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**TAXI DRIVING: A STUDY OF OCCUPATIONAL TENSION**

*City University of New York*

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TAXI DRIVING: A STUDY OF  
OCCUPATIONAL TENSION

by

Richard Schlosberg

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate  
Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The sociology of work has long been a major sub-discipline within the field of sociology. The classical theorists, such as Marx and Durkheim, considered occupations an integral part of society, and one significant school of American sociology, the Chicago School, was deeply involved in the study of the workplace.

This dissertation has the theoretical goal of synthesizing elements of the Marxist theoretical school with the methodological techniques of the Chicago School. In particular, the dissertation attempts to analyze the lower class occupation of taxi driving in New York City within a larger structural framework, including both a historical and economic analysis of the class relations of the New York City fleet driving industry. Specifically, the dissertation has the goal of using the traditional sociological and anthropological research techniques of observation and participant observation within a critical theoretical framework.

In the 1920's, the Chicago School, under the leadership of Robert Parks, began to study the use of urban space, and became particularly interested in the emerging urban centers with their substantial lower working class populations. Lower class forms of work were examined, and this

period produced studies of such things as the waitress, the hobo, the "jackroller," the taxi-hall dance girl and the professional thief.<sup>1</sup>

These studies focused on what the Chicago school termed "social pathologies," i.e., lower class occupations and phenomena associated with the development of industrial capitalism, and used observation and participant observation as the methodological techniques. While a great deal of descriptive data were collected, little, if any, thought was given to the structural conditions conducive to the development of these phenomena.

In the late nineteen forties Fred Davis did an excellent participant observation study of taxi drivers in Chicago. In an article entitled "The Cabdriver and His Fare: Facets of a Fleeting Relationship" Davis analyzes the interactions between fleet cab drivers and their potential passengers.

One of the things that Davis develops is a typology of the different types of passengers that fleet drivers pick up in the course of a work day. Davis' categories of potential passengers includes what he terms "The Blowhard," "The Businessman," "The Ladyshopper," and "The Live Ones."<sup>2</sup> The focus in this study is on the exchange relationship between the driver and his fare. While it is never explicitly mentioned in the study, Davis emphasizes how cab drivers use these categories to maximize their profits in the interactions that they have with their

passengers.

The question that he never raises is why cab drivers use typologies such as the one mentioned above? No mention is ever made of the fact that cab drivers have traditionally been among the most poorly paid workers, and that this factor helps to explain why drivers try to extract extra money from their passengers. In his analysis, Davis isolated the cab driver from the relationship that he has with the fleet owner, in which the driver's wages are determined.

In another section of the article, Davis analyzes the techniques that drivers employ to extract as much tip money as possible from their passengers. It is here that he develops terms that refer to the techniques that the cab driver uses to ensure his tip.<sup>3</sup> However, again the question of why cab drivers do this is never explored. It is here that a plausible recourse is to analyze the political economic structure of the industry.

In his study, Fred Davis makes two theoretical presumptions about the nature of this occupation. In the first place, it becomes very clear that cab driving involves an exchange system between the driver and his fare (the passenger). Davis spends a lot of time analyzing ways in which drivers attempt to extract large tips from their passengers, leading one to believe that cab drivers border on being thieves.

Thus while it appears that drivers and their fares

are involved in an exchange network that involves the driver trying to extract profits from his passengers, little, if any, mention is ever made of the fact that fleet drivers are also involved in another exchange network with the garage owners. Therefore their relationships with their passengers are dependent on this former relationship in which drivers' wages are determined.

However, the exchange relationship that Davis writes about is not merely between the driver and his passenger(s). What is omitted in this analysis is that the driver is involved in two relationships, one between himself and the passenger and the other between him (the driver) and the owner(s) of the taxi fleet for which he works.

What Davis omits is that the behavior that the driver manifests in the former relationship is a function of the latter relationship that he (the driver) is involved in i.e., the class conflict between fleet drivers and the fleet owners.

The form of remuneration in the taxi industry, the "booking" system, in which the driver receives a percentage of the meter,<sup>4</sup> presents an interesting problem for sociologists, such as Fred Davis, who have studied this form of labor. Davis (1959) misses the fact that cab drivers receive only a small proportion of their salary from the meter, since a large percentage of the meter goes back to the owner. Thus, tips become a very important part of the

cab driver's remuneration, and the behavior that drivers manifest to get higher tips is crucial to their survival.

In particular, there is no mention made of the way in which the driver earns his salary, while a great deal of attention is given to the ways in which drivers are deviant on the job, particularly in regard to their interactions with their passengers. Thus, much of the literature on cab drivers shows how drivers tend to be a very unscrupulous lot, without regard for the structural conditions, particularly the remuneration system, that generate this kind of behavior.

The interactions between drivers and their passengers were later analyzed by James Henslin (1967) in his study of cab drivers in St. Louis, Missouri. In his doctoral dissertation Henslin examines what he terms an "...Interactional Analysis of an Occupational Culture."<sup>5</sup> Primarily using the methodological techniques of observation and participant observation, Henslin emphasizes the drivers' interactions with their fares and the nature of the social relationships among fellow cab drivers.

In his analysis of cab drivers' interactions with their passengers Henslin uses Erving Goffman's concept of "front," i.e., social characteristics such as dress, ethnicity, age and location to analyze cab drivers' priorities in what he (Henslin) terms "tracking" potential passengers.<sup>6</sup> Henslin uses these variables in analyzing how

drivers determine whether or not to pick up a passenger depending on the latter's "trackability," i.e. how certain the driver can be that he will get his fare and how large a tip he can expect.

In a manner similar to Davis, Henslin elaborates on the scheming nature of the cab driver to explain the driver's behavior, without making reference to the class relations of the fleet driving industry. Therefore, according to Henslin, the cab driver's behavior is separable from the relationship between the driver and the fleet owner. No mention is made at all of the fact that the relationship that fleet drivers have with fleet owners influences behavior such as the type that he describes.

While the remuneration system of St. Louis cab drivers is somewhat different than that of New York City drivers, Henslin explores cab drivers' preoccupations with shooting dice and arrives at the following conclusion based on the system of remuneration:

Cabdriving is structured such that it provides the opportunity for craps. The system of remuneration common in cab driving provides cab drivers with unaccountable income...Cab drivers receive a variable cash amount of a daily basis. These drivers rent their cabs for \$8.75 (their "pro") for a work shift of eleven and a half hours. They also pay for their gasoline. Whatever money is taken over the "pro" is the driver's profit for the day. This ordinarily runs between \$15 and \$20 per shift, but there is neither a minimum nor a maximum. Receiving one's pay in cash each day both eliminates a record of the actual amount and provides ready cash with which to shoot craps.

With this structure of remuneration, the cab driver is able to hide from any interested party both winnings and losses due to craps because no one except the cab driver himself, not even his boss, knows how much he made on a given day.<sup>7</sup>

While Henslin begins to demonstrate a relationship between the remuneration system and cab drivers' behavior as a function of this system, he never fully develops the idea of how the remuneration system is a function of the relationship between the fleet owners and their drivers. The fact that cab drivers have a lot of cash in their pockets is not an adequate explanation for why they play dice during a good deal of their free time on the job.

In both Henslin's analysis of "tracking," i.e., choosing passengers for predictability of tips, and his analysis of playing dice, emphasis is given to the choices that the driver makes in these situations. While Henslin talks about the structural factors that a cab driver has to choose from, he never demonstrates how the driver's behavior is a function of a system in which tipping is a major part of the driver's survival wage.

What is extremely troublesome about both Davis' and Henslin's work is that cab drivers are seen as a kind of manipulative, deviant sort of character, who are constantly trying to exploit their passengers in an exchange relationship in which the drivers and owners are never looked at. Therefore, the class system characteristic of capitalism is never examined.

In a somewhat similar approach my Master's thesis (1975) examined cab drivers' preoccupations with such things as betting on horse races and baseball games. Using the methodological techniques of observation and participant observation, the following analysis is characteristic of the study:

Sports talk is an important source of tension management for the cab driver. It enables the driver to curse, groan or shout, all of which are significant tension releasing devices...

