refuge in public parks and the Presidio military base. The destruction exacerbated existing inequalities, turning the most vulnerable into long-term refugees.¹⁸ The earthquake pushed everyone onto the streets, making it a public and hectic recovery process, although those with more resources were able to regain housing faster than those with fewer resources.

The earthquake accelerated demographic changes unfolding at the turn of the century, especially dispersal of people from the city center. Originally an "instant city" during the Gold Rush, San Francisco's population concentrated on the eastern edge by the

¹⁷ John Casper Branner, *San Francisco Burnt Area, 1906.*, 22,200 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1908), David Rumsey Map Collection.

¹⁸ Andrea Rees Davies, *Saving San Francisco: Relief and Recovery after the 1906 Disaster* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 12.

Bay for much of the 19th century.¹⁹ With streetcar lines moving from the Ferry Building down the city's main artery, Market Street, the early development of San Francisco revolved around this city center.²⁰ By the 1880s and 90s, the majority of the people still lived in this dense area, but with the expansion of streetcar lines, along with municipal action to promote settlement on Western side of the city, the population became more dispersed.²¹ The earthquake and fire accelerated this trend. According to Joanna Dyl, "in 1911, three-quarters of San Franciscans resided outside the burned district in contrast to just 45 percent in 1905, representing the movement of more than one hundred thousand people."²² In effect, the destruction of the denser, eastern part of the city accelerated an existing pattern of people moving from central city neighborhoods to streetcar suburbs.

¹⁹ Brian J. Godfrey, "Urban Development and Redevelopment in San Francisco," *Geographical Review* 87, no. 3 (1997), 312.

²⁰ Robert W. Cherny, "City Commercial, City Beautiful, City Practical: The San Francisco Visions of William C. Ralston, James D. Phelan, and Michael M. O'Shaughnessy," *California History* Vol. 73, no. No. 4 (Winter, /1995 1994), 297.

²¹ Tamara Venit-Shelton, "Unmaking Historic Spaces: Urban Progress and the San Francisco Cemetery Debate, 1895-1937," *California History* 85, no. 3 (2008), 177.

²² Joanna L. Dyl, *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017), 121.

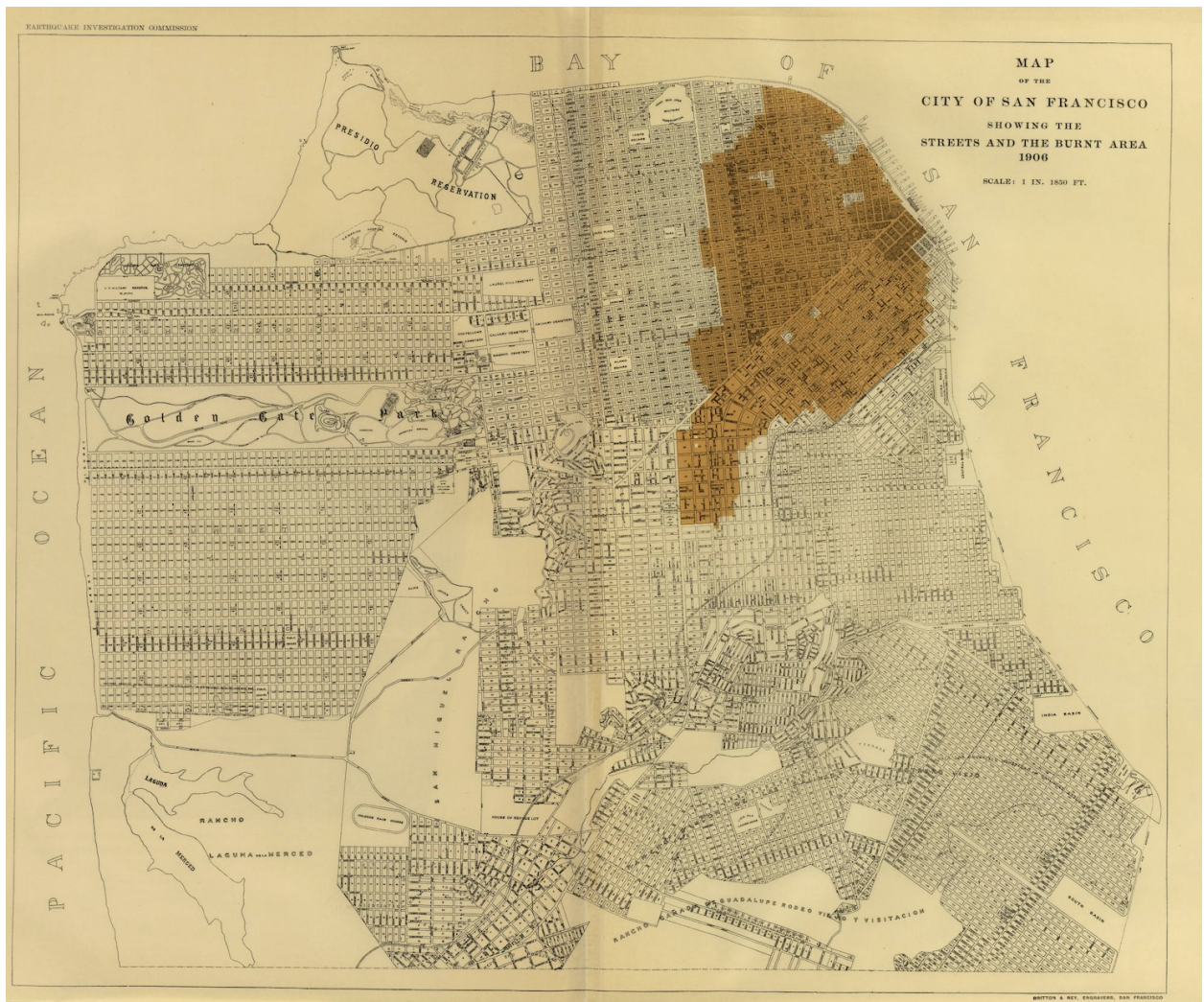


Figure 2: John Casper Branner, *San Francisco Burnt Area, 1906*, David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com, image number: 2130020.

United Railroads became a central figure in rebuilding the city, hoping to regain control over transportation in the wake of disaster. In addition to the destruction of the housing stock in the fire zone, during the earthquake many of the railway lines split from the seismically fractured ground and needed extreme repairs. The effort made United Railroads a central figure in rebuilding the city. Although founded only four years before the earthquake, United Railroads had quickly created a near monopoly of streetcar lines by buying an assemblage of previous companies. Eastern investors had bought up

existing streetcar lines. Patrick C. Calhoun, grandson of former South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, had taken charge of the new conglomerate. For its part, United Railroads saw the crisis as an opportunity to increase its transportation dominance in the city, pushing through improvements to their service to gain public support. The effort proved successful. A piece from the *San Francisco News Letter* several months after the earthquake lauded the work done by the company, claiming that “such remarkable energy and ability is unprecedented in the annals of street railway enterprises.”²³ The article also highlighted the prompt rebuilding of transportation infrastructure and investment in rebuilding the city.²⁴ Similarly, the *New York Times* celebrated United Railroad’s return to action, remarking on the improvement of services and extension of electrical trolley lines above head.²⁵ While United Railroad’s work after the earthquake appeared to reflect the company’s initiative to better the city after the disaster, it also highlights the company’s continued dominance over transportation options and labor for transportation infrastructure. This control gave some San Franciscans pause.

Even before United Railroads formed, many San Franciscans questioned who should own public utilities. This debate intensified after the 1906 earthquake. In 1898, the city passed a new city charter that would go into effect in 1900. The charter included Article XII, which allowed the municipal government to acquire public utilities if two-thirds of voters passed a bond measure to fund the acquisitions.²⁶ Then-Mayor James Phelan believed the government should own essential utilities. Reflecting the idea of

²³ “United Railroads’ Great Work,” *San Francisco News Letter*, July 21, 1906.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “Two years afterwards in San Francisco: Judged by the New Buildings, Improved Streets and Railroads, the City Will Be Better Off Than It Was Before the Earthquake,” *New York Times*, 1908, sec. Part Five Magazine Section.

²⁶ Authority of the Board of Supervisors, *Charter of the City and County of San Francisco* (San Francisco: Authority of the Board of Supervisors, 1919).

municipal progressivism, he argued that public necessities should not conflict with corporate profit incentives.²⁷ Some others did not share this view. In 1898, a critic labeled municipal ownership a “tax-eater” for a “worse service,” also writing:

There is a tacit assumption in some quarters that the sentiment of the people of San Francisco is in favor of the policy of acquiring public utilities, but it is negatived [sic] by the fact that no serious move has ever been made in that direction.²⁸

While against acquiring public utilities, the critique acknowledges how popular the idea had become in the city. To him, the fact that there was no precedent in municipal ownership of public utilities made the proposition absurd.²⁹ Despite his assumptions, voters passed the new charter, expanding the scope of municipal powers for items deemed within the public good. Still, the Southern Pacific Company challenged the vote on technical grounds, aiming to void the charter.³⁰ The company controlled much of the inter-urban transportation out of San Francisco, both train and ferry services, and the expansion of government powers in ownership of transportation lines threatened their business.³¹ In *Fragley v. Phelan*, the California Supreme Court ruled against Southern Pacific, permitting the new charter. And, an 1896 amendment to Article XI in the state constitution provided municipalities the “home-rule” provision, giving local governments

²⁷ Robert W. Cherny, “City Commercial, City Beautiful, City Practical: The San Francisco Visions of William C.

Ralston, James D. Phelan, and Michael M. O’Shaughnessy,” *California History* Vol. 73, no. No. 4 (Winter, 1994/1995), 303.

²⁸ “Public Utilities,” *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*, February 17, 1898.

²⁹ Public ownership of railroads had been an existing topic of conversation, as explored in W. F. Deverell, *Railroad Crossing: Californians and the Railroad, 1850-1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) and Chapter 6 of Tamara Venit-Shelton, *Squatter’s Republic: Land and the Politics of Monopoly in California 1850-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

³⁰ “In Defense of the Charter: Garrett M’Enerney Files His Brief Answer to Fragley’s Attack in the Supreme Court:

The Printed Argument Defends the Constitutionality of the Legislative Act of the Year 1807,” *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*, September 26, 1899.

³¹ Southern Pacific Company, *San Francisco And Vicinity* (Buffalo, N.Y.: The Matthews-Northrup Works.).

more power in governing municipal affairs. The introduction of the “home-rule” provision, along with the political support of San Francisco voters to amend the city charter, opened the door for the city to pioneer ownership of railway lines. San Francisco led the way in this emerging trend in political planning of urban environments.

A Carmen strike against United Railroads reinvigorated debates about ownership of urban space, raising the importance of the new city charter and provisions regarding municipal ownership of public utilities. After the 1906 earthquake, a corruption case and a labor strike turned violent brought United Railroads and owner Patrick Calhoun into the center of political debate. In May 1907, just as information about United Railroad’s involvement in an evolving graft scandal became public, the Carmen’s Union began a strike for higher wages and an eight-hour work day.³² On what would become known as “Bloody Tuesday,” Calhoun called strikebreakers and armed guards to the scene of the strike. A confrontation eventually escalated to two deaths and many injuries, with violence from both directions continuing in the ensuing months. The strike divided the city between those who supported the Carmen’s Union—especially other labor organizations—and those who respected the strong response—especially businessmen. With a public divided, both sides of the battle claimed ownership of the streets.³³ The argument centered around whether public utilities, including transportation, could serve the interest of the public when in private hands. Proponents of the strike declared that “people own the streets,” not corporations. Supporters of Calhoun and United Railroads argued that preventing streetcar use inhibited the public from properly moving through

³² Issel and Cherney, 173.

³³ Dyl, 189.

cities and thereby limited individual use of the streets.³⁴ The conversations about who city streets should belong to associated with the strike would provide a precedent when jitney operators later asserted their presence on the streets, breaking the binary between municipal versus private ownership of transportation arteries.