In addition, sports talk plays the crucial function of being able to overcome the interpersonal distances that exist between drivers...<sup>8</sup>

In the above statement the cab driver is viewed as a conscious decision making actor, who essentially has control over his choices. No structural variables are employed in this analysis, and the driver's behavior is viewed as independent of the class system of the industry.

A third major study of cab drivers was done in the 1970's by Charles Vidich (1976). This author's research is concerned with the determinants of cabbie culture that have been previously neglected by Davis and Henslin, and myself.

In his introduction he states:

In large measure the public's image of the New York City taxi industry has been formulated by the timeless quality of the hack's character. Although the taxi driver poses as a public servant, his actions and his historical reputation in New York have led the public to believe that he is all too often working as a crook. In order to introduce the reader to the present image of the New York taxi driver, and the nature of his services it is necessary to delve into the reputation he has acquired over the past century.<sup>9</sup>

The interesting methodological and theoretical question that Vidich raises is that the contemporary image of the cab driver is a function of the history of the industry. While this analysis certainly goes beyond isolating the behavior of the driver as a contemporary phenomena, it fails to describe drivers' behavior as a function of the labor system in the industry.

Thus, the reputation of the cab driver is not seen as part of the history of the class relations in the industry, but rather as an isolated historical occurrence. Throughout his book, little mention is ever made of the fact that drivers have traditionally been a form of highly exploited, lower class labor, therefore necessitating certain types of behavior in order to survive.

In a later section of his introduction the above author states:

Like the mythology of the industry, the cab driver's vocabulary reflects the values that he shares with his peers. The vocabulary of the cabby is action oriented and many of the words and phrases are predatory in nature. It is a language of combat and coercion, including such words as "bandits," "crashing," "steerer," "gestapo," "buckers," and phrases like "stiff you," "double up," "common whores," and "break the ice," as outstanding examples of their jargon. There are virtually no positive words in their vocabulary.<sup>10</sup>

The argot of the cab driver is oriented toward the exceptionally competitive nature of the survival process involved in making a living as a taxi driver. Thus while Vidich is accurate in pointing out the negativistic, in fact almost totally violent nature of the driver's

vocabulary, he fails to point out the structural conditions that have led to this way of talking.

The values that are common to all fleet drivers are structured by a system that necessitates a predatory, highly competitive mentality as a means of survival. What is lacking in Vidich's analysis is a synthesis of the historical data with the behavior of the driver and the public image that is associated with this latter type of behavior. Therefore, in a manner similar to Davis and Henslin, behavior is never really seen as a product of the labor system, but rather takes on a quasi-autonomous life of its own.

Of primary importance in this dissertation is the synthesis of a theoretical framework that is able to incorporate both a cultural analysis, using such methodological techniques as participant observation and observation, with a sufficient explanation of the historical and economic factors that have formed the basis of this subculture. In particular, the dissertation attempt to integrate both historical and economic analysis as a means of explaining an occupational subculture.

Therefore, while this dissertation began as a case study of the New York City taxi industry during the late nineteen seventies, it has developed into a more theoretical statement. The contemporary picture of the industry is analyzed as a function of the historical relationship between the owning class and the labor force.

The first hypothesis that will be proposed and developed in the thesis is that the particular remuneration system that is characteristic of the taxi industry, i.e., the commission system, has been a major determinant in the ways that cab drivers interact with their passengers.

Firstly, cab drivers are not wage labor, the form of remuneration characteristic of American capitalism, but rather get paid a percentage of the meter. Therefore, the exchange relationship that exists between the driver and his fare is merely one part of the entire exchange system in which the cab driver is involved.

Therefore, while sociologists have tended to analyze cab drivers' interactions with their passengers as autonomous events, this dissertation proposes to analyze these interactions as a function of the remuneration system characteristic of the industry.

Secondly, the particularly alienating quality of taxi work has never really been analyzed as a product of the labor system and as a determinant of cabbies' behavior. Specifically, the isolating nature of the work situation in which drivers are constantly pitted against each other has never been looked at as a determinant of behavior.

While Davis (1959) talks about the unpredictability of cab driving and Henslin (1967) talks about how cabbies try to minimize their uncertainties, little has been said about the structure of the industries in which fellow cab

drivers are pitted against each other in their fights for fares. The atomization process that is an integral part of the New York City taxi industry will be discussed as a determinant of the racism and the lack of class solidarity in the industry.

The purpose of this approach is to demonstrate that culture is a product of history and economic development of the class system, rather than merely the conscious choice of the social actors who are involved in the particular phenomena.

One of the most formidable obstacles to the development of the class consciousness in taxi drivers in New York City has been the lack of a serious union movement. The history of the taxi industry in New York City has been plagued by a combination of company unions and unsuccessful attempts by the more powerful unions to unionize the industry. Finally settling for a union that is very much pro-owner, fleet drivers in New York City have really never had the opportunity to be represented collectively. The impact of this situation will be critically analyzed as a determinant of the current image and behavior of the New York City fleet driver.

My own historical basis for such an approach goes back to my earlier study of the taxi industry referred to above. It is here that I began to delve into an analysis of what I termed "adaptive mechanisms" of cab drivers, i.e., ways

in which cab drivers attempt to escape from their imputed occupational roles.

This concept was essentially based on Erving Goffman's concept of "role distance," which he defines in the following way:

...all behavior that does not contribute to the task core of a given role but only to those behaviors that are seen by someone present as relevant to assessing the actor's attachment to his particular role and relevant in such a way as to suggest that the actor possibly has some measure of disaffection from, and resistance against, the role.<sup>11</sup>

These adaptive mechanisms included such cabbie activities as getting "stoned," betting on horses and driving passengers around the city without turning on the meter, i.e., "arming a trip."

The major problem with this perspective is that it views cab driving as an activity, rather than as a form of labor. The activity of the cabbie is seen as a behavior unrelated to his relationship to the labor system in which he is involved, i.e., independent from the class relations of the capitalist workplace.

The question that I fail to mention in the Master's thesis is why cab drivers become so preoccupied with escaping from the role of being a cabbie? What are the structural conditions leading to this kind of behavior in which the worker is continually involved in escaping from the workplace?

At this point it becomes critical to analyze these

adaptive mechanisms as a function of the structural conditions of the taxi industry, in both its historical and economic bases.

Theoretically, the dissertation attempts to synthesize elements of both the Symbolic Interactionist perspective, in particular a number of theoretical concepts of Erving Goffman, with a more critical Marxist perspective that will emphasize the historical and economic components of the taxi industry.

In particular, I have retained much of the qualitative data that I collected during my participant observation as a cab driver, but I suggest an analytical framework that integrates both historical and economic analysis as a means of explaining a contemporary phenomena.

While the Symbolic Interactionist framework provides interesting descriptive data about the nature of the workplace, it fails to recognize a number of major factors which influence the behavior of the cab driver in his work setting.

To begin with, the profession of cab driving is located within the larger political economic context of the capitalist workplace, therefore, creating certain demands on labor that are characteristic of the capitalist system in general. In particular, the atomization process in the taxi industry is reflective of the larger capitalist system in which workers are systematically kept apart from

each other, and usually placed in competitive situations. Thus while Symbolic Interactionists are accurate in their descriptions of the behavioral processes, for the most part they lack any structural analysis, therefore, never explaining the source of the situation.

Specifically, cab driving represents a rather unusual form of labor, since drivers' salaries are based on a combination of a percentage of the meter plus tips. There are no guaranteed weekly wages for cab drivers, therefore creating a situation in which there is a good deal of unpredictability.

Fleet drivers in New York City are essentially given the use of a taxicab for the workday and are required to bring in a "booking" of somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and twenty dollars per shift. Night drivers are expected to book twenty to thirty dollars more than day drivers. After deductions are made for union dues (thirty cents for each trip), the remainder of the fare is divided up between the driver and the fleet garage owner, with drivers getting anywhere between 43% to 50% of the remainder, depending on how long the driver has worked for the same garage. This booking constitutes two thirds of the driver's salary, while the tips that he receives from his passengers constitute the remaining one third. Tips are the only part of the driver's remuneration that he does not have to share with the fleet garage owner, thus making

it crucial for drivers to behave in ways that maximize their tips.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, cab driving provides a function for the larger system of which it is a part. In the sociology of work literature cab driving is termed a "service occupation." Basically, cabs are used to transport workers back and forth from their jobs, and are also used by businesses to transport goods in the congested areas of the inner city.

Braverman (1974) points out how service workers are an integral part of the production process in capitalist society:

...Workers in transportation are often regarded as workers in a "service" industry, but if the location of a commodity is taken as an important physical characteristic, transportation is part of the process of production.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to state:

From this point of view, the distinction between commodities in the form of goods and commodities in the form of services is important only to the economist or statistician, not to the capitalist.<sup>14</sup>

What Braverman attempts to do is to integrate the service occupations within the larger structural framework of capitalist society. Thus, cabs play a crucial role in the capitalist industrial process by providing a means of transportation for the upper classes and transportation for commodities in the inner city areas.

He later points out that while service workers play an integral role in the production process, they are often

part of the lowest paid sector of the labor force.

In his analysis of salaries Braverman states the following:

...the median of the usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers in the service occupations is lower than that of any occupational group except farmworkers. In May 1971 it was \$91 a week (if one includes the half million private household workers; excluding these it was \$96), as against \$115 for clerical workers, \$117 for laborers (nonfarm), and \$120 for operatives.<sup>15</sup>

In a somewhat similar manner James O'Connor (1973) analyzes the place of occupations, such as taxi driving, in the context of advanced industrial society. In his analysis of the monopolization process, O'Connor distinguishes between two sectors of the society, the competitive and the monopoly sectors. Taxi driving is an example of the competitive sector, which O'Connor describes in the following way:

In the competitive sector, the physical capital-to-labor ratio and output per worker, or productivity, are low, and growth of production depends less on physical capital than on growth of employment. Production is typically small scale, and markets are normally local or regional in scope. Familiar examples include restaurants, drug and grocery stores, service stations, and other branches of trade; garages, appliance repair shops, and other services; clothing and accessories, commercial displays, and other manufacturing industries. Competitive industries employ roughly one third of the U.S. labor force, with the largest proportion in services and distribution.<sup>16</sup>

O'Connor adds another important factor about the nature of industries such as cab driving, which is that the output per worker is virtually constant. In the taxi industry this means that cab drivers can only increase

their salaries by having the owners increase fares. The driver is merely the intermediary in this relationship, i.e., the one who passes on the fare increase to the passenger.

### Research Methodology

The dissertation seeks to bring together descriptive, case study material on the New York City taxi industry with an economic class analysis and relevant historical data.

The dissertation began with a combination of observation, participant observation and open ended interviewing at the Columbia Operating Company and the Checker Cab Garage, two now defunct mid-Manhattan fleet garages.

Much of the data that I collected during this time period, 1975-1977, was used for my Master's thesis, "A Descriptive Analysis of the New York City Taxi Industry" (1975). While I considered this to be an interesting descriptive study, the most important contribution that it makes was a section entitled "Adaptive Mechanisms," i.e., ways in which cab drivers escape from their imputed occupational roles. As I previously mentioned, these adaptive mechanisms included such things as pot smoking, betting on horses and hanging out at the Belmore Cafeteria.

During the time period of 1976-1978, I began to rethink the question of fleet driving in New York City. I decided that this type of descriptive study had the

severely limiting factor of seeing cabbies' behavior as independent from the labor system of capitalism.

In the first place, one of the things that disturbed me was that the cab driver has traditionally been portrayed in the literature (particularly by sociologists) as an itinerant, irresponsible character, who spends a lot of his time trying to figure out ways to get extra money from his passengers.

The most common approach that has been employed is to analyze the interactions among fellow cab drivers or among cab drivers and their passengers. With the possible exception of Vidich's work, there has really been no formidable attempt at a class analysis of the taxi industry. The thing that I objected to the most was the common notion that cab drivers were a "colorful" topic to study.<sup>17</sup> I began to feel more angry about the exploitation in the industry that both popular literature and sociology failed to recognize. The idea that the labor system strongly influences our behavior became more and more a part of my way of thinking.<sup>18</sup>

This began to open up a new avenue in my analysis of the taxi industry. I had already done extensive research into the nature of the New York City fleet garage industry, and now I realized that I could use a lot of the descriptive data to begin to integrate both a historical and economic analysis. In this way I could try to explain the behavior of the contemporary fleet driver as a function of the

history of the class relations of the industry.

This has proved to be a much more formidable task than I had originally anticipated. In the first place, I had to be able to integrate a sufficient amount of historical background in order to explain the contemporary image of the fleet driver in New York City.

Secondly, I had to synthesize two very different theoretical perspectives. My Master's thesis used a very dogmatic theoretical perspective, Symbolic Interactionism, and primarily viewed the fleet driver as a social actor divorced from any structural variables, trying to create some sense of order in an otherwise chaotic existence.

The major problem that I did not want to fall into was an analysis of the workplace as an autonomous unit that is not a function of the class relations of a capitalist society. Therefore, while Symbolic Interactionism proved to be a good way to describe the activities of cab drivers, it became more and more clear to me that it lacked an adequate analytical framework.

Thus the task of creating a historical and economic base for my analysis of the New York City taxi industry began. Hopefully, this analysis will aid in the understanding of the plight of the contemporary fleet driver.

## HISTORY OF THE NEW YORK CITY TAXI INDUSTRY

The history of the New York City taxi industry essentially falls into three major time periods. The first one, from the years 1897 to 1910, corresponds to the origin of the motor driven car and ends with the introduction of government regulation in the industry. This era was characterized by virtually no regulation of taxi services by the city government.

The second time period, between the years 1910 to 1937, began with the city government's introduction of the taximeter and ended with the passage of the Haas Act, i.e., a bill that created the taxi medallion as a limited commodity. It was only with the passage of the Haas Act that a limited number of cab drivers could now be employed in the city, making the taxi industry amenable to unionization efforts for the first time.

The third time period, from 1938 to the present, begins with the unionization efforts of the Transport Workers' Union and continues to the present day demise of the fleet garage industry in New York City.

The significance of this section is that should be used as a means of clarifying the contemporary picture of the New York City taxi industry, i.e., as a analytical basis.<sup>19</sup>

In my analysis of the history of the New York City industry, I have chosen 1897 as the point of departure, since this was the year that the first electrical powered taxicab was introduced in the city. Prior to this, all transportation, with the exception of railroads, was horse and buggy transportation.

While this form of transportation was technically superior to the horse and buggy, it had many obvious flaws, such as its twelve hundred pound battery and a maximum speed of fifteen miles per hour. It therefore competed with the horse and buggy for the first ten years of the twentieth century.

At this point in the history of the industry, there was little, if any, outside regulation of the privately owned cabs. The vast majority of these vehicles were found at either the hackstand at Grand Central Station or at hotels, which had their own private hackstands. Many hotel owners owned cab services, and at this time there was very little competition among cab drivers for fares on the city's streets.

Furthermore, as Braverman (1974) points out in the previous chapter, taxis provide an important service in the congested inner city, particularly serving as a means of transportation between the shipping ports in Manhattan, where raw materials come into, and the factories in the city.

At this point in the history of the industry, cab fares were not standardized, i.e., there were no taximeters,

and while drivers worked on a commission system, they were able to negotiate fares with their passengers.

Furthermore, cab trade was pretty predictable, being essentially limited to hotel trade and the business district. Unlike the contemporary fleet driver, cab drivers in the early nineteen hundreds had a much more predictable work day and did much less competing with each other.