In addition to the Carmen's Union strike, a graft scandal involving Calhoun and United Railroads increased the company's presence at the center of the city's political debates. Brought forth by former Mayor James D. Phelan and his business associate, Rudolph Spreckels, the graft trials centered around current Mayor Eugene Schmitz and the "boss" for the Union Labor Party, Abe Ruef.³⁵ Both Schmitz and Ruef, among other Union Labor members of the Board of Supervisors, accepted bribes from business leaders in return for favorable contracts. Calhoun wanted to electrify the streetcar system by building lines above ground, a move pushed through in the wake of the earthquake. With initial pushback to the idea by city council members, Ruef and Calhoun orchestrated a bribe to move forward with the plan. While Ruef ended up in prison and Schmitz had to resign as Mayor, Calhoun and other bribe-givers escaped with no punishment. In summarizing why, William Issel and Robert W. Cherny write:

The demise of the San Francisco graft prosecution, particularly the deflection of blame away from the corporations that had offered the bribes, including Pacific Gas and Electric, Pacific Telephone, and the United Railroads, had come about partly because the Merchants' Association and the heads of the city's largest banks waged a decisive campaign to turn discussion about municipal politics away from class conflict and business graft toward issues of city development and economic progress.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, 2006), 188-190.

³⁶ Issel and Cherny, 158.

With the earthquake and an economic downturn in 1907, a powerful subset of the business community backed Calhoun and other bribe-givers, believing that further economic disruption would devastate the city. To exonerate Calhoun and others who offered the bribes, the Merchants Association shifted attention away from corporate malfeasance to the need for economic progress. Still, some members of the business community chose to view the graft trials in their true, bilateral nature. Phelan and Spreckels did not back Calhoun. Instead, they aimed to promote reforms in government that targeted both sides of corruption. Even though Calhoun walked free, the graft scandal and “Bloody Tuesday” made Calhoun and United Railroads polarizing figures in the city and reignited conversations about who should own streetcar lines in the city.

A firm believer in urban beautification, Spreckels disliked electric streetcar lines above the ground. He represented how the City Beautiful movement, which captured the attention of San Francisco’s urban planning instigators before the earthquake, had gained increased traction after its destruction. In the year before the earthquake, famed planner Daniel Burnham brought the City Beautiful movement to San Francisco. He introduced the “Burnham Plan,” a reorganization of the spatial arrangements in San Francisco. Burnham focused on facilitating urban beautification, mostly by widening streets and promoting park space, working with the natural contours better than the existing grid system.³⁷ Burnham’s plan reflected the City Beautiful movement’s belief that beautifying cities can create social and moral uplift. According to William Wilson, City Beautiful was a political movement that “demanded a reorientation of public thought and action toward urban beauty,” and contended that political action with citizen support could implement

³⁷ Cherny, 302.

change to urban spaces.³⁸ However, the Burnham report, as well as other City Beautiful campaigns, required a top-down approach to urban planning where the government, advised by experts, reshaped the built environment. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Burnham plan drew a disparate coalition of support, including Phelan, the Southern Pacific Company and organized labor.³⁹ Still, the political push to implement the changes lost steam. Early supporters and critics alike recognized the difficulty of planning on such a big scale, even for a city that had just burned down. Instead, the political support shifted away from Burnham's plan and to Mardsen Manson's report. Manson was a civil engineer that studied at UC Berkeley and advised the City of San Francisco on several occasions. Manson's plan was more practical, focusing less on beautification and more on commercial recovery. Up against the difficulty of rearranging existing built environments, even after the earthquake, and public support constraints, city officials never implemented any of the broad City Beautiful plans. Still, City Beautiful influenced how politicians thought about the government's role in planning and managing urban space.

Government involvement in planning urban environments did not come to fruition as City Beautiful advocates may have hoped in San Francisco, but public ownership of streetcar lines became a tangible change in which local governments sought to promote collective benefit by promising certain utilities. With United Railroads becoming a focal point of controversy following the graft trial and Bloody Tuesday, the democratic will to facilitate public ownership of a streetcar line grew. The burgeoning role of municipal

³⁸ William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 1-3.

³⁹ Dyl, 132-142.

government in the ownership of public utilities needed the earthquake to center United Railroads ownership of transportation lines in political debate. The jitneys would push these questions even further. While it would take several years for the Geary St. line to open up, and three decades after that for all streetcar lines to be owned by the municipal government, the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake reshaped how San Franciscans moved around and understood public space forever. A different story would take place in the city's southern counterpoint.

Los Angeles: Dispersion From the Start

Los Angeles's urban growth followed a different pattern from that of San Francisco. At the end of the 19th century, Los Angeles transformed from a sparsely populated basin to a major Western city. Real estate speculation served as the central driver of this growth. "Los Angeles was first and above all the creature of real-estate capitalism," Mike Davis explains, "the culminating speculation, in fact, of the generations of boosters and promoters who had subdivided and sold the West from the Cumberland Gap to the Pacific."⁴⁰ Davis notes how the creation of the city did not depend on ecological or geographical advantage, but rather speculation.⁴¹ In order to ensure that speculation would return a profit, boosters sold the city with the idea that it would be an "Aryan city under the sun," promoting the idea that white settlers could own

⁴⁰ Mike Davis, *City of Quarts*, (London: Verso Press), 25

⁴¹ Ibid.

land in this temperate climate.⁴² Harrison Gray Otis, the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, served as one key booster.⁴³

But no one rivaled Henry Huntington in facilitating the city's growth. Through a conglomerate of trolley, power and real estate companies, Huntington effectively expanded and shaped the city. The nephew of the railroad tycoon Collis P. Huntington, who was a member of the "big four" that built the transcontinental railroad, Henry Huntington became the maybe the most influential person in shaping the turn of the century Southern California. Historian William Fredricks argues that "Because Huntington operated this group of companies in an era when city and county planning commissions held little regulatory power, he became, in effect, the region's metropolitan planner."⁴⁴ In a time with little municipal power, Henry Huntington shaped the spatial layout of Southern California. Rather than the city government extending electricity, water or transportation to new settlements, Huntington and other private actors invested the capital to create the necessary infrastructure for the city to grow. In the case of transportation, in order to gain a quick return on investment, small-time railway builders asked adjacent landowners for subsidies for increasing the value of property by providing transportation. Land owners then largely subdivided the land themselves.⁴⁵ This practice allowed Huntington to play an outsized role in the shaping of Los Angeles.

This mode of profit-driven development and ideal of "streetcar suburbs" made Los Angeles dispersed, beginning with the immense period of growth at the end of the

⁴² Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 91.

⁴³ Davis, 25.

⁴⁴ William B. Fredricks, *Henry E. Huntington and the Creation of Southern California* (Ohio State University Press, 1992), 1.

⁴⁵ Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 86.

19th century. Much of the suburbanization of Los Angeles is accredited to the post-1920s acceptance of the automobile, accelerating during World War II and beyond. However, the model of growth predating that period made Los Angeles dispersed even prior to the automobile. That is not to say that the urban center of town did not hold significance. The plaza that signified the center of the town for the Spanish settlement underwent a “spatial mitosis,” with the Anglo businesses sprouting up to the south, making Broadway and Sixth street the commercial center of the city by 1915.⁴⁶ Downtown would become a major commercial center during this time, but the greater spatial dynamics of the city tended to reflect low-density, single family domesticities. Land speculation and corresponding transportation drove this dynamic at first, but around 1914, the city hit a high point of population density, going from a remarkably low 3.7 persons per acre in 1900 to 9.3 persons per acre in 1914, still relatively low compared to older eastern cities and San Francisco.⁴⁷ In addition to this trend and the influence of the City Beautiful movement’s ideal, streetcars helped to further the expansion of the city as the lines moved outwards beyond the growing density of the urban core.

The consolidation of railways in Los Angeles occurred in the first decade of the 20th century, creating a duopoly where one company focused on interurban transit and the other focused on transit within the city limits. This followed a similar pattern to United Railroads consolidating lines in San Francisco, but also points to how Los Angeles grew as a region, not just a city. Henry Huntington had dominated local transit, following the model of subdivision and expansion, but then got into the business of

⁴⁶ Mary P. Ryan, “A Durable Centre of Urban Space: The Los Angeles Plaza,” *Urban History* 33, no. 3 (2006), 477.

⁴⁷ Eric Stewart, “Victorian Sprawl: Streetcar Technology and the Suburban Ideal in Los Angeles, 1870–1920,” *California History* 93, no. 2 (2016), 24.

interurban transit by acquiring lines from other companies to form the Pacific Electric (PE). By 1911, Huntington and Edward H. Hariman of Southern Pacific struck a deal that gave Southern Pacific control of Pacific Electric. Huntington gained control of the Los Angeles Railway (LARy), which focused on local transit.⁴⁸ By this time, the companies more or less constituted two monopolies, with the former focusing on local transit and latter focusing on interurban transit. To many, this was not a problem: The two companies offered relatively good service and facilitated the growth of the city in a way that many approved.

Despite its unique history of urban development, like San Francisco, Los Angeles experienced a change in the mode of development from private to public hands during the first couple decades of the 20th century. During this time, L.A.'s municipal government assumed a larger role in the economic development of the region. It worked to obtain a water source from the Owens Valley and to create a more substantial harbor.⁴⁹ While the West had relied on the federal government for expansion throughout the 18th century, especially in regards to procuring water, local municipalities played a key role in economic development during the Progressive era.⁵⁰ This was not unique to Los Angeles. Other Western cities during the Progressive era adopted a more state centered growth model, but Los Angeles officials wanted to catch up to more established cities like San Francisco.⁵¹ Within this understanding, the fact that Los Angeles did not experiment with municipal ownership of streetcars, unlike San Francisco, presents that difference between

⁴⁸ Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 87-92.

⁴⁹ Steven P. Erie, "How the Urban West Was Won: The Local State and Economic Growth in Los Angeles, 1880-1932," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (June 1, 1992), 519.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 549.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the two cities was not differing beliefs in state economic planning. Instead, the dissatisfaction with United Railroads in San Francisco contrasted with an acceptance of Pacific Electric and Los Angeles Railways in Los Angeles. For the time being, Los Angeles did not experiment with municipal ownership of transportation systems, yet still grew in the role of the state in issues of urban development.

Organized labor in Los Angeles pushed for this regime, seeing public ownership as a means of both securing jobs in hostile environments towards organized labor and ensuring that the needs of the public were met. During the period before World War I, union leaders grappled with the question of “how, and to what extent, the city’s public services needed to be extended and protected in order to meet the needs of its rapidly growing population.” Labor officials were keenly aware that “private capitalists were eager to seize control” of resources for their own gain.⁵² Progressives shared this question, but part of this push by organized labor came from the fact that labor had few other avenues for gaining political power at this time. In 1910, several union members had bombed the building of the *Los Angeles Times*, making L.A. an open shop city for the next twenty years and exacerbating the city’s already labor-hostile environment.⁵³ President of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harrison Grey Otis, was known as vehemently anti-labor from the start. Henry Huntington shared that reputation. Not only did leaders of organized labor see public ownership as a means of ensuring the needs of the public were met, but also embraced municipal power for its job-creation possibilities.⁵⁴ Still, labor

⁵² John H.M. Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012), 41

⁵³ Fred B. Glass, *From Mission to Microchip: A History of the California Labor Movement*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2016), 181-190.

⁵⁴ Erie, “How the Urban West Was Won,” 546.

had relatively little power. Despite their belief that public ownership of transportation would better serve the needs of the public, the city government believed otherwise. LARy and PE continued to privately operate Los Angeles' system of streetcars without the prospect of municipal ownership anywhere close.

Conclusion:

The Progressive Era trend of government gearing towards public ownership, or at least state guided development, took root in these two growing California cities.

Progressives aimed to use the government to promote public benefit. In regards to transportation, San Francisco officials believed municipal ownership instead of United Railroads best achieved that goal. In Los Angeles, the city believed the existing streetcar companies adequately served the public. With the same goal, the two cities adopted differing modes of state involvement of transportation. San Francisco geared towards public ownership of streetcars, while Los Angeles accepted the private-public partnership that had defined streetcars for decades. Jitneys soon emerged in both of these geographies, adapting to the distinct transportation and labor histories of each city.

The conditions that would make the jitney successful in each city were different. In Los Angeles, the spatial dispersion of the city contributed to the early success of the jitney. In San Francisco, drivers situated themselves as challenging United Railroads, playing into existing hostility towards the company. Either way, both local governments were primed to address whether jitneys enhanced or hindered the public benefit. Both considered the question for private versus public ownership of streetcars given the new power of being able to own public utilities, whether they chose to do so or not. The jitney

entered this debate. In doing so, it challenged the binary of public versus private ownership of transportation by introducing a new vehicle for public transportation that could not be ignored.

Chapter 2: How Public are the Streets?