However, one issue that arose during this early time period and has continued to plague the industry has been the question of the fleet owners' regulation over their drivers. Since fleet owners do not have direct supervision over their employees, they (the owners) have traditionally relied on the city police department to serve as a regulatory agency over fleet drivers.

By 1910, the role of the city government as a regulatory agency over fleet cab drivers began to develop with the introduction of the taximeter. It was at this point that the city government began to provide for the periodic inspection of taximeters to make sure that drivers did not tamper with the meter, i.e., adjust the meter in ways so that drivers would not have to report fares.

The relationship of the cab driver to the owner is mediated by the cab meter, which determines much of the driver's salary. Historically, cab drivers have always been paid by a commission system, in which their salary is based on a percentage of the meter intake with the remainder going back to the owner of the taxi.

For the most part, drivers have had very little negotiating power with a passenger in terms of the fare, which is predetermined by the taximeter. Therefore, whenever possible, drivers have attempted to tamper with the meter in ways that would enable them to negotiate directly with their passengers.

Therefore, by 1910, the fleet owners requested that the city government aide them by periodically inspecting taximeters to insure that drivers haven't tampered with them. In addition to this, fleet owners began to develop means to insure that their drivers had to always turn the meter on when they were carrying a passenger. This is to insure that the fare would be recorded.

The following news article describes how fleet owners began to combat their drivers' attempts to do trips with their "flags' up," i.e., without turning on the meter:

Only recently several of New York's taxicab companies were compelled to dissolve because the cabs operated by these companies were not collecting sufficient fares to warrant a continuance of their service to the general public. Other companies were compelled to raise their rates, which at the time they thought to be rather excessive. In explaining their action the head of one of the companies said, "Among other things the unfortunate dishonesty of chauffeurs in failing to register fares has been the source of greatest loss to our company. The trouble has been that the drivers make 'flat rates' (off the meter) and when doing so they do not drop their registering flag, which starts the taximeter going."

A device has just been placed on the market, and it accomplishes effectively and thoroughly the very end sought, namely, curbing the dishonesty of drivers and compelling the meter to register as soon as the passenger enters the cab.<sup>20</sup>

The existence of the taximeter is predicated on a system between fleet owners and fleet drivers that is based on mutual distrust, i.e., what the driver is able to keep from being recorded on the meter he is able to keep for himself.

Therefore, the fleet owners have been able to utilize both technology, in the form of the taximeter, and the city government, in the form of the Hack Bureau, in keeping surveillance over fleet drivers.

By the early nineteen hundreds, taxi riding had become almost as popular as subway riding. This was primarily due to the introduction of mass produced cars, such as the Renault, which were imported in large numbers and used as taxicabs in New York City.

While it has been previously mentioned how drivers' salaries are determined by a percentage of the taximeter, the introduction of mass produced cars further increased the competition among drivers, giving the cab owners further reason to seek control over their drivers, who were now desperately competing against each other for fares.

The following describes a newspaper account of the ever burgeoning New York City taxi industry in the early nineteen hundreds:

"Taxicabs are popular now with the masses and unpopular with the classes," was the opinion expressed yesterday by the manager of one of the largest cab companies in this city. He declared that when taxicabs first came out they were a novelty and the wealthy were eager to ride in them. The prices were too high for ordinary folk.

"This has changed now," the manager went on to say, "because the rates have been reduced and the women object to riding in red, green or yellow cabs and a chauffeur in greasy livery.

"To meet this, we have ordered a number of autocabs (limousines) which will be for hire on call, without a taximeter or any of the distinguishing features of the autocab. They will be painted a dark Brewster green, with selected drivers in neat livery with black buttons, at a rate of \$3 for the first three hours and \$2 for each succeeding hour. ...Customers who can give us a four months' charter can have their cab painted any color they prefer.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in addition to creating a non-wage labor occupation, fleet owners flooded the cab market so badly that drivers were continually trying to out-bargain each toher.

In an attempt to further increase the popularity of taxi riding, the city government began to eliminate the private hackstand system in New York City, thus creating a situation in which cab drivers would openly compete for fares at the various hotel hackstands that were previously privately owned. Making hackstands public further increased the already atomized quality of taxiwork in New York City by opening up another avenue for open competition.

It was at this point that taxicab "waiting lines" began to develop, where a number of taxis would line up and wait for their fares, thus increasing the competition among drivers.

The opening up of hotel trade to all cab drivers in 1913 prompted the Board of Alderman of New York City to pass an ordinance calling for the following; the abolition of private hackstands, the standardization of cab rates,

the creation of public hackstands in parks, squares and streets and a standardized procedure to both issue and revoke hack licenses.

As hotel owners lost control over the taxi industry, a new class of cab drivers began to buy into the industry, i.e., the owner driver, independent owners who usually own one or two cabs.

Historically, the introduction of the small owner has complicated the class relations of the taxi industry, by creating a third class in addition to the fleet owners and fleet drivers.

As one might infer from this description, the New York City taxi industry took on more and more of a chaotic character as it progressed into the nineteen twenties. between the years 1925 and 1930, approximately fifteen thousand taxis were added to the city's streets, resulting in about thirty thousand cruising taxicabs by 1930.

The net effect of this was to create massive rate wars among fellow drivers, since it became increasingly difficult to get passengers. The rate wars became so intense that people were able to ride around in taxicabs for five cents a ride, the same price that they paid for the subway.

By the nineteen twenties, the fleet owners in New York City had set up a workplace in which illegal practices were virtually necessary to the economic survival of the driver.

By 1931, the public outcry against the taxi industry

was so intense that the Jimmy Walker Administration was forced to hold open hearings on the issue of increased government regulation of the taxi industry. The principle complaints of the public were the use of taxicabs in committing crimes and the incessant rate wars among drivers.

While the Walker Administration was forced to respond to this public outcry, they did very little except for limiting the number of taxicabs at twenty thousand.

By the time that the LaGuardia Administration came into existence, the New York City taxi industry was perhaps at its all time low. The criminogenic nature of the taxi industry had become more and more excessive, including a combination of such factors as police corruption, racketeering, and excessant rate wars. At a time when the Depression economy could barely afford to keep a taxi industry going, New York City was faced with a totally oversaturated industry, which was in desperate need of change.

The final measure that was enacted to keep the taxi industry a profitable business was the enactment of the Haas Act in March 1937. This bill, which was originally proposed by the Alderman Lew Hass, froze the number of taxi medallions, vehicles with a license to pick up passengers on the street, at slightly over thirteen thousand. The creation of this limited market made the taxi medallion a highly prized commodity, which has gone up in price from its original cost

of ten dollars to as high as seventy thousand dollars in 1980. Since most of these original medallions were in the hands of about ten fleet garages, a very valuable commodity was created.

The present day taxi industry really begins with the passage of the Haas Act in 1937. It is only at this point that a limited number of taxi jobs were created, and that cab driving became a viable means of survival.

#### Unionization Efforts

I have chosen 1937, the date of the passage of the Haas Act, as the point at which to analyze the various union movements in the taxi industry.

Prior to 1937, cab drivers were very disorganized in any unionization efforts, and the larger companies in New York City, Parmalee and the Yellow Cab Company, organized company unions which were completely under the leadership of Mike Quill, to effectively organize fleet drivers in New York City in the late nineteen thirties.

The early efforts of Mike Quill and the TWU met with fierce opposition from the fleet owners, who had never tolerated anything more than company unions prior to this date.

There were two factors in the taxi industry at this time that I consider to be very much on the fleet owners' side in their fight against unionization. The first factor that has characterized fleet driving throughout its history has been the individualistic nature of the job, i.e.,

fellow workers rarely, if ever, have time to get together to organize. Due to the transience of the job, there is little time for drivers from the same garage to organize against management in any collective effort.

The second factor that the fleet owners have used for their behalf has been the organization of associations of fleet garage owners to represent their collective interests. Presently, the Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade is such an organization. Between the late nineteen thirties and the mid-nineteen sixties, there have been approximately fifteen major New York City garages, thus making it rather easy for fleet owners to organize against the very atomized labor force with whom they have had to contend.

While cab drivers have had company unions in the early nineteen hundreds, it was not until 1937 that outside unions began to organize cab drivers.

In 1937, the C.I.O., Committee for Industrial Organization, became a potent force in the unionization efforts in the industry. In 1937, The New York Times reported the following show of union solidarity:

In the face of a strike threat by the Committee for Industrial Organization, the Parmalee Taxicab System signed a closed shop contract with Local 819 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, an American Federation of Labor union-local 819 was chartered last week to take the place of the Parmalee System, a so-called company union...

Officers of the C.I.O. group charged that the contract represented "a deal between the company and the company union which has now become affiliated with the A.F. of L."22

This early unionization effort was merely the first of many such efforts.

During the same year, the second major unionization effort was undertaken by Michael Quill, who began an all out effort to include taxi drivers in his newly emerging union, the Transport Workers Union. The T.W.U. had recently unionized New York City's subway and bus drivers, and now sought to include cab drivers in the same union structure.

What was particularly important about this unionization effort was that Quill's proposal called for a minimum wage contract for taxi drivers.

Under the proposed T.W.U. contract, night cab drivers were guaranteed twenty-eight dollars per week plus forty percent commissions on all earnings over forty-five dollars per week, and day drivers were given fifteen dollar per week plus forty percent commissions on all earnings over thirty-seven-fifty per week.

The appeal of a minimum wage contract was so great to the rank and file that the following show of solidarity occurred in 1939:

A general strike of taxicab drivers in the city, affected 1,000 men operating 8,500 cabs and some 2,000 maintenance men, was called yesterday by the Transport Workers Union, C.I.O. affiliate, in support of demands for a larger share of receipts, improved working conditions and more thorough unionization of the industry.

Union officials charged that the large operating fleets had "sabotaged" the negotiations and were seeking to institute company unions.<sup>23</sup>

Fleet owners countered the Transport Workers' Union attempts to unionize the entire fleet industry in New York City by creating company unions in most of the major garages and through the use of physical force in some instances.

By 1939 the Transport Workers' Union became a dead issue in the taxi industry. While Vidich (1976) attributes this to the union's attempt to eliminate part-time drivers from the work force, it is my belief that the latter's attempt to create a minimum wage system in the taxi industry was a greater threat to the remuneration system in the industry. The minimum wage system threatened the entire class system of the taxi industry, i.e., a remuneration system based on commission earnings. This has not and probably will never become a reality in the industry.

The defeat of the Transport Workers' Union has had far reaching consequences through the present day. To begin with, it represented the greatest threat to the fleet owners that was conceivable. It has become clear by now that a minimum wage system would not be tolerated by the fleet garage owners in New York City. The "booking" or commission system continues to prevail in the industry today, and while fleet drivers try to get around it by driving passengers without turning the meter on, the fleet garage owners basically have a guaranteed income every time a passenger enters the taxi.

In addition, the defeat of the T.W.U. brought out an inherent difficulty in organizing labor in as decentralized a structure as the taxi industry. When one of the most powerful New York City garages, Parmalee, decided to combat the T.W.U. with a company union, city cab drivers had a difficult time combatting this.

The second major unionization effort occurred in the late nineteen forties when the United Mineworkers, under the direction of John L. Lewis, attempted to unionize the fleet industry in New York City. This was a much briefer and less intensive drive than the one of the Transport Workers' Union in the late nineteen thirties.

When Lewis began his unionization efforts, there were already close to five thousand owner drivers in New York City. This was close to half of the medallion cab industry in the city at this time. Traditionally, owner drivers in the New York City taxi industry have been an enemy of fleet drivers, since their major thrust has always been to keep meter rates as high as possible, since they don't work on a commission system. In addition to U.M.W.'s failure to unionize the owner drivers, the large fleet owners had by this time sufficiently organized to fight back the unionization efforts of the fleet drivers.

It appeared that by the nineteen fifties, the combination of the fleet garage owners' organization and ruthless tactics, the burgeoning class of owner drivers and the lack

of any centralized organization among fleet drivers, kept taxi drivers among the lowest paid forms of labor in New York City.

The plight of the New York City taxi driver had gotten so bad that by 1958, The New York Times wrote the following:

Seventy percent of the taxi companies pay their drivers 44 cents on each dollar; 30 percent of the taxi companies pay their drivers 45 cents on each dollar registered on the meter. This places the New York City taxi driver among the lowest paid workers in our city. Bus drivers in New York City receive \$2.28 an hour. Truck drivers \$2.50 an hour.<sup>24</sup>

By the early nineteen sixties, two things became fairly well known about the taxi industry, i.e., the poor working conditions and the low salaries of fleet drivers.

In 1963, The New York Times reported that the average New York City fleet driver earned between \$85 and \$115 per week, working anywhere from ten to twelve hours per day. Braverman (1974) states that service occupations, such as taxi driving, have lower salary scales than any occupation except for farmworkers.

The other problem that has continually plagued fleet drivers has been the working conditions in the industry. By the early nineteen sixties, the working conditions in the New York City fleet industry had gotten so bad that the following article appeared:

The police have opened an inquiry to learn whether fleet taxi drivers have to kick back to dispatchers for jobs and other services.

They are trying to ascertain also if the men have to shape-up - that is, compete each day for jobs and whether there is a surplus of cabs or men to drive them...<sup>25</sup>

The plight of the New York City cab drivers became more and more of an issue of public concern. This culminated in the eventual formation of the Taxi Driver Alliance in 1964. This organization was led by Harry Van Arsdale, an experienced labor leader and friend of Mayor Wagner. This latter relationship was probably the most significant factor in preventing the fleet owners, who were now collectively represented by the Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade, from preventing even a weak union from developing. It also represents the first time that the New York City government intervened on behalf of the fleet drivers.

By 1965, the Taxi Driver Alliance was incorporated as Local 3036 of the A.F. of L.-C.I.O. It now represents some twenty thousand fleet drivers, owner drivers and "inside men," i.e., mechanics and maintenance personnel, while the Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade represents some fifty five fleet with about thirty eight hundred cabs.

Harry Van Arsdale's leadership role, which has been tenuous from the very start, has always been in the midst of the most basic crisis in the union, i.e., between the owner drivers and the fleet drivers.

The following New York Times description reflects this very basic problem:

Mr. Van Arsdale, who organized the Taxi Driver

Alliance six years ago, after others such as John L. Lewis, Mike Quill and Jimmy Hoffa had failed, now faces what some members say is a tough fight to keep his job, as a result of the dissension...

The sharpest division is between the 5,000 members who own their own cabs-they are happy with the new pact because they keep all of the fare increase-and those who work for the fleet operators.

Within the latter group there are other divisions: between older and younger men, and between full-time drivers and thousands of part-timers (including policemen and other civil servants.) All have a vote in the union...<sup>26</sup>

Thus, by the mid-nineteen sixties, a taxi union emerges which is split along the class lines of fleet drivers and owner drivers, in addition to the familiar divisions that have plagued fleet drivers, i.e., race, religion, age and sex.

A CASE STUDY: THE NEW YORK CITY TAXI INDUSTRY:  
1975-1977

This section is intended to present a descriptive analysis of the New York City taxi industry during the time period 1975 through 1977.

As previously mentioned, most of the data were obtained by working as a fleet driver for two major New York City cab garages, both of which had over one hundred taxicabs. The other data was obtained by a combination of observation and open ended interviewing.

It is my intention to show how present day cabbie life is a function of the history of labor in the taxi industry that was briefly described in the preceding chapter. In particular, I am interested in showing how the economic structure and history of exploitation in the industry have shaped the public's image of the contemporary taxi driver. Specifically, the common image of the fleet driver as an unscrupulous thief needs to be shown to be a function of the historical development of the class system.

The majority of the major taxi garages in New York City are located in what is commonly known as the "Hell's Kitchen" area of Manhattan, an area running from the low forties to the high fifties, west of Broadway. In the

past five years five of the major fleet garages in this area have sold out of the fleet garage business, including the two garages for whom I drove.