In 1915, the jitney craze captured national attention. In addition to a Charlie Chaplin film titled *The Jitney Elopement*, several songs from that year focused on jitneys. “I Didn’t Raise My Ford to be a Jitney Bus” told the story of a man who bought a Ford, only to be confused as a jitney driver.⁵⁵ “I Want To Ride In A Jitney Bus” portrays the excitement around this new form of transportation from the perspective of its customers,⁵⁶ but perhaps the most illuminating song from that year was out of San Francisco, entitled “Father is Driving a Jitney Bus.” The song speaks about the financial allure and risk of running a jitney. For the chorus, Joseph Carey wrote:

Father is driving a Jitney bus from the station to the park / And soon I know he’ll be a millionaire / The stove in the kitchen has been ignored / Dear mother is renting a “Can’t Afford” / For half a dime she’ll take you anywhere / Sister has left the department store to become a Jitney Queen / Her little car is winning great renown / O, the bank account is getting fat, for Pa and Ma and sister Hat / Since the Jitney bus has come to bless our town.⁵⁷

The song’s reflected the early economic promise of the jitney with the bank accounts of the family members “getting fat” as the drive father became a “millionaire.” The song depicted the jitney as an accessible form of employment where the operator sets his or her own terms and filled a profitable market niche that the public embraced. However, it also exposed the risks. The “Can’t Afford” line referenced the significant upfront cost of acquiring a car—often Model T’s bought on credit, but in this case rented.⁵⁸ The idea that everyone will get rich from the jitney, regardless of gender and age, gives the song an

⁵⁵ Jack Frost, *I didn’t raise my Ford to be a jitney bus*, (Chicago, New York: Frank K. Root & Co., 1915).

⁵⁶ Howard Kocian and Theodore B. White, *I Want To Ride In A Jitney Bus*, (St. Louis: Buck & Lowney Co., 1915).

⁵⁷ Joseph B. Carey, *Father Is Driving a Jitney Bus*, (San Francisco: Buell Music Co., 1915).

⁵⁸ Schwantes, “The West Adapts the Automobile,” 309.

almost satirical tone. Still, the verses express a sincere celebration of the jitney, both as a respectable form of self-employment and a welcomed alternative to the streetcar.

The song may sensationalize the promise of the jitney, but jitneys did offer a democratized form of transportation both for the rider and driver. They challenged transportation dominance by railroad companies like United Railroads, and allowed individuals to create their own form of transportation employment. However, the story of the jitney does not reinforce the trope of a unique American individualism. Rather, jitney operators gained power and autonomy through their ability to organize. The formation of associations and unions gave jitney operators a voice in local politics, quickly recognizing that as singular drivers they were weak, but as a unified force they could compete with the street car companies.

Comparing the legislation in Los Angeles and San Francisco in 1915 (the first full year of the movement) demonstrates the power of both the operators in organizing and local government as a regulatory body. Operators in San Francisco quickly formed the Jitney Bus Association and created a harmonious relationship with the labor friendly city government, which made 1915 a year of promise for the jitney in San Francisco. On the other hand, the driver's association the Auto Bus Drivers Association of Los Angeles remained a marginal actor.

Organization of the drivers was important for the fate of the jitney in the two cities, but the jitney's varying success also depended on other factors. The amount of hostility towards the streetcar companies and how each city council viewed regulation had important implications for the jitneys ability to operate. The regulation of city streets became a question of how "public" streets should be, as well as who was better equipped

to serve the transportation interests of the public: collectively organized drivers and the city, or a private company. A comparison of San Francisco and Los Angeles during the beginning of the jitney craze exposes the rise of two different regulatory approaches to jitneys. Los Angeles aimed to protect business interests, including the railway companies, and San Francisco experimented with accepting collective power of a new field of workers in collaboration with municipal ownership of streetcars. These examples demonstrate the need for regulation around transportation and street use to promote worker organization and power, rather than trying to stifle it.

Finding Ground: The Introduction of the Jitney

The early suburbanization of Los Angeles, facilitated by streetcars, made Los Angeles an early adopter of the automobile and, thus, the jitney. It was, in fact, the birthplace of the jitney. A *Saturday Evening Post* article claimed J.R. Draper, a Los Angeles car salesman, ran the first jitney operation on July 1st, 1914.⁵⁹ Conceding that automobile owners in Long Beach may have offered rides for a nickel before then, the article suggested that Mr. Draper's decision to drive his car down First Street, from Downtown to Boyle Heights, launched "the fastest little revolution in urban transportation that the city has ever seen."⁶⁰ The author saw Los Angeles as the natural starting point for this "revolution" that extended to the rest of the country. He contended that the well paved streets and consistent climate contributed to car ownership. But, more than anything else, the suburban character of the region drove the "necessity" of cars. Although streetcar companies had shaped development in such a way that made Los

⁵⁹ Will Payne, "The Jitney Juggernaut," 65. *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 May 1915, 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Angeles such an attractive place for automobiles to take root.⁶¹ It was for these reasons that the jitney also took off.

As examined in the introduction, the word ‘jitney’ referred to a broad group of automobiles that offered transportation services. The distinction between bus companies and individual operators at the beginning of the craze nevertheless is important. J.R. Draper drove a five-seater car, usually a Ford Model-T or a comparable model, but the term jitney also referred to larger busses. These larger busses sometimes were organized from the start as companies, such as The Pacific Motor Coach Company. Founded in April of 1914 with an initial capitalization of \$500,000, the company started running double-decker busses from Downtown Los Angeles to Venice, Long Beach, Pasadena and San Pedro.⁶² These auto-bus companies also caused headaches for streetcar companies, but the organizational structure is much different than that of jitneys. The Pacific Motor Coach Company is just that—a company, with investors and a corporate structure. On the other hand, smaller jitney operators invested their own money and labor to run the operation. Not employed by anyone, they had to purchase or rent their own vehicle, as well as pay for gas and maintenance. Unlike the jitney operators, The Pacific Motor Coach Company was organized from the start. The different types of jitney shared terminology, the challenges they posed for streetcars, and the same regulatory responses from city governments. Despite the differences in organizational structure, it is better to consider these different jitneys as two sides of the same coin.

⁶¹ Stewart, “Victorian Sprawl”; Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 92.

⁶² R.W. Meade and Charles N. Black, “The Jitney-Bus Competition,” *Electric Railway Journal*, 13 February 1915, 324.

The urban environment of San Francisco may have not been as conducive to cars as Los Angeles, but the city was a logical next step for jitneys to arise due to close proximity to Los Angeles and the public searching for alternatives from the streetcar monopoly. Unlike LA, the drivers organized very quickly. By the end of 1914, jitney-busses arose in San Francisco and by January 11, 1915, the bus operators had already organized the San Francisco Jitney Bus Association. The purpose they gave for forming was to create “a permanent organization for the protection of the jitney busmen and improve transportation conditions in San Francisco,” as well as “assist in solving any problem that may have arisen by the advent of the jitney bus into the traffic affairs of this city.”⁶³ Directly calling out United Railroads, one of the officials of the Association claimed, “The jitney bus is meeting a demand that has been created as the result of the poor service of a public utility corporation.”⁶⁴ The public seemed to reinforce that sentiment by embracing the jitneys. By January 31, 1915, the *New York Times* estimated that 300 jitney-buses and about 1,000 jitney automobiles were operating in San Francisco.⁶⁵ The demand for jitneys began from the beginning of the year in San Francisco, causing there to be an explosion of operators onto the city streets.

As the jitney operators in San Francisco sought to confront the power of streetcar companies, streetcar companies across the country saw the jitneys as a competitive nuisance. The *Electric Streetcar Journal*, a national trade publication, followed the jitneys on a weekly basis in 1915. On February 13th, it ran an article entitled “The Jitney Bus Competition.” Longer than jitney’s usual page coverage in the journal’s Traffic and

⁶³ “Jitney Bus Men Have Organized: Allege That Poor Street-Car Service Resulted in Nickel Bus,” January 11, 1915, sec. 2, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “‘Jitney’ Bus is Taking Many Cities By Storm,” January 31, 1915, sec. Automobiles, p. 2.

Transportation section, the co-authors R.W. Meade and Charles N. Black described how jitneys popped up across the United States::

Naturally, the idea has achieved its greatest popularity in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and other cities on the Pacific Coast, but even during the past month it has spread like malignant growth as far south as Texas and as far east as Detroit and Toledo.⁶⁶

To them, the movement that took root in the West spread like cancer. The article interspersed its overt criticism of the jitney with economic arguments that presented the streetcar companies as benevolent owners, especially defending the “flat street car fare.” Beyond the economic arguments that framed streetcars in a positive light, the authors attacked the safety of the jitney on city streets. The article laid the framework that railroad representatives would follow to argue against the jitney in the coming months and years: safety, the economic inefficiencies of running automobiles rather than trains, and how the interests of the state depended on streetcar companies due to taxes. Shining through these arguments was the clear goal of eradicating the jitney.

Jitneys competed with streetcars by taking advantage of the flat fare charged by the street car companies. Jitneys centered around the urban core, driving on the exact lines as streetcars, but only traveling one to three miles of the line. On the other hand, streetcars had recently facilitated suburban growth.⁶⁷ Beyond investing heavily in suburban lines, the flat fare streetcars charged meant that riders closer to downtown subsidized the riders from the suburbs. Jitneys competed in the downtown area, with Market Street in San Francisco and Broadway, Main and Spring Streets in Los Angeles

⁶⁶ R.W. Meade and Charles N. Black, “The Jitney-Bus Competition,” *Electric Railway Journal*, 13 February 1915, 324.

⁶⁷ Eric Stewart, “Victorian Sprawl: Streetcar Technology and the Suburban Ideal in Los Angeles, 1870–1920,” *California History* 93, no. 2 (2016): 17–30.

serving as their main corridors, leaving suburban travel to the streetcars. This directly threatened the business model of streetcar monopolies. The superintendent of the Los Angeles street railway “estimated that these jitneys were taking at least \$2,000 per day revenue from the street railway company,” while an estimate in San Francisco projected that the rate was \$2,500 per day.⁶⁸ The streetcars clearly had an invested interest in making life for the jitneys harder. The jitney’s prominence sparked the effort to regulate and tax them. In both Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well as nationally, the streetcar companies drove that initiative.

Beyond streetcar companies, the local business class more generally supported the regulation of jitneys. In the case of Los Angeles, that aligned with *LA Times*’ owner Harrison Gray Otis crusade against unions.⁶⁹ As such, coverage of jitneys in the *LA Times* reflected its owner’s interest. From the start, the *Times* emphasized the anarchy caused by the jitneys. Articles highlighted the safety concerns of citizens, while neglecting to note that consumers had readily taken upon this new form of transportation. For example, when describing how rain brought crowds back to the streetcars in Long Beach, a *Times* correspondent referred to the jitneys as “skidding pirates.”⁷⁰ Similarly, L.A. mayor Henry H. Rose opposed the jitney from the start.⁷¹ The *Electric Railway Journal* summarized his public address about jitneys on January 10, saying that he “declared that the menace of

⁶⁸ Conrad H. Syme, “Report of Conrad H. Syme, General Counsel, on Jitney Service in Various Cities.” (District of Columbia: Public utilities commission, May 3, 1915), 3.; R.W. Meade and Charles N. Black, “The Jitney-Bus Competition,” *Electric Railway Journal*, 13 February 1915, 326-327.

⁶⁹ Fred Glass, *From Mission to Microchip: A History of the California Labor Movement*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

⁷⁰ “Jitney Fares Desert Autos: Street Cars Crowded First Time in Months; Rain Drives Patrons from Skidding Pirates,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, October 31, 1914, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

⁷¹ Michael Farren and Matthew Mitchell, “Op-Ed: If You Like Uber, You Would’ve Loved the Jitney,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2014.

the bus called for vigorous action and that he saw no reason why the Council should delay action.”⁷²

In San Francisco, Patrick Calhoun, as President and owner of United Railways, opposed the jitneys, with the *San Francisco Chronicle* backing his opposition.⁷³ The newspaper politics in San Francisco centered on the rivalry between the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner*. The complexities of this rivalry are difficult to distill, yet in general, Michael H. de Young’s *Chronicle* often presented the opinion of the city’s elites, while the *Examiner*, owned by William Randolph Hearst, appealed to populist tendencies.⁷⁴ The *Chronicle* highlighted Patrick Calhoun and four other directors of United Railways as “notable Californians,” having an invested interest to “resuscitate reputations” of the railway’s President after the graft scandal.⁷⁵ Like many of the city’s elites, de Young was concerned about commerce in the city, but the connection went deeper than that. Calhoun had formulated close ties to de Young, aiming to emulate Henry Huntington’s empire of transportation, real estate and ties to the prominent newspaper of the region. On the other hand, radicals embraced the jitney.⁷⁶ Conservative jitney drivers existed, but from the outside, radicals tended to support the movement due to its anti-corporate and monopoly ethos. Also, by operators often owning their vehicles, workers seized the means of production for transporting people.