The Cornell Cab Company, one of my two, was fairly representative of the typical major cab garages of the nineteen seventies. This particular company owned over one hundred medallions (taxicabs), making it one of the larger fleets in the city. It is similar to most other New York City cab companies.

Cornell took up almost a square block of land. It had three major areas; a maintenance shop on top of which was located the owners' offices, a rather large parking area for the cabs and another small building containing the dispatcher's office and lockers where the "steady" drivers (mostly older Jewish and Italian veteran drivers) kept their personal belongings. This room was also used by the drivers as a place to go to when they took breaks, even though very few of the drivers took their breaks at the company. Most of them took their breaks at the more familiar cab driver hangouts.

The most obvious thing that an observer notices when he enters a cab company is the diversity among the drivers in terms of age, ethnicity and race. In addition, little conversation occurs among the drivers. The conversations that do go on are between the older veteran cab drivers and the dispatcher, the representative of management who is

responsible for giving out cars to the drivers.

During an interview a young, college educated cab driver showed me the following description of the "shape up" that he wrote about the cab garage that he worked for:

He passed unnoticed among them...Unnoticed among the Puerto Ricans idly smoking cigarettes, among the lumpy veterans, chewing their cigar stubs and cursing the weather. Unnoticed among the actors striking poses, flipping through "Backstage," among the skinny dancers, nervously fidgeting and licking their chops...<sup>27</sup>

It is during this time of day that drivers wait to be dispatched for the day. In New York City cab garages, fleet drivers either get a steady car, i.e., they drive the same car everyday, or they have to wait around in the garage to be dispatched. The significance of this time of day is that drivers' wages are based on their being dispatched for the day, therefore creating a tremendously competitive and hostile mood during these shapeup periods.

The first thing that a cab driver does when he enters the garage is to go to the dispatcher. If the driver has a steady car, he can get out of the garage in fifteen or twenty minutes. Otherwise, drivers report to the dispatcher and wait for their names to be called. With rare exceptions, almost every cab garage has more drivers than it can dispatch in a day.

When an available car is ready to be dispatched, the dispatcher calls out the last name of the cab driver, and the driver comes forward to pick up his car keys and

trip ticket. The trip ticket is used to record the trips that the driver makes in the course of his day and also to record his "bookings," the amount of money that he puts on the meter.

It is virtually mandatory to tip the garage's dispatcher on a daily basis to insure a good running car, which has a tremendous effect on how much the driver is able to book for the day (night).

The first fare that the driver picks up is known as his "ice breaker." Since superstition plays a big role in the world of cab driving, the ice breaker is considered a symbol of luck among the older drivers. Many of the drivers consider it an omen of their potential bookings for the day. The issue of superstition among cab drivers is certainly a serious one, and probably is related to the lack of control that the cab driver has over his work, i.e., knowing where he will be going and how much money he will earn.

For the day time cab driver, the choice of where to get fares is rather simple. Most day time drivers go out on the streets just as people are going to work. The safest bets for such morning action are places such as the Port Authority, Penn Station and Grand Central Station. These trips are usually good ice breakers, since they often consist of groups of commuters from whom the driver is likely to get a decent tip, i.e., from fifteen to twenty percent of the meter.

Work slows up between the hours of ten and twelve, while the cab driver is waiting for his lunch trade to begin. As might be expected, the day time cab driver adapts his driving to the hours in the business day. Many drivers know that it is a good idea to take their lunch breaks at about 11:30 A.M., so that they will be back on the road for the lunch trade. The lunch trade lasts for about two hours (from twelve to two P.M.) and forms the second part of the day shift driver's work day.

At the end of the lunch trade the driver's trade declines once again until the third part of the work day, the "going home" shift.

As a former cab driver, I found this shift to be the most difficult one, since the people who take taxis home at the end of their work day are anxious to get home and try to pressure the taxi driver into getting them to their destinations very quickly. In addition, these people often take cabs because they are late for their commuting trains or busses and may try to pressure the driver into making trips to Grand Central Station or Penn Station in record time.

One incident that occurred to a day shift driver illustrates this type of event:

A middle aged working women hailed me at Fifth Avenue in the mid-fifties, the heart of the midtown working district. She was so panicky about making her train out of Grand Central on time that she told me the exact time that it was leaving, which would have been barely possible to make even

if the traffic was good. It never is on Fifth Avenue at around 4:00 P.M. I picked up on her panic and took a right on Fifth Avenue which was the wrong direction. I really felt nuts that I would never make Grand Central on time. She started yelling when she saw me take the right and I felt that I would settle for the fare and would love to get her out of the car. I did get the fare, but was also "stiffed"...28

This kind of incident is not an infrequent occurrence during the late afternoon. The end of the work day is often the hardest time for the cab driver. It is not infrequent to pick up a panicky customer and wonder whether you will be able to help them meet their last minute time deadline.

Most of the day time driver's business is in the midtown area of the city (from about twenty third to fifty ninth street). I would estimate that about three quarters of the trips that a day time driver does are within this area of Manhattan, although there are certain drivers (ten percent or less) who cruise in Brooklyn or Queens.

The day shift ususally ends by 4:30 P.M., and drivers are supposed to bring their cabs back to the garage by then. Since drivers get paid on a commission system, it is not infrequent for a driver to sneak in an extra half hour or so if he did not have a very good booking that day. The nature of the remuneration system is such that cab drivers spend lots of time trying to invent ways of making extra money so that they can subsist. Sneaking in extra time is a rather obvious way of doing

this.

The driver's relationship with his dispatcher is an important factor in being able to sneak in extra time. Since the garage's dispatcher is responsible for sending the cars out on the street, he (the dispatcher) will sometimes let a driver whom he likes keep a car out late. The drivers who are allowed to keep cars out are usually the older veteran drivers, who have consistently tipped the dispatcher during the time that they have worked for the garage. The dispatchers also determine how many days per week and which days of the week that drivers are allowed to work. It is rare to have Sundays off in the cab industry, and at Cornell, a rather representative garage, one driver was fired because he missed two or three Sunday workshifts.

The older white drivers, who almost always tip the dispatcher, are the only drivers in most garages who have Sundays off. While cab garages vary as to how severe they are about making drivers do a Sunday workshift, all part time drivers have to work on Sundays in almost every cab garage in New York City. It is crucial to the profits of the fleet owners to keep their cabs on the road when and where possible.

The relationship between the dispatcher and driver is based on exploitation, in which having a good relationship with the dispatcher assures the driver of a steady car and even some say in who drives the car during the other shifts.

A daytime driver always likes to know who his night man is, so that he is assured of a good running car.

All taxicabs are driven for at least two shifts per day. The first shift ends at 4:30 P.M., and the night drivers are dispatched somewhere between four thirty and five thirty in the afternoon. Night men have the advantage of not having to drive in as much traffic and not having to have the cars in at a specific time. Night drivers usually stay out until they earn a certain booking, while a day driver is required to bring his cab in at a certain time.

Night men are expected to book more than day men. They average about ten to fifteen dollars more per work shift than the day drivers. While I was driving in the mid-seventies, day drivers were expected to book at least sixty to seventy dollars per shift. Since the meter rates have increased about twenty percent from that time, booking figures for the past year should reflect these new rates.

In addition, the Cornell Cab Company and many other garages in the city have a third work shift, known in the industry as the "graveyard" shift. These drivers usually begin between one and two A.M. and keep their cabs out until they are needed for the morning shift at around seven A.M. This is by far the most difficult driving shift, since there are very few traditional cab riders on the streets during these hours. One of the best sources of business

during this time is trips from the bus terminals and train stations to the airports.

Drivers perceive passengers differently during the different work shifts. The day shift is probably the easiest in terms of the predictability of the types of passengers the driver will be picking up. Most of the work during this shift is done in the midtown area of Manhattan, and most of the fares (passengers) are businessmen. The night shift is a lot less predictable. Passengers during this work shift are usually going out to dinner or to the theater, rather than going to business. The predictability of these passengers is a lot less than during the day shift.

In his study of taxi driving in St. Louis, James Henslin (1967) developed a concept called "trackability," based on Goffman's concept of "front." Trackability refers to how cab drivers perceive their potential fares.<sup>29</sup> The significance of this concept is the following. During the course of a work day, drivers encounter many different types of passengers who vary according to such factors as age, sex, race, neighborhood and time of day. Drivers "track" or evaluate potential passengers in terms of these factors to estimate tipping potential and whether or not they would be safe passengers.

The concept of trackability can be applied to analyzing the differences between the day shift and the night shift. As I have previously mentioned, Henslin uses time of day as

a variable in tracking passengers. This variable is the crucial difference between the two work shifts, since the predictability of passengers is much greater during the day shift. However, Henslin fails to mention the economic basis of this concept of trackability for cab drivers. Night cab drivers, while subject to greater risks in terms of the trackability of their passengers, are able to book a lot more money than the day drivers. Thus risks are a source of capital among fleet drivers.

The owners of the fleet garages know that this is true, and make it much more difficult to work on the evening shift in most garages. Fleet garage owners like to have their cabs on the road twenty four hours a day, and are particularly strict about keeping their night drivers out as late as possible. While some garages have a third work shift between two A.M. and eight A.M., some garages merely make their night drivers stay out until three or four in the morning. As previously mentioned, the night shift is the more preferable of the two shifts, and most cab drivers know that bookings are at least fifteen to twenty dollars more on this shift. Most drivers are willing to sacrifice the greater unpredictability (trackability) during this work shift for the increased bookings.

The first part of the night shift begins with the end of the business day, at around four thirty P.M. It is at this time of the day that most people are leaving

work, and they often need a taxicab to get them to their destination. The two hour period between four thirty and six thirty P.M. is a time at which this traffic is very intense. The next phase of the night shift is the dinner and theater crowd which last from approximately seven to nine P.M., and is a time when cab drivers get a good deal of business and a lot of money in tips.

Similar to the day shift driver, the night shift driver experiences a number of lulls in his shift. For the night shift driver the hour between nine and ten P.M. is a time when his business decreases. This is usually the time when drivers take breaks for dinner. It is also around this time of the evening that cab drivers tend to "cruise," i.e., seek out fares, in the theater district and what is known as "Restaurant Row," the area between Eighth and Ninth Avenues on Forty Sixth Street. In the past five years fleet garage owners have consistently put more pressure on drivers to cruise as little as possible, since the cost of fuel is a very significant factor in calculating fleet owners' profits.

One of the greatest problems of working at this time of the evening is that cab drivers have very little control over where they can cruise. While most cab drivers would like to stick to the theater and restaurant crowd, there is a great probability that they will end up somewhere around Times Square, one of the most dangerous cruising

areas in New York City.

While sociologists, such as Fred Davis (1959), describe the relationship between the cab driver and his fare as a rather spontaneous interaction, the reality of the situation is that cab drivers dislike the Times Square area and know that there is an extremely high probability of being robbed in this area.

This fear of being robbed is characteristic of being a fleet driver in New York City. Davis (1959) wrote the following vivid description of cab driving in a big city (Chicago), in which he captures the mood of not being in control over what is going to happen next:

Unable, either directly through choice or indirectly through location to select clients, the cabdriver is deprived of even minimal controls. His trade therefore exposes him to a variety of hazards and exigencies which few others, excepting policemen, encounter as frequently; for example, stick-ups, belligerent drunks, women in labor, psychopaths, counterfeiter's, and fare-jumpers. Unlike the policeman's, however, his control over them is more fragile.<sup>30</sup>

In my experiences as a New York City fleet driver, virtually every cab driver that I interviewed had, at one time or another, been robbed. It is very difficult for a driver to avoid this, since there is little that a driver can do if he is stuck at a red light. Fleet garages require that drivers pay for any money that they lose in being robbed.

The graveyard shift starts out with people who are going out to late movies or even late dinners (the city

has many all night diners). The clientele quickly changes as the night goes on as it tends to become more and more made up of business people who are either closing up their late night businesses, such as restaurants, or are going to work on a particularly early shift, such as the people who work for newspapers. In my experiences as a fleet driver, the only way in which the fleet driver could make a good booking was to do long trips out of town. Any trips outside of New York City enable the driver to double the meter, i.e., charge the passenger twice the rate that appears on the meter. If a driver is having a good night, it is very likely that he wouldn't report the trip out of town, and pocket half of the fare. This is the only instance that I can think of in which fleet owners can not check on the driver. In addition, it is slightly easier to do "arm jobs," i.e., driving passengers off the meter, during this shift. This is based on two factors.

Firstly, there are fewer hack inspectors around at these times, and the chances of being caught with your "flag up," i.e., without your meter on, are decreased. The job of these inspectors is to make sure that fleet drivers don't violate such things as keeping the meter running while they have passengers, keeping accurate trip tickets and keeping their cabs clean. There tends to be a higher concentration of hack inspectors during

the business hours of the day, particularly in the midtown area and the major airports.

Secondly, the graveyard shift tends to have the highest proportion of trips out of Manhattan. Therefore, there is less likelihood that these drivers will be caught doing an arm job by a hack inspector.

#### The Cab Driver and His Tips

The amount of money that a cab driver earns in tips in a considerable proportion of his income, approximately one third. Therefore, a good deal of drivers' behavior patterns are focused on ways to extract maximum tip money from their passengers.

In the relationship between the driver and his fare, tipping is a very important part of the exchange network that exists. The tip is one part of this exchange network that does not have to be part of the larger exchange system which the driver is involved in with the fleet owner.

Tipping is most predictable during the day shift. Most of the passengers are businessmen who often frequent cabs and are quite familiar with tipping procedures. Most of these people know that you are expected to tip a quarter on the first dollar and about twenty percent after that. As Henslin (1967) point out in his article on trackability, drivers find these people very predictable, and therefore do not have to work as hard to get tips from them.

Tipping predictability is decreased during the night and graveyard shifts, particularly during the latter. Generally, tips tend to increase during the night shift, yet are totally unpredictable during the graveyard shift, in which there are a large proportion of long jobs, i.e., trips out of Manhattan. These fares are the most risky in terms of what to expect for a tip.

As noted earlier, tipping varies according to many of the variables that Henslin mentions in describing a passenger's "front." Cab drivers take into consideration such things as dress, sex, age, race, location and time of day in determining whether or not to pick up a passenger.<sup>31</sup> These are all important factors in determining a passenger's tipping ability.

However, what Henslin fails to mention is the economic significance of this behavioral phenomenon, i.e., why cab drivers are so preoccupied with this phenomenon. It is at this point that behavior can better be explained as a function of the system of remuneration in the taxi industry, that makes tipping such an important part of the cab drivers' salary. Thus, the question of why so much of a cab driver's behavior is focused around extracting tips needs to be answered in terms of the remuneration system of the taxi industry.

Since tipping is such an integral part of cab drivers' salaries, fleet drivers get infuriated when they are not tipped in accordance with what they expect from the

fare. In this particular system of remuneration, the cab driver's tip is very important to his livelihood, and not giving a tip is a major means of exploiting drivers. Passengers quickly realize that drivers are very dependent on tipping and often use this as a means of having power over the driver. A cab driver once explained the following incident to me in which he came close to being "stiffed," i.e., not getting a tip, from his fare:

I took this woman from the Bronx to the Upper East Side and ran up about four dollars on the meter. She left me a twenty cent tip for the trip. This got me so pissed that I threw the money back at her and told her to keep it...<sup>31</sup>

Most cab drivers agree that businessmen and couples are the best tippers. The driver is almost always assured of at least a standard, predictable tip from a businessman. Couples tend to be even better tippers, particularly on short trips during which they almost automatically give the driver fifty cents for each person in the cab regardless of the fare.