Beyond the excitement of radicals and fear of conservatives about the “craze,” jitneys seemed to capture public appeal, for the most part, at the beginning of the “craze.”

⁷² “Traffic and Transportation,” *Electric Railway Journal*, 23 January 1915, 204.

⁷³ Syme, “Report of Conrad H. Syme, General Counsel, on Jitney Service in Various Cities,” 5.

⁷⁴ Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 191.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 190-196.

⁷⁶ Payne, “The Jitney Juggernaut,” ; “Jitneys,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1915.

An *Examiner* comic from the burgeoning jitney movement in San Francisco depicts “These Stirring Days of the Jitney,” capturing who the clientele might have been, popular appeal, and the frights it caused for United Railroads (figure below). In the top right corner is a drawing of the factory worker telling the driver to go faster, suggesting that the working class may have been patrons for jitneys. This situation is plausible because jitneys served the central parts of downtown at a time when workers often lived near their place of employment, while wealthier San Franciscans lived on the hills to the North or in the expanding suburbs. The fare matched the flat-fare of the streetcars at a nickel a ride, so the cost was not prohibitive in comparison to other transportation options. The artist also claimed that jitneys were so popular that riders begged for money to ride it again and soon people would need to hang from a bar above the automobile in order to address the demand. In critiquing the jitney, the artist commented on the noxious fumes of gasoline and pedestrian safety, as well as a young operator charging ¢1 to the dismay of a police officer. These points contribute to both the spatial imposition of cars on city streets in a physical, auditory, and olfactory way, as well as the general lawlessness of who could operate a jitney. While the cartoon portrayed jitneys in their complexity, the artist was no supporter of United Railroads either. The artist characterized the company fat capitalist bracing for the “impending battle,” and breaking the rules of “civilized war” by placing spikes on the ground to burst jitney tires. Also, the artist shows a jitney visiting United Railroads in their nightmares, noting the existential threat that this new form of transportation posed. All in all, the comic presents one understanding of both United Railroad’s and the public’s view of the jitneys prior to regulation.



Figure 3: "These Stirring Jitney Days" from the *San Francisco Examiner* on 12 January 1915. Accessed from sfexaminer.newspapers.com.

Formalizing the Movement: Early Regulation of the Jitney Craze

During the brief period of conflict arising between jitney operators and railroad companies depicted in the cartoon, the jitney existed as a sort of informal economy. The concepts of formality and informality have been examined in urban studies circles, with Martha Chen defining informality as “employment without labour or social protection—both inside and outside informal enterprises, including both self-employment in small unregistered enterprises and wage employment in unprotected jobs.”⁷⁷ Scholars have problematized the binary between formality and informality in recent years.⁷⁸ The jitney during this period is a good example of why the binary of formal and informal employment is helpful, but that there may be more of a grey area between. For a brief moment, the jitney operated as an unregulated form of transportation with burgeoning organization from the drivers. Since the drivers had yet to be structured by the state, they operated with the existing framework of transportation and started their own associations, companies and eventually unions. Despite the problems with the binary and the fact that informality is usually used to characterize work in the contemporary global south, the concept is useful not just due to the omission to regulatory frameworks, at first, but also that “informal economies” often occur in public space.⁷⁹

The jitney introduced the car on a massive scale to city streets. This, coupled with the push by competing interests, sparked the initial round of regulation in early 1915. The first round of ordinances in San Francisco and Los Angeles was not what one might

⁷⁷ Martha Alter Chen, “Rethinking the Informal Economy: Linkages with the Formal Economy and the Formal Regulatory Environment,” in *Linking the Formal and Informal Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷⁸ Peter Herrle and Josefine Fokdal, “Beyond the Urban Informality Discourse: Negotiating Power, Legitimacy and Resources,” *Geographische Zeitschrift* 99, no. 1 (2011): 3–15.

⁷⁹ Lorena Muñoz, “From Street Child Care to Drive-Throughs: Latinas Reconfigure and Negotiate Street Vending Spaces in Los Angeles,” in *Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

expect. The initial L.A. ordinance required driver registration, maintained a low licensing fee, allowed drivers to select their route and had minimal requirements for the cars. Many in the business community, led by the Chamber of Commerce, and Mayor Rose viewed the ordinance as too lenient. Critics wanted an indemnity bond to “protect the public” as well as a higher licensing fee. In a report on the first ordinance, the City Council stated that the motor bus must “develop along natural lines, leaving the experience of time to demonstrate whether it will develop as an aid to established methods, or whether it will work a complete revolution as an urban passenger common carrier.”⁸⁰ The City Council of Los Angeles aimed to let the jitney unfold naturally and tried not to stifle its success. After the ordinance, the *LA Times* featured the disgust from “leading business men,” characterizing the ordinance as the “weak-kneed, half-hearted plan of dealing with the serious ‘jitney’ bus problem.”⁸¹ The Auto Livery and Taxicab Owners’ Association, who saw the jitney as competition as well, also wanted the indemnity bond and a higher licence fee. They also called for a flat fare of ¢5 and explicitly suggested the city take more cues on how San Francisco officials planned to regulate the jitney.⁸²

Although San Francisco had the most successful jitney service and strongest association of drivers, it passed a much more stringent initial ordinance than Los Angeles. An article in *The Automobile* magazine tried to reconcile the success of the jitney, the organization of San Francisco drivers and a labor-friendly city government with the strict ordinance. The author wrote:

⁸⁰ “Slight Regulation of ‘Jitney’ Busses,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), January 20, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section, 2.

⁸¹ “Citizens Disgusted with Council’s Way,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), January 20, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section, 2.

⁸² “Regulations to Regulate: Auto Livery Men Present a Real Jitney Ordinance,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), February 2, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

The jitney situation is unique in this city, for the reason that there is complete harmony between jitney association and city government, even in the passage of an ordinance that would be regarded as too stringent in some places. Here is a city that may be regarded as the jitney metropolis. Certainly there are many more cars in operation here, with a sturdier controlling body, than elsewhere in the country.⁸³

The Association seemed to have settled for a cordial political relationship with City Hall, rather than fighting for a less regulatory ordinance. In this sense, the Association seemed to accept the process of formalizing the jitney trade, as long as political officials listened to what they had to say. Not all jitney drivers agreed with the Association. During the initial organization of the San Francisco Jitney Bus Association, W.R. Covington was elected President and Thomas Doyle was secretary.⁸⁴ Just before the passage of the ordinance, there was a rift within the association. Thomas Doyle tried to file the articles of incorporation in Sacramento, only to find that W.R. Covington had done so just days before.⁸⁵ Doyle claimed that higher-ups in the organization, like Covington, had aimed to create an association that none of the drivers would join. In a further rift, several drivers formed the Jitney Bus Operators' Union, No. 1., applying to be part of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and Chauffeurs.⁸⁶ While Doyle's Association accepted the new ordinance, the first round of regulation occurred when there was a split in the drivers' associations, prompting unsatisfied drivers to unite with organized labor.

While there may have been disagreements between jitney operators, they agreed on respecting municipally owned railways. Two main reasons guided this choice. First, drivers sought to challenge the service of United Railroads, not the new municipal

⁸³ "San Francisco Jitney Men and City Authorities in Complete Accord," *The Automobile*, May 13, 1915, 873.

⁸⁴ "Jitney Bus Men Have Organized: Allege That Poor Street-Car Service Resulted in Nickel Bus," January 11, 1915, sec. 2, p. 9.

⁸⁵ "Jitney Associations, Battle For a Name," *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*, April 14, 1915.

⁸⁶ "Jitney Men Organize," *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*, May 18, 1915.

service. United Railroads attracted the contempt of many in the city and municipal ownership aimed to challenge their power, just as the jitneys did. Second, and perhaps more logically, jitney operators did not want to attract the attention of the city government. According to the operators, they sought to avoid the Geary Street line that the city owned and operated.⁸⁷ From its founding, the Jitney Association avoided the Geary Street line, acquired just years earlier by the city government. When reports came that jitneys operated in competition with the “Muni” line, leaders of the Association “pleaded not guilty with considerable vehemence.”⁸⁸ Rumors circulated among the newspapers and operators that United Railroads put jitneys on Geary Street to attract scrutiny for jitneys from the city government. That did not seem to work. Just a couple of months later, the city administration formed a contract with twenty-five jitneys for several days’ hire, paid by the city.⁸⁹ Since drivers cooperated with the transportation goals of the city, especially in not competing with municipally-owned lines, the city aimed to promote this new form of transportation.

In Los Angeles, the choice to let the jitney “unfold naturally” allowed it to briefly flourish, but the lack of regulation eventually led to a more polarized debate on the jitney about their right to city streets. The city adopted a slow approach to regulation that left both sides unsatisfied. After the passage of the initial ordinance, the Auto Bus Owners’ Association of the L.A. sought to overturn the indemnity bond with a ballot referendum.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ “Municipal Line Is Startled by Jitney Specter: As a Result City Fathers Get Busy on Ordinance to Regulate the Peaky, Ever-Thickening Swarm,” *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*, February 7, 1915.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “San Francisco Jitney Men and City Authorities in Complete Accord,” *The Automobile*, May 13, 1915, 873.

⁹⁰ “Ballot Box to Settle ‘Jitney’ Bus Problem?: ‘Jitney’ Referendum,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, February 27, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

Members of the Association acted immediately to launch a campaign, believing they had the power and organization to successfully pass their own initiative.⁹¹ W.A. Hagans, the vice-president of the Association, aimed to have the initiative drafted in a way where operators were “protected in the legitimate business of carrying passengers, and that the passengers and the public are protected as we serve them.”⁹² The interest of serving the public is central to his claims. Also, believing that the city should treat the jitneys as a “legitimate business of carrying passengers” asserts a claim to operate on city streets. On the other hand, Mayor Henry Rose viewed the ordinance as not doing enough. He proposed restricting access of jitneys to Downtown, increasing the bond and requiring an English literacy test.⁹³ Mayor Rose framed his additions to the ordinance as “protecting passengers and the public” and treating the ability to operate on public streets as a “special privilege.”⁹⁴ Rose believed that jitneys did not have a right to operate on public streets because to him they threatened the public’s safety. Both he and Hagan framed their arguments around whether jitneys had a legitimate claim to operate on city streets and whether they served the best interest of the public.

City Councils were not the only government bodies trying to regulate the jitneys in 1915. At the state level, both the State Assembly and Senate considered bills on the jitney. The saga at the state level points to the influence of streetcar companies, attesting that their own interests were interwoven with the state’s. In the early stages, a joint Revenue and Taxation committee held a meeting on the jitney, leading to “one of the

⁹¹ “Fight If Ordinance Signed, Say Bus Men,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), March 2, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Non-Regulating Bus Ordinance Is Vetoed,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), March 4, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

⁹⁴ “Opens Attack on Jitbus Law,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), May 26, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

most extraordinary ever held before a California legislature committee,” according to reporter Franklin Hichborn, who covered State politics for the *Examiner*.⁹⁵

Representatives from railroad companies came in large numbers, arguing that the State’s interest was the same as their own. They believed that since jitneys decreased the ridership of streetcars, the state lost valuable tax revenue. In addition to that, they argued that this competition would injure labor by displacing conductors and motormen, as well as dissuade capital from the state if its government refused to protect existing investments. As a streetcar representative from San Diego put it, “if you fail to take care of capital invested here, you cannot expect new capital to come in.”⁹⁶

What made the hearing so “extraordinary” was not only how the streetcar professed that its own interests were interwoven with the state’s, but also that representatives of jitney drivers had no way of knowing about the hearing. A jitney representative from San Francisco arrived at the hearing after it was half over, making compelling points that jitneys created more jobs and attracted capital for their own ventures, and that the proposed taxation would make jitneys unprofitable. The hearing indicates that while the jitney drivers may have been organized at local level, they did not have the same involvement in state politics as the streetcar companies. While railroad companies had existing modes of communicating between each other and professing a shared interest, organization of jitney operators only happened at a local level.

The joint Revenue and Taxation hearings led to Senate Bill 814 and the Assembly Bill 1530, but Governor Hiram Johnson vetoed both attempts to regulate the jitney at the

⁹⁵ Franklin Hichborn, “The Jitney Bus Issue,” in *Story of the Session of the California Legislature* (San Francisco: Press of The James H. Barry Company, 1916), 56.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 57.

state level. The senate bill focused on taxation and occurred in the first session of the year. The jitney operators and the railroad representatives orchestrated a deal: instead of protesting the bill, they lowered the taxation rate from \$12.50 to \$7 a seat and had it not just apply to jitneys, but all motor vehicles.⁹⁷ The Assembly bill focused on regulation and occurred in the second session. In its end form, it required jitney drivers to secure a pricey franchise. While both passed in each chamber—the Assembly regulation bill with more contention—Governor Hiram Johnson vetoed one after the other. For the taxation bill, he heard a compelling story from the wife of a jitney operator, claiming that if the bill were to pass, the operation would be unfathomable due to the additional costs.⁹⁸ When professing her point, she said to the governor, “All those who are for the bills represent the powerful railroads. The fact is, the public wants the ‘jitneys’ to run... We want a chance to make a living, and ask you that you refuse to kill us off.” To her, State and Assembly bills would have been prohibitive to operating. She claims that the state should not implement them because “the public wants the ‘jitneys,’” and this action by the government would counter the desires of the public by killing the jitneys. The power of the streetcar companies at the hearings outnumbered the jitneys, but by sharing a compelling story that highlighted jitneys as the underdog serving the public’s interest, the jitney operator’s wife convinced the governor to veto the bills. Governor Johnson also understood the range of local conditions for the jitney and believed that regulation at the state level would be an overreach.⁹⁹ To this point, while state politicians considered regulation and taxation, illuminating the discrepancy in political influence on the matter

⁹⁷ Ibid, 60.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 62.

⁹⁹ “Jitney Bill Not Signed: The Governor Recognizes That Local Regulation Is Best,” *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*, June 15, 1915, sec. Thought and Comment.

that streetcars had over jitney operators in the legislature, the governor's vetoes reinforce the importance of looking at how local governments handled the jitney question.

The regulation of the jitneys would be a municipal issue, centering around the jitneys' right to operate on city streets, and to what degree the city should take interest in regulating the economies that occur there. Conrad Syme wrote a report for the Public Utilities Commission that compared jitney craze in different cities, including L.A. and San Francisco. The *New York Times* characterized Conrad Syme's report for the Public Utilities Commission of the District of Columbia as supporting the "Jitney's Right to Place."¹⁰⁰ Syme's report assessed whether jitneys should have the right to operate on the city streets and what role they should occupy in the future of transportation. Syme did not see jitneys as a fad. He argued to regulate them to "the extent demanded by the public safety and convenience," but also warned that the jitney could not "be profitably operated if it is strictly regulated."¹⁰¹ More than anything, he saw public transportation in a city as "part of one problem and should be treated as such for the public benefit, and in such a way that the maximum of service may be secured without ultimate harm to the whole."¹⁰² Analyzing the jitneys in Los Angeles and San Francisco after the first round of regulation, Syme provided valuable insight into how city leaders should approach the problem. To him, jitneys existed within the larger goal of making public transportation truly serve the needs of the public. He credited the jitneys success not only to poor public perception of streetcars, but also because they made short-haul transportation more comfortable and flexible. Syme thus sees a place for the jitney in cities: one where they

¹⁰⁰ "Supports Jitney's Right to Place: Should Not Be Regulated Out of Existence, Says District of Columbia Expert.," *New York Times*, June 13, 1915, sec. Automobiles, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ Syme, "Report of Conrad H. Syme, General Counsel, on Jitney Service in Various Cities," 8-9.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 9.

are formalized through regulation, but allowed to flourish as the public transportation innovation that they were.

During this period, municipalities arose as the regulatory bodies of their city streets. In considering the issue of public transportation, the jitney entered the existing debate of municipal versus private ownership of that means. In San Francisco, the city government embraced the role of the jitney as a part of promising public mobility—as long as it was formalized and worked in cooperation with the municipal aims. In Los Angeles, the matter had more to do with whether the jitney served the business interests of the downtown businesses and existing transportation companies. Mayor Rose and business leaders did not think so, and by challenging the order of consolidated development modeled by Henry Huntington, the democratization of transportation that jitneys provided did not fit into their imagined order. Jitneys would continue to present issues for city councils and competing interests, but as regulation continued, the central issue moved beyond how to formalize the craze to shaping the spaces in which drivers could operate.

Chapter 3: Public Space and the Battle for Public Interest

In the fourth issue of *The Jitney Weekly*, a cartoon depicted a man holding up a jitney with a sword labeled “progress” on his belt. Surrounding him are previous forms of transportation, from the “prairie schooner” and stage coach to the overcrowded trolley car of 1916. Just a year earlier, the jitney represented the terminal point in transportation progress at the Panama-Pacific Exposition’s Transportation Day Pageant.¹⁰³ Jitney operators played into this idea as well. Published by the Jitney Operators’ Union, *The Jitney Weekly* served to gain public support for Amendment 10 in the upcoming election in November, 1916. The Amendment would reverse the City Council’s decision to ban jitneys from Market Street from the hours of 10:30am-4pm. As stated by the Operators’ Union, the “Board of Supervisors have tried to stop progress by voting the jitneys off Market St.,” directly tying this decision to an understanding of the jitney as a modernizing force.

Organizing a ballot initiative for the unlimited use of Market Street indicates how the regulation of space became a core grievance of the operators and how they saw autonomy of movement as a key component of realizing their vision for progress. The amendment that the Operators’ Union fought for sought to allow them to the city’s most iconic avenue, as well as the commercial hub of the city. More so than licensing, taxes, and even the indemnity bond, having the city dictate the mobility of the drivers prevented them from being true competition to the streetcars. The Operators’ Union also contended that the restriction was class legislation since the city allowed private cars and taxis to

¹⁰³ “Transportation Day Pageant To Tell Story of World’s Progress,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 16, 1915, sec. Automobile.

remain on Market. Many could not afford those forms of automobile transit, while the Operators' Union framed jitneys as "carriers of the common people." Without access to the city's most iconic avenue, lined with shops, the operators would not be able to achieve their vision of progress and modernity defined on the terms of the working class.



Figure 4: Cover of *The Jitney Weekly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (San Francisco, Jitney Operators' Union, 1916), showing a woman representing progress holding up a jitney. Reprinted with permission of the San Francisco State Labor Archives and Research Center.

In Los Angeles, jitney operators had already pushed for a ballot initiative against the cost of the indemnity bond. Direct democracy tools such as the initiative and referendum came as a product of Progressive Era reform, but from its inception

companies found ways to shape public opinion in their favor. In the election in June 1915, voters decided on the initiative put forth by drivers and considered a candidate “Jitney” Williams for City Council. Those defending the jitney did not fare well in this round of voting, but jitneys still experienced success. Two years later there would be another vote, this time to overturn a city council decision that restricted their ability to operate in a sizable portion of downtown. Losing again, the denial of access to downtown streets in Los Angeles left the jitney drivers with little ability to compete in what gave them the competitive advantage: the dense, urban core.

Amendment 10 and the two ballot initiatives in Los Angeles reveal how much the operators saw this struggle revolving around more than just bonds, but as a battle over space. The operators’ labor movement viewed this regulation of space to be representative of streetcar companies acting through politics, making the state a body that protected capital rather than one that protected working class power. The imposition of cars on urban space became a clear issue, but only restricting jitneys and not other forms of automobiles in main corridors lent credence to the claims of the Jitney Operators’ Union that these efforts were pieces of “class legislation.” These Progressive Era municipal governments would challenge streetcar companies with a movement towards municipal ownership but privileged the interest of existing capital of streetcar companies when regulating the movement of jitneys. The restriction of space became the final straw of local regulation on the jitney. It solidified cars as a form of private rather than shared transportation, and helped postpone the threat that automobiles would have for mass transit, whether publicly or privately held.

Direct Democracy

Direct democracy for policy making became a practice born in the Progressive Era, with many cities and the state adopting the initiative, referendum, and recall during the first decade of the 20th Century. California pioneered this style of governance. Championed by John Randolph Haynes, a doctor that made his life's mission to bring direct democracy to the state, the purpose was to bring more power to the hands of the populace.¹⁰⁴ Progressive politicians adopted this new form of democracy, believing it could remove the influence of powerful corporations and give more power to citizens. The initiative allowed citizens to propose new legislation; the referendum allowed them to reject policies decided by their elected officials; the recall allowed voters to remove elected officials from office before the end of their term.¹⁰⁵ In many ways, direct democracy challenged the notion of representative democracy by pushing for a greater involvement of the public in policy making. The move to adopt "home-rule" charters at the beginning of the century (discussed in chapter 1) gave municipalities more power in policy making. With the addition of the initiative and referendum process, citizens became part of policy decisions in the Progressive Era. A contemporary critique of direct democracy initiatives is that corporations can influence public opinion through spending money and controlling the narrative around the issue, something that becomes evident as early in the ballot initiatives around the jitney.

Jitneys on the Ballot in L.A.

¹⁰⁴ John Allswang, *The Initiative and Referendum in California, 1898-1998* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 8-10.

¹⁰⁵ Tracy Gordon, *The Local Initiative in California* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2004), 1.

Los Angeles offers an important case in point. The city council's initial ordinance (discussed in chapter 2) left no one happy. Less stringent than many other cities, the business community in Los Angeles and anti-jitney Mayor Rose viewed it as lacking teeth, while the operators saw the indemnity bond expensive and prohibitive. In order to overturn the ordinance, the drivers gained enough signatures for a ballot initiative, provoking a coordinated response of some members of the business community.

Business owners and the Chamber of Commerce did not like the original ordinance as well, but the new one proposed by the operators seemed even worse. The ballot initiative would replace the already lenient regulatory ordinance passed by the City Council with one that the Auto Bus Association proposed.¹⁰⁶ In order to defeat it, the Chamber of Commerce launched an organized response. Their cause for concern was valid. The indemnity bond served as a fair piece of regulation, ensuring that if any harm was caused by jitneys, harmed parties could be compensated.

During the first vote on the jitney in Los Angeles, which occurred on June 1st, 1915, business owners and the Chamber of Commerce exerted significant effort to shape the public discussion. The business community especially relied on the *Los Angeles Times* to share anti-jitney arguments. In one article, the *Times* quoted a business owner who argued that "the ordinance passed by the City Council is far too lenient, in that it does not offer sufficient protection to the public, it is much better than the one proposed by the jitney drivers."¹⁰⁷ The business leader articulated the perspective of many other members of the business class in Los Angeles. Private business owners appropriated the

¹⁰⁶ "Vote Against Jitney Initiative, They Urge.," *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), May 31, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

¹⁰⁷ "For Defeat of Bus Ordinance: Prominent Citizens Repeat Reasons Against It," *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), June 1, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

language of guaranteeing protection to the public. Another “prominent citizen” labeled the initiative a clear “menace to the public,” hoping that voters recognized that when considering the measure. The *LA Times* presented the business owners as the ones representing the collective well being while the jitneys were the ones harming it.

The *Times* also included the voices of other business leaders who had more pointedly selfish interest in regulating the jitneys. With the election set to take place the next day, Paul Shoup, the President of Pacific Electric, shared his opinion on the ballot initiative in the *Times*. He claimed, once again, that the interest of railway companies was interwoven with the state since diminished ridership meant less tax dollars.¹⁰⁸ With less tax dollars, “the burden” of maintaining cities and towns fell onto the property owners. He also noted that because railways were required to pave the street two feet outside of their rails, the jitneys were getting rich from the infrastructure of the railway companies.¹⁰⁹ In summation, Shoup argued for an even playing field of “public regulation” for the jitneys, seeing the private company as performing necessary public functions in the region. The end goal for Shoup was to have the jitneys regulated and shaped by the city in a similar manner to the streetcars. His language is not as explicit as the Chamber of Commerce in arguing for the benefit of the “public.” However, he did imply the public good when he purported a functioning city depends on the taxes from corporations like his. Regardless of what arguments were put forth by those opposing the jitneys, “prominent citizens” against the jitney had the greater power to spread their ideas—a vital tool in votes of direct democracy.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ “Bus Ordinance Danger Shown,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), May 31, 1915, sec. Pictorial City/Editorial Section.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ “Sebastian’s Majority Over Four Thousand,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), June 3, 1915.

On the same ballot as the jitney initiative a leader in the jitney movement in Los Angeles ran for City Council. The *Times* ran equally disparaging coverage of him, reinforcing the newspaper's desire for a future where the jitney had no way to fight for itself within politics. E.L. Williams served as the president of the Motor Bus Operators' Association. As expected, *The Los Angeles Times* sought to discredit him and his campaign, writing:

The lone hope of the jitbus; a failure in most other lines, as evidenced by the fact that he has dipped into nearly everything with no apparent degrees of success, a young adventurer who has the mistaken notion that this jitney bus is entitled to representation...¹¹¹

Despite the centrality of jitneys in the June 1915 election, the *LA Times* held that they did not deserve any place to decide their future in local politics. Seeing him as the “lone hope” reflects how they believed that even with an Association of drivers, the jitneys lacked power compared to the orchestrated campaign of the Chamber of Commerce and business owners. *The Times* did not believe the “jitney bus [was] entitled to representation,” proving how the paper's leadership hoped the jitney would be an ephemeral fad. After Williams finished twelfth, the newspaper chalked up the loss of another candidate, sitting council member George Williams, to being “pocketed between the jitbus Williams and the Socialist Williams.”¹¹² The paper claimed that “Jitney Williams” had “received hundreds of votes that were intended for Councilman George Williams,” causing the incumbent to lose as well.¹¹³ Although feared enough by business leaders to organize against it, the jitney movement did not garner any respect from the *LA Times* as worthy enough to hold a place in city politics. At this moment, the public

¹¹¹ “The Municipal Candidates Put Under the Microscope,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), May 27, 1915.

¹¹² “Sebastian's Majority Over Four Thousand,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), June 3, 1915.

¹¹³ Ibid.

seemed to be persuaded by the perspectives the *LA Times* shared, with Jitney Williams and the drivers' ordinance both losing.

In the aftermath of the election, drivers in Los Angeles questioned whether the existing Association was sufficient and looked to organized labor for help. This outcome illustrated that a significant portion of operators became firm in their belief that they were better represented by labor than the business class. With the regulation set to go into effect on July 1, 1915, several Los Angeles drivers sought to organize and affiliate with the Teamsters.¹¹⁴ Certain Los Angeles drivers became "dissatisfied with the work of the Motor Bus Operators' Association" after losing the election.¹¹⁵ This followed a similar pattern to San Francisco, where jitney drivers in San Francisco organized the Jitney Operators' Unions in the aftermath of an ordinance that the dominant Association accepted. In both cases, drivers sought out organized labor when the Association did not meet their expectations for organized operators. The Association did offer benefits with the new regulation. Rather than paying an annual \$130 for the \$11,000 indemnity bond as an independent driver, drivers in the Association would only pay \$112 to fulfill the same requirement.¹¹⁶ These "independent" drivers who did not want to join the Association prove the diversity in operators. Some drivers saw themselves as individual businessmen, investing their own capital to start a business. However, the formation of a union suggests that a greater trend was operators viewing themselves as needing the support of a larger labor movement. The Motor Bus Operators' Association offered marginal financial benefits for individual operators and some collective strength in influencing policy

¹¹⁴ "L.A. Jitney Busmen Ask Labor for Aid," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 27, 1915.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ "Jitney Men Seek Cheaper Bonds," *Los Angeles Herald*, June 23, 1915.

decisions, but to many drivers that was not enough. Organized labor offered the support drivers were lacking. It would be another two years until the next initiative in Los Angeles. Until then, the city council passed piecework regulations and formalized the movement without slowing it too much.

Amendment 10 and the Restriction of Market Street in San Francisco

In San Francisco, where driver organization with labor preceded Los Angeles, the city council's regulation of jitney access to Market street compelled the drivers to launch a ballot initiative and corresponding campaign in 1916. The Jitney Operators' Union became the focal part in this battle. The Association, on the other hand, took a more moderate stance and showed the divergence between the two bodies. By this point, many drivers had accepted the indemnity bond and other measures, but in July 1916, City Council passed amendments to the original ordinance. The five new features included a cap at 700 permits; a requirement to submit a photo to the police department when obtaining a permit, carrying signs that designate the route (being able to deviate slight from said route but running to the end of it even if there were no passengers), granting Police Department several powers, including the first establishment of pedestrian and vehicular traffic lanes, and banning of jitneys on Market street between Sixth and Fremont between 10:30AM and 4PM.¹¹⁷ The Jitney Operators' Union took greatest concern to this last point, seeing it as an impediment to their vision of progress.

In order to overturn the city council's decision, the Union put forth Amendment 10, which would be voted on in November 1916. They also published the *Jitney Weekly*

¹¹⁷ San Francisco Municipal Record, v. 9, 1916, 204.

in the months leading up the election to ensure that their voice had some way of reaching the public. In the *Jitney Weekly*, the Operators' Union made it clear they envisioned the fight as a battle between jitney operators on the streets of San Francisco and out-of-town capitalists claiming those streets for themselves. The Operators continuously refer to the jitneys as "coaches of the common people," presenting that while automobiles might have been unaffordable to many, jitneys allowed anyone to ride them and served the general public.¹¹⁸ In calling out why the "coaches of the common people" deserved access to Market street at all times, they wrote, "the streets of San Francisco are in the hands of absentees. For more than fifteen years Wall Street stock sharks have been filling their cash boxes with San Francisco money."¹¹⁹ The union argued that while United Railroads had control of the city streets, the money they accrued benefitted New York bankers, not San Franciscans. The critique centered around having capital from out of town invested in the city, forcing San Franciscans to pay a company that would take the profits back to New York, rather than circulate within the local economy. This idea was reinforced in a comic in a later issue, which depicted money from United Railroads in San Francisco filling up a bag of wealth in New York. On the other hand, jitneys had kept an incredible amount of \$2,500,000 dollars for "S.F. Cash Registers."

¹¹⁸ *The Jitney News*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 28, 1916), 2.

¹¹⁹ *The Jitney News*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (September 2, 1916), 1.



Figure 5: Cover of *The Jitney Weekly*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (September 30, 1916). Reprinted with permission of the San Francisco State Labor Archives and Research Center.

By presenting United Railroads as a distant entity that did not benefit San Francisco, the union tapped into exciting hostility towards United Railroads by referring the reader as to why they should be skeptical of the company in the first place. On several occasions, the union reminded the reader of the graft scandal of several years before, noting how the company had been let off the hook to promote a return to commercial

recovery after the earthquake.¹²⁰ The union asked the reader, “What has New York ever done for you that you should let it hog Market street?” arguing that, “The jitneys have taken the U.R.R. off your back and put it at your feet; kick it.”¹²¹ The terms were clearly confrontational towards bankers and the out of town company. What the Operators’ Union found most appalling was the idea that a geographically distant entity could profit off the mobility of people in another city. The geography of capitalism was expressed in spatial terms when referring to United Railroads as owning the city streets, yet absent from materially benefitting the city. In saying that “jitneys have taken U.R.R. off your back,” the union present the Operators’ Union presents the monopoly as a burden to the people of San Francisco. They aimed to continue the public anger against United Railroads as the hegemonic power in transportation, pushing people to act on it when saying “kick it,” since United Railroads were already at their feet. The Operators’ Union aimed to tap into existing hostility, in doing so arguing against foreign control of urban space by distant capitalists.

The Operators’ Union viewed the city’s regulation of Market street in overtly spatial terms. The Operators’ Union refers to a “deadline” in a fictional story about a widow who drove a jitney past the 10:30am Market street cutoff. The widow was described entering a jail cell in tears, greeted by a “painted girl” from the Barbary Coast.¹²² When the presumed prostitute asked why the widow was there so early in the day, she answered, “I crossed the deadline,” thinking that she could get to the Ferry Building before 10:30, but instead got stuck between two cars on the way. The “painted

¹²⁰ *The Jitney News*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 28, 1916), 3.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *The Jitney Weekly*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (September 9, 1916), 4.

girl” said that she was also there for “crossing the deadline.” Confused, the widow asked what deadline the prostitute was referring to, to which she responded, “the dead line around the ‘Coast.” The Barbary Coast was the accepted red light district of the city at that time. The widow clarified that “her dead line is different. I’ve got to stay off Market street, between Sixth and Fremont streets, during the busy hours of the day,” to which, the prostitute claims, “They can’t put a dead line around anybody but thieves and—and girls like me.” The interaction, filled with pejorative views of the prostitute to contrast the celebration of the widowed jitney operator, presented the idea that jitney operators had to navigate a system of enclosure and restriction their movement. The regulation jitney operators faced did not compare to the gendered or racialized restrictions on mobility that many others of the time experienced. Nonetheless, the interaction illustrates how the jitney drivers conceptualized the new regulation fixing and restricting the space they were able to move within. Since their trade depended on mobility, the jitney operators viewed this restriction, more so than any other regulation, as the most detrimental to their success. The prostitute’s experience hints at how the city already spatialized regions, with the Barbary Coast serving vice and Market Street being a protected place for legal commerce. The police and its carceral apparatuses played the central role in enforcing such spatial restrictions. The jitney operators, therefore, viewed the police as protectors of private property that did not guarantee the public benefit.

While directly calling out the bankers and United Railroads, the Operators’ Union did not pick an issue with the merchants that supported moving the jitney off of Market Street. Instead, the union critiqued the larger owners of capital and the police who protected their interest. The Operators’ Union called the Market Street business owners

“fairly good citizens” when left to themselves, but “when the Bankers come around, jangling the Sheriff’s Lock, that these merchants do blushful deeds.” The union thereby underscored how the power of the Bankers became interwoven with the states’ carceral capacities.¹²³ The drivers claimed that banks would threaten the credit of the merchants if they did not rally against the jitney or else they would get the “Sheriff’s Lock,” alluding to foreclosing the establishment. The union suggested the bankers had influence over the merchants through control of capital, with the institutional backing of the state through the police.

From this idea that the state protects capital interests, the Operators’ Union portrayed city council as having sold out to the interests of capital. This is made explicit when the union calls the restriction of Market Street as “class legislation.” In the second issue of the *Jitney News*, the operators wrote a section discussing how removing jitneys from the Market was “class legislation” that made the “plain people banished to the back street.”¹²⁴ Directly addressing the supervisors of City Council, the Operators Union declared:

If you had voted *all* autos off Market street you would not have merited so much criticism. But you struck only at the autos of the many. The monogrammed machines of the select you did not molest. You struck at the comfort of the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children who were riding the jitneys. You said to them: ‘You people are not good enough for a first-class street. Mission street is good enough for you.’¹²⁵

The union implied that by restricting the only form of automobiles that carried “the many,” the City Council was enacting legislation that privileged automobile space for the wealthy. That made it clear to the jitney operators that for City Council, the space that

¹²³ *The Jitney News*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (September 2, 1916), 1.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹²⁵ *The Jitney Weekly*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (September 9, 1916), 3.

automobiles took up was not the issue. Instead, the problem was who was driving and riding in the cars. The union described Mission street, where City Council diverted the jitneys, as having cobble stones compared to the smooth pavement of Market street.¹²⁶ Only the cars of the wealthy, along with United Railroads, would have access to Market street. The jitney operators claimed that if all cars had been banned, they would not have seen the spatial restriction imposed as “class legislation,” but since the problem was with them and not their form of transportation, they viewed the regulation as such.

Public safety was one of the main rationales San Francisco officials used for banning the jitney from Market Street. The jitney operators challenged this notion, claiming that the violence of United Railroads’ was a much bigger threat to public safety. In writing about the “anti-jitney bankers,” the jitney operators hoped to highlight the hypocrisy of calling for public safety when none of them condemned the violence enacted by companies they support. Invoking the recent history of turbulent labor disputes, the operators repeated the phrase “as men concerned in public safety,” followed by an instance of violence towards the working class. They point to several instances of companies importing armies to squash strikes, to which the bankers had no problem. The operators also invoked the graft scandal, asking “did you raise your voices against the many acts of violence committed in this community when officials of a street railway corporation were on trial for corrupting the city government?”¹²⁷ After raising a variety of other questions directed at the violence carried out by capital interests, the operators pointedly stated, “if you cannot give an affirmative answer to each and all of these questions, and we know you cannot, then why have you advocated the removal of the

¹²⁶ *The Jitney News*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 28, 1916), 1-2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

jitney competition from the path of United Railroads *in the name of public safety?*” These questions uncover the primary mode of argument against the jitneys as threatening public safety. But more importantly, it shows how the jitney operators aimed to assert themselves as representing the best interests of the public. The operators contextualized their own battle amidst a struggle of organized workers facing violence, and articulated a firm belief that public benefit is best achieved through collective power, not by the decisions of capitalists.

Other than United Railroads, some merchants organized against the jitneys, but that is not to say that they did not acknowledge any of the strengths of this new form of transportation. Roy Bishop, president of the Market Street Association, spoke for “other business associations and improvement clubs representing the organized opposition to the jitney traffic in Market street.”¹²⁸ He argued for the regulation of the jitney because of the congestion of the streets and lowering of property values. He also suggested that jitneys were “unsightly” and reduced customer traffic due to safety concerns.¹²⁹ Bishop clearly saw the power of reclaiming space for business owners as a means of decreasing the prominence of the jitney. Bishop did recognize the benefits that the jitney offered. He stated, “It would be idle to contend that the jitney is not a convenience to certain of our citizens who live in certain sections of our city. The convenience of these people is, of course, to be taken into consideration, but we feel that for their convenience the whole city should not be inconvenienced.”¹³⁰ Bishop thereby reinforced that the benefit of the jitney was spatially uneven. With working-class and poorer residents living closer to the

¹²⁸ “Anti-Jit Law Urged - Bishop Favor Act - ‘Relieve Market St.’,” *San Francisco Call and Post*, June 24, 1916.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

urban core, and noting how he did not belong to this population, Bishop conceded that jitneys served the transportation needs of working class residents. Jitneys may have not been serving the entire public properly in his eyes, but they gave working class residents a means of quicker mobility. The competitive advantage of jitneys over streetcars was speed and concentration in dense areas. Opponents of the jitneys viewed spatial control, backed by the city, as a means of dampening the strength of jitneys.

The Jitney Operators' Union would lose their battle over Amendment 10. The day after the election, *The San Francisco Call and Post*, which the Jitney Operators' Union claimed was a speaking tool for United Railroads, wrote an editorial asserting that, "The vote against the jitney men's ordinance has demonstrated above all that the people of San Francisco are jealous of their fundamental right to the ownership and control of the streets."¹³¹ The paper turned the Jitney Operators' Union's argument on its head. The *Call and Post* purported that the public were fed up with jitneys "controlling the streets." This was actually something that the Jitney Operators' Union repeatedly claimed about United Railroads. This claim by the *Call and Post* was undoubtedly insincere given the context around United Railroads.

However, solely pinning the outcome of the election on United Railroads' ability to dominate the media does not fully describe the situation either. Rather, the introduction of automobiles to urban space—be it jitneys or other cars—was met with resistance by a populace embracing a future of municipal ownership of streetcars. Nonetheless, the amendment ensured automobiles would only be for wealthy residents, not "carriers of the

¹³¹ "Jitney Vote Showed That the People Are Jealous of Their Rights," *San Francisco Call and Post*, November 11, 1916, sec. Editorial.

common people,” paving the way for cars to become private transportation rather than serving the public in the years to come.

Regulating Space in Downtown LA

Initiative Number 4 on the June 1917 June Ballot restricted a sizable portion of downtown from jitney services. The City Council’s proposal created “a zone bounded by First street on the north, Main street on the east, Eighth street on the south, and Hill street on the west” where the jitney could not operate.¹³² The purpose was to relieve downtown congestion. Many other California cities had a zone excluding jitneys already, including San Francisco, Oakland, San Diego, Fresno, Bakersfield and Long Beach. According to the Auto Club of Los Angeles, who supported restricting the jitney, these measures in other cities had proven successful in diminishing the presence of jitneys¹³³

Once again, those opposing the jitneys right to space argued the initiative protected the public. Jitney drivers in Los Angeles framed the argument as competing with streetcars for public patronage. To the operators, as was the case in San Francisco, being able to remain downtown represented a competition for urban space between opposing transportation options. A critic of the jitneys framed the initiative differently in an article just before election. He wrote, “This is not really a fight between the street railways and the auto-bus owners; it is a contest between the majority of the public on one side and the bus owners and the patrons of the jitney cars on the other.”¹³⁴ The author

¹³² “Auto Club Wants ‘Jits’ Regulated,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, June 3, 1917, sec. Automobiles and Sports.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ “Be Just and Fear Not,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, May 29, 1917, sec. Editorials-News-Business-Society-Sports.

reiterates what many had claimed before him: jitneys threatened the public well-being. He framed those who operated and enjoyed the vehicles as a special class of people expecting distinct rights. Central to every ballot proposition around the jitney during the craze is the argument from opposing sides that the jitney either represents the public's interest, or is an obstacle in realizing the public interest.

The returns from the election reflect how jitneys served short-haul transportation rather than the outlying districts. In the end, the jitney lost by an approximate margin of 21,853 votes in favor of regulation to 18,130 against it. Characterizing how the voting played out, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote:

Early complete and incomplete returns were disheartening to the street railway men and others who had worked hard to defeat the jitney bus association, but it developed that their fears were unwarranted. When returns began to roll in from the West Side and outlying districts majorities in favor of the jitneys were changed to the other side and it was believed that full returns will show the defeat to be most decisive.¹³⁵

Early votes, which came from the areas closer to the city center, wanted to keep the jitney. But the tides turned when the votes from outlying districts rolled in. This pattern of voting suggests that even though many business owners and residents complained about congestion downtown, those living closest to the city center wanted to keep the jitney moving freely. This proves the jitneys' success in offering a new viable form of short-haul transportation in dense parts of cities. Ironically, those that did not live in the parts closest to downtown are those that denied the jitney the ability to operate there. Without the ability to serve the supporters of jitneys in dense parts of Los Angeles, the jitney "craze" geared towards its final days.

¹³⁵ "Returns Indicate Sweeping Shake-Up at the City Hall," *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), June 6, 1917.

Chapter 4:

The End of the Urban Jitney “Craze”: World War I, Interurban Jitneys and the Private Automobile

The *LA Times* ran the headline “Jitney Buses Are Abolished” on the front page of July 16, 1918. As an aim to reduce “economic waste” during the war, the Public Utilities Commission barred jitneys from operating. The movement had become increasingly weak up to that point, but this proved to be the final straw.

Restricting main streets in both cities made the jitney movement weak, marking an end to the “craze.” The economic changes from World War I delivered the final blow. In the case of Los Angeles, the local government heeded the national governments to stop unessential businesses. The public utilities commission saw jitneys as exactly that. In San Francisco, while the city did not “abolish the jitneys,” rising costs of essential parts to operate a jitney made life much harder. This combination of localized restrictions to space and global trends caused an end to the craze. Jitneys continued in San Francisco and would return in Los Angeles, but by the end of the war, privatized car use would replace jitneys as the dominant form of car use on city streets.

World War I and the Shock to the Jitney

World War I put pressure on the jitney with governmental bodies viewing it as unessential. By the summer of 1918, the Provost General of the Army considered adding “jitney and taxi drivers to the list of nonessential occupations that must be given up for the duration of the war.”¹³⁶ The distinction would have no enforcement, but rather be a

¹³⁶ “Jitney Drivers May Have to Work, Fight: Taxi’s and Other Auto Service Considered Duplication of Street Cars,” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), June 6, 1918.

recommendation for municipalities to follow. The Los Angeles Public Utilities Commission headed that advice and saw the jitneys as an “economic waste.”¹³⁷ Only about forty jitneys operated in Los Angeles by that point, down from an estimated peak of 500 vehicles in operation in 1915. This rapid decrease came in direct aftermath of the ordinance that restricted downtown to jitneys.¹³⁸ The remaining jitney drivers protested this decision “vigorously” according to the *LA Times*, but nonetheless, the “jitneys were abolished.”¹³⁹ The jitney dwindled from local government regulation, but what eventually “abolished” the jitney came from advice of the wartime federal government. The national response to World War I prompted the local Public Utilities Commission to rule the jitney as unessential. Even though jitneys within the city limits existed after WWI on a small scale, the actions of the larger state in proposing a “temporary” ban on the jitneys served as a final nail in the coffin for the “jitney craze” in Los Angeles.

In San Francisco, the Public Utilities Commission did not abolish the jitneys per the calls of the federal government, but the economic changes caused by the war pushed jitney operators out of the trade. The jitney had partially been a remedy for unemployment following a recession in 1914.¹⁴⁰ After the US entered World War I in the Spring of 1917, many operators moved to wartime industries.¹⁴¹ According to Sergeant of Police Francis E. Mahomey, in charge of the traffic squad, “jitneys had rapidly diminished since the war days” and cited the options for other forms of employment.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ “Would Kill Jitney Bus as War-Economy Measure,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, July 9, 1918, sec. Editorials-News-Business-Society-The Drama.

¹³⁸ “Jitney Bus Petition Filed with Clerk,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, December 19, 1917, sec. Editorials-News-Business-Society-The Drama.

¹³⁹ “Jitney Busses Are Abolished,” *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, July 16, 1918.

¹⁴⁰ Schwantes, “The West Adapts the Automobile,” 307-310.

¹⁴¹ “Jitney Fares Are Doubled,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 5, 1918.

¹⁴² Ibid.

The price of tires and gasoline jumped during the war, which made the job less profitable. The operators who continued with the trade began to charge 10¢ rather than the original 5¢ in order to make up for these extra costs.¹⁴³ The jitney no longer cost “a jitney,” making it less affordable for the patrons that had once seen it as a cheap way to ride in an automobile. Regardless of the role of regulations in response to the war, the economic conditions of higher prices for operation and attractive jobs in wartime industries pulled drivers off the streets. A regulation of the jitney at a smaller scale made the movement weak, but the global economic forces shaped how the jitney would be able to succeed at a local level.

Still, jitneys were more resilient in San Francisco than in Los Angeles, in part due to the strength of the union. Sergeant Mahomey estimated that no more than 300 hundred jitneys operated at this time despite the additional challenges of the war.¹⁴⁴ The restriction of Market street had decreased the prevalence of jitneys, but did not have as drastic of an effect as the restriction of space in Los Angeles. Part of that likely since the Jitney Operators’ Union had a vast majority of the jitney operators in San Francisco in their ranks.¹⁴⁵ That allowed operators to coordinate routes so as to not compete with one another and also gain collective benefits. One of those benefits was a lower prices for the indemnity insurance, but that started to change during World War I. The sole insurance provider for the jitney drivers stopped reissuing insurance to drivers.¹⁴⁶ About 150 jitneys lost insurance and thus could not operate, causing quite a hit for the movement.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ “Labor Section,” *Organized Labor*, Volume 17, Number 16, 15 April 1916.

¹⁴⁶ “Jitney Busses May Be Cut to 200 Cars Soon,” *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-1922)*, August 19, 1918.

During the war, the “jitney craze” in both cities ended. The spatial restrictions severely hindered the movement in both cities leading to this point. By the time of the war, Los Angeles had few jitneys operated within the city. The Public Utilities Commission acted to “abolish” jitneys in order to save resources during the war. San Francisco did act in such a way. Still, jitney drivers found it hard to adapt to the economic changes of the war. The operators had to charge more due to higher costs of operating, in addition to having trouble with the insurance company that provided the indemnity bond. While the jitney craze within the city had ended, jitneys persisted in different ways in the following years.

The Shift to Interurban Travel

Despite being ridden out of existence within city limits, many jitneys in Los Angeles transitioned to interurban travel. In doing so, the operators evaded regulation by taking advantage of the dispersed and fragmented political geography of the region. By 1919, financial mismanagement, war-time pressures and other factors including automobile and jitney competition caused there to be a nationwide crisis for local railway companies.¹⁴⁷ That prompted the Secretaries of Commerce and Labor to form a commission that examined the problem, culminating in the book entitled *Electric Railway Problem*, published in 1921. In it, author Delos Wilcox spent a chapter focusing on the effect of the automobile and jitney. He quotes Mr. Chas L. Henry of Indianapolis, “the father of interurban railway.” Henry said about Los Angeles, “the jitneys within the city limits were pretty well regulated out of existence by an ordinance initiated on behalf of

¹⁴⁷ Delos Wilcox, *Analysis of the Electric Railway Problem* (New York: Afferton Press, 1921), 1-5.

the street railway interests.”¹⁴⁸ This affirms the influence of streetcars in the spatial regulation of the jitneys.¹⁴⁹ However, by the late 1910s and early 1920s, more jitneys focused on interurban routes. Interurban jitneys had always been part of the movement, but after the city council restricted jitneys from operating in downtown L.A., more operators moved to interurban travel. Cars ran from Downtown LA to Venice, Long Beach, Pasadena or Pomona. Short spatial-temporal distances now, but at the time, highways did not exist. Jitneys in L.A. increasingly covered these distances after being regulated out of the city proper.

After this shift, more jitneys competed with Pacific Electric since PE focused on interurban travel in the Los Angeles region. Henry goes on to say, “the Pacific Electric Company is losing \$1,400 a day, \$500,000 a year, from jitney buses doing country business. Now, you may call them interurban jitneys if you want to. They are absolutely uncontrolled.”¹⁵⁰ The interurban railway expert noted how operators moved beyond city limits during this time, avoiding the regulations placed within the city limits. This presents the malleability and persistence of jitneys as a form of transportation. When operating became too hard in a given space, jitneys served a different purpose in transportation. They had relied on the short-haul transportation for so long, but by the 1920s, jitneys in Los Angeles tended to focus on interurban travel.

The Rise of Private Automobile Use

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 100.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Governments restricted the space that jitneys could operate, but paved the way for private automobiles to dominate the streetscape. When jitneys first emerged, the streetcars experienced hardship beyond this new form of competition.¹⁵¹ Stanely Mallach argues that “the automobile proved to be a far greater threat to the street railways than the jitney” since while the jitney came under similar regulations to streetcars, governments paved the way to private automobile use.¹⁵² The jitney spurred many early traffic laws, but the influx of private automobiles in the 1920s added significant congestion. Automobile ownership exploded in the 1920s with more affordable cars and good economic conditions following the war. Just as the jitney had started in Los Angeles, the city would be an early adopter of widespread private automobile use.¹⁵³ Unlike with the jitney several years earlier, city planners and traffic engineers implemented laws that sought to facilitate car traffic.¹⁵⁴ They believed that congestion would be eased by giving automobiles more space and right of way. While the answer for controlling jitneys just years earlier was restricting their space, cities conceded streets to private automobiles in the 1920s.

Business owners in downtown Los Angeles wanted space for private automobiles, changing from their protest against the jitneys. In 1922, an ordinance that prevented parking in Downtown went into effect. However, its enforcement was short-lived since the lack of automobile traffic decreased the business for downtown merchants.¹⁵⁵ Allied

¹⁵¹ Stanley Mallach, “The Origins of the Decline of Urban Mass Transportation in the United States, 1890-1930,” *Urbanism Past & Present*, no. 8 (1979), 8.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁵³ Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 14.

¹⁵⁴ Mallach, “The Origins of the Decline of Urban Mass Transportation...,” 11.

¹⁵⁵ Mark S. Foster, “The Model-T, the Hard Sell, and Los Angeles’s Urban Growth: The Decentralization of Los Angeles during the 1920s,” *Pacific Historical Review* 44, no. 4 (1975), 466-67.

with the Southern California Automobile Club and other groups interested in preserving cars' access to downtown, the measure only lasted 16 days. The ban had reduced the effectiveness of cars by limiting their parking, but enough political support to overturn it suggests that many felt comfortable with the private automobile taking up public space.¹⁵⁶

By the mid-1920s, planners in Los Angeles sought to design the city's transportation for cars. The City of Los Angeles established a planning commission in 1920 and the county established a regional planning commission 1923. In 1924, the planning commissions produced the "Major Traffic Street Plan for Los Angeles," aiming to reduce congestion.¹⁵⁷ The plan sought to widen, expand and straighten many streets in order to make automobile transportation more efficient. The plan went to the voters in November that year and they approved its implementation.¹⁵⁸ The city changed the urban environment to accommodate cars, making cars a more viable mode of transportation. Jitneys had entered cities not designed for cars, but throughout the 1920s, planners in Los Angeles aimed to reshape the cities to accommodate this new form of transportation.

Los Angeles developed a unique relationship with automobiles, but similar processes occurred in San Francisco where the city accepted private automobile use. During the restriction of Market street to jitneys, the Operators' Union viewed it as class legislation since the city did not restrict other forms of automobiles. Jitneys lasted longer in San Francisco, but private automobiles became popular. Unlike jitneys, they were free to roam on Market at any time of the day. Restrictions that had been imposed on the jitney did not subject private automobiles to the same conditions.

¹⁵⁶ Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile*, 88.

¹⁵⁷ Wachs, Martin. "The Evolution of Transportation Policy in Los Angeles." In *The City*, edited by Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 119.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 120.

Conclusion

Despite having rejected the jitneys' claim to streets just years earlier, officials in San Francisco and especially Los Angeles accepted private cars on the city streets. The cities gave space for cars to park in downtown areas and sought to redesign cities for seamless automobile transportation. The public embraced these changes as well. What made the jitneys such a contentious issue then? The answer seems to be that many felt uncomfortable with a class of operators using this new form of transportation as their trade. That gave the operators the power to shape automobile traffic in how they decided. Instead, it would be shaped by those that could afford to purchase cars. Cities helped defeat the jitney, but facilitated individual car use. That made automobiles a vehicle of private rather than public movement in both San Francisco and L.A.

Conclusion: A Future of Transportation that Ensures Public Interest

In San Francisco, the last jitney stopped running in 2016.¹⁵⁹ Jess Losa had operated his jitney since the 1970s. His route went from the Caltrain station, seven blocks on Third Street to Market Street, and seven blocks back to the Caltrain station down Fourth Street. He served the downtown area, connecting with public transportation options for passengers. In this way, Losa's jitney aided rather than took away from public transportation. Still, citations and competition, including with Uber and Lyft, made business harder over the years. Losa's story captures how the jitney in San Francisco became extinct by the 21st century, but still, jitneys had persisted through changing regulations and competing transportation for all of the 20th century. Nothing would rival the craze in scale and political debate, but jitneys continued to be a part of city life, whether we noticed them or not, up until the recent present.

After the craze, jitneys served as the transportation solution for marginalized communities that did not have adequate public transportation. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the main jitney route in San Francisco ran down Mission Street, a heavily Latinx district.¹⁶⁰ The other popular route was the one Jess Losa ran, connecting with the Caltrain station. By the 1970s, the city stopped issuing permits for jitneys due to transit deficits, seeing it as competition. The jitneys that remained continued to serve the Mission for the time being, but became much less frequent in the 1980s due to this new regulation.¹⁶¹ San Francisco and Los Angeles city governments allowed a small number

¹⁵⁹Max DeNike, "The Last Ride of the Jitney," *SF Weekly*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.sfweekly.com/news/the-last-ride-of-the-jitney/>.

¹⁶⁰ Robert Cervero, "Commercial Paratransit in the United States: Service Options, Markets, and Performance," *The University of California Transit Center*, 1996, 38.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

of regulated jitneys during this time during this period from the 1950s to the 80s.¹⁶² Many cities did not. Members from marginalized communities across the country still operated jitney services to fill a transportation gap during the 1970s and 1980s, despite their illegality. Riders from these communities preferred the cost and convenience of these jitneys and also felt secure riding with members of their own community instead of the bus.¹⁶³ August Wilson's play entitled *Jitney* follows Black operators who serve Pittsburgh's Hill district. They fill an important role for transportation needs for their community, since taxis and busses did not serve that part of town, but the city tries to shut down their service. In this iteration of the jitney, neighborhoods that had been spatialized as dangerous needed another form of public transportation to bring people around. Jitneys stepped up to serve this role in the absence of the state from providing equitable mobility. Even more so than the original craze, later jitneys were grounded in space—deeply tied to the communities and people they served. They served a role of not just moving people around when the neoliberal state was absent, but also provided a space for communities to feel safe in transit.

One of the most dangerous parts about Uber and Lyft is the disregard for how their operations disrupt the geographies they enter. Uber and Lyft see space as something to conquer—a blank slate where they can apply a market for movement by saturating drivers and hoping for consumers to crave going somewhere quick. Jitneys wanted to compress space and defend home, parts of two defining poles of Modernity to Harvey. In Postmodernism, the reorganization of space-time includes capital being incredibly mobile

¹⁶² Klein, Daniel, Adrian Moore, and Binyam Reja. *Curb Rights*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1997, 44-45.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 41

across the globe, commodifying every aspect of daily life.¹⁶⁴ Uber and Lyft reflect this trend to an extreme degree. The smartphone has allowed their capital to seamlessly move throughout the globe, subsidizing rides to pull new consumers and drivers to their app. By framing themselves as “creating markets,” the labor becomes invisible, creating the myth that drivers own and operate their own business and are not subject to the algorithm. The companies deny the fact that they are even transportation companies, claiming to be tech companies that create markets.

Rideshare is an industry where the government could ensure better mobility by operating a municipally owned service. In *Abolish Silicon Valley*, former software engineer Wendy Liu writes, “rideshare apps could be part of local transit systems—publicly funded, positioned as an infrequent alternative to public transit, with well-compensated and unionised drivers.”¹⁶⁵ Designed to work with existing bus lines and transit stops, rideshare could cooperate rather than compete with public transit. Los Angeles Metro started a pilot program called Metro Micro in June of 2021.¹⁶⁶ In seven parts of the city, people can schedule a rideshare vehicle to transport them within a certain geographic zone for only \$1. The aim is to solve the issue of “micro mobility.” Given the sprawl of Los Angeles, busses and trains, no matter the coverage and frequency, can only get people so close to their destination. LA Metro already has bike share programs at certain stations to address this issue. The prospect of a municipally owned rideshare service furthers this valiant attempt to make public transit feasible in cities that have been shaped by privatized car-use for almost a century.

¹⁶⁴ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 284

¹⁶⁵ Wendy Liu, *Abolish Silicon Valley: How to Liberate Technology from Capitalism*, (London, United Kingdom: Repeater, 2020), 198.

¹⁶⁶ See <https://micro.metro.net/> for more information.

Public transportation is now in public control, unlike in the 1910s, but governments ensure its failure by giving preferential treatment to cars. The state continues to expand highways—despite the principle of induced demand—and subsidize cars' ability to park on streets. The pandemic proved the beauty of “slow streets:” avenues where people and bikes roamed the streets rather than cars. Pollution levels also dropped when people stopped driving so much. These conditions opened the eyes of many that life without cars is feasible and quite energizing for urban life. Still, people left public transit due to fear of disease spreading and reduced service. The lesson we must take from the pandemic is not the return to cars in full force, but appreciate the beauty that came from decreasing automobile traffic for a period. In order to hold onto this lesson, the mode of action must be limiting the space given to cars. That can be done by creating transit only streets or lanes, as well as preserving slow streets. Also, charging the “real cost of parking” rather than subsidizing the ability to park on the street will make driving less convenient.¹⁶⁷ The government must stop paying for cars to be the most convenient means of transportation. By doing so, the state can incentivize people to choose more efficient modes of transportation in order to create healthier and more vibrant cities.

The Progressive era response to the jitney also offers lessons for how to regulate future technologies in transportation. Companies such as Waymo, Tesla, Apple and Cruise, among others, purport that autonomous vehicles will liberate the public from the shackles of traffic and expedite movement while also creating less traffic deaths. Perhaps autonomous vehicles will provide less friction of movement, but as has already been evident that the technologies of these vehicles have a better ability to interact with each

¹⁶⁷ Donald C. Shoup, *The High Cost of Free Parking* (Chicago: Planners Press, American Planning Association, 2005).

other than with human life. Autonomous vehicles have the potential to be a game-changing technology. Rather than rejecting them, as city governments eventually did with the jitney, the government must ensure that its implementation serves the best benefit of the public. That means if jobs are lost in the transportation sector due to automation, working must benefit from this new form of transportation, not just those who invested in it. Also, autonomous vehicles do not solve the spatial imposition of cars on city streets. Prototypes by these companies still are constrained by our individualized notion of transportation. The question once again becomes, do autonomous vehicles have a “right to the city,” and if so, who is benefitting from this asserted right? The future of autonomous cars is still further than we think, but we must start considering whether the capitalist techno-utopian claims of autonomous vehicles really solve transportation issues, or rather exacerbate inequities in mobility that already exist.

The jitney operators heavily considered equity in transportation. The operators’ saw themselves as “carriers of the common people” that also challenged corporate ownership of transportation. To them, companies controlling how people moved through urban space could not serve the best interests of the public. Instead, it only profited the shareholders. They felt more confidence in the municipalities providing mobility. Still, jitney operators challenged the government when they felt like the government's claim to serve the public interest actually protected business interests. Jitneys were radical in this sense, hoping to define city life on their terms of decentralized collective power. They played into existing histories of labor and transportation in each of their cities to try and gain support, but the powerful coalition of streetcar companies, government and those concerned about the safety and congestion of automobiles successfully suppressed the

jitney “craze.” Cars still would take root on city streets, just not in the form of jitneys.

Rather than being a vehicle for people to ride together, they became an object for individualized transit, dominating urban space with their presence while also separating people as they moved from place to place.

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