Cab drivers try to arrange for group riding when possible. While this practice is illegal, except during periods of emergency (for example, the recent subway and bus strike of 1980), a fleet driver can make a lot of extra money in addition to the meter if he carries three or four different people to a similar area, and they each pay him close to the meter rate.

A typical example of how this works occurred during World War Two, when there was a shortage of taxis on the

streets. The following position was taken by the regulatory agency, the Hack Bureau of New York City:

An official of the Hack Bureau said:  
"Where it can be controlled, we permit doubling up on the part of the passengers themselves. If the passengers want to group themselves, that is all right, but we will not permit the driver to do the grouping. If you permit indiscriminate group riding, you would have a holiday for larceny."<sup>32</sup>

Historically, the attitude of cab drivers has always been against the Hack Bureau, and many fleet drivers seek out ways of setting up group riding situations in spite of the regulations against it. This is another one of the few ways that drivers can make money for themselves without reporting it to the fleet owners.

Davis (1959) describes the following interaction between two cab drivers in which the issue of trying to get tip money from a passenger is being discussed:

Once when I complained to a veteran about having been "stiffed" by a young couple, newly arrived in Chicago, to whom I extended such extra service as carrying luggage and opening doors, I was told: "Wise up kid! When you pick up one of these yokels at the Dearborn Station carrying a lot of cheap straw luggage on him, you can bet ninety-nine times out of a hundred that he isn't going to tip you. Not that he is a mean guy or anything, but where he comes from they never heard of tipping. What I do with a yokel like that is to take him to where he is going, show him that it costs fifteen cents extra for each piece of luggage. Now he doesn't know that there is no charge for hand luggage, but that way I'm sure of getting tips out of him."<sup>33</sup>

In the above example Davis presents a fairly typical interactional pattern between cab drivers, but does not explain the structural components of such an

interaction, e.g., why do cab drivers scheme up ways of trying to get extra money from their fares.

In addition, while the media is very vocal about describing how cab drivers steal money from incoming passengers at the foreign arrivals building at Kennedy Airport, little, if anything, is ever said about how drivers are under the continual surveillance of hack inspectors.

Cab users and most contemporary critics of the taxi industry do not analyze this exchange relationship, but rather tend to focus on the exchange between the driver and his fare. This latter exchange network is merely a reflection of the many exploitative exchange networks that the driver brings with him into his interactional patterns with his passengers.

For the aforementioned reasons it is very common for fleet drivers to try to exploit their passengers. Davis (1959) talks about two such techniques, the "fictitious charges" strategy and the "making change" strategy.<sup>34</sup> The first technique occurs when the driver makes up a false story about how much it costs for special services, as illustrated in the anecdote above. The latter technique occurs when a driver fumbles around in his pockets for the right amount of change, in an effort to coax the passenger into giving him a tip, or when the driver gives the passenger back his change in certain denominations so as to invite a certain size tip.

An additional way that cab drivers try to get extra tip money from their passengers is to disconnect the back seat light in their cabs, so that the passenger(s) can't count their change. It is very infrequent to find a fleet cab in New York City that does not have its back seat light disconnected.

## THE PROCEDURES INVOLVED IN BECOMING A CAB DRIVER

An account of how one gets a New York City cab driver's license can be brief. Although many cab garages in New York City will only accept drivers above the age of twenty-five, the law states that one only has to be above the age of nineteen to be able to drive a taxi in the city. Lowering the hack license age in 1966 to nineteen brought about a large number of young transient drivers who stayed in the industry for short periods of time. This basically weakened the position of the career driver, since these transient young drivers have been an undermining factor in labor negotiations.

Any person above the age of nineteen who has a regular driver's license need only to obtain a Class IV Chauffeur's License to get a fleet garage to sponsor him for a hack license. (A Class IV Chauffeur's License can easily be obtained with a regular driver's license.) Hack licenses are issued by the Taxi and Limousine Commission in Long Island City. A sponsored driver is then bound to drive for the same garage for at least twenty work days after he receives his hack license. The name of your sponsor is on the hack license, and therefore, this system is easily enforced.

The tests involved in obtaining a hack license are administered at the commission headquarters in Long Island City. This begins with a lecture by an older man, probably an ex-driver himself. This lasts for about three hours, and

is essentially an outline of the rules that a cab driver must follow. The other parts of the test consist of a written and a physical examination.

The written test is extremely simple, and consists of ten identification questions including locating such places in New York City as the Americana Hotel, Shea Stadium, Yankee Stadium, The New York Hilton, The Plaza Hotel, Penn Station, Grand Central Station and The Port Authority. Veteran drivers complain about the extreme leniency in allowing people to get hack licenses.

The physical exam is very similar to the one that Henslin (1967) describes in his study of cab drivers in St. Louis. However, while Henslin describes his visit to a private doctor's office, the New York City driver's physical consists of a much cruder group examination, reminiscent of an army physical. This whole process of obtaining a hack license takes approximately five days from start to finish.

#### Typology of New York City Taxi Drivers

The following categorical scheme is an attempt to delineate the various types of cab drivers in New York City. The typology, based on a combination of age and ethnicity, is important in explaining the interpersonal distances among cab drivers, which are often along ethnic lines.

### Older Jewish and Italian Drivers

This category consists mostly of Jewish and Italian men in their early fifties and older. These people have worked in the industry for long periods of time, usually from ten to thirty years or more, often with the same garage.<sup>35</sup>

In the words of Studs Terkel, these drivers fit the stereotypes description of "...the balding, pot-bellied, cigar chomping, middle aged man, who'd drive like a bat out of hell and yell at all of the other drivers that they had their hands up their asses..."<sup>36</sup>

While these drivers tend to congregate with each other, their interactions usually consist of complaints about the job. The list of things that these drivers complain about are numerous and include such things as police harassment, the new breed of "colored drivers" and the tough working conditions involved in "pushing a hack." Since many of these drivers have managed to save up some money, they have become entrepreneurs and have bought into what are known as "mini-fleets."<sup>37</sup>

### Young Black Drivers

This group consists of young black men in their early twenties to mid-thirties. They are a very transient group of drivers, and very few of them stay at the same company for more than a year or two.

These young black drivers are frequently referred to by the fleet owners and the management as the "colored guys."

While many of these drivers are good, steady bookers, the racial tension that exists between them and the dispatchers is extremely high.

### Young Hispanics

These drivers are mostly young Puerto Rican men in their twenties and thirties. They tend to keep to themselves alot, and rarely verbally interact with the other drivers in the garage. They have a reputation for being exceptionally fast drivers and often book more than any of the other drivers in the garage.

One of the major differences between the young Puerto Rican drivers and the young black drivers is that the former tend to stay longer at the same cab garage.

The chief dispatcher at the Cornell Cab Company once informed me that the young Hispanic drivers tend to stay as long as a year and a half to two years at the same garage. (This is longer than any of the other drivers except for the veteran Jews and Italians.) He explained it in the following way, "Colored drivers rarely last long, but the Puerto Ricans do because they have families."

While both blacks and Hispanics would have to feel the racism in cab garages, the latter category of drivers tend to be more overtly compliant to the authority figures in the garage, and are in fact probably the best drivers in New York City cab garages.

### Young White Drivers

These young men and women range in age from their early twenties to mid-thirties. Although some of them have recently lost a job, most of them are aspiring to other professions, such as acting, art and music.

In my observations at cab garages it was very clear that these young white drivers rarely talk with fellow drivers or with their dispatchers and are acutely aware of the exploitative nature of the industry. They usually respond to all of this by trying to be as oblivious as possible to the surroundings.

While these young white drivers are probably the best educated of drivers (many of them are at least college graduates), they tend to be contemptuous of the older Jewish and Italian drivers, ignoring them in the garages.

This group of drivers, the young white drivers, was particularly prominent in the spring of 1975, when the drivers were negotiating a new contract. They publish their own newspaper, The Hot Seat, which is always at bitter odds with the regular cab union, which is notorious for its pro-fleet owner stance.

### Others

There are many drivers who do not fit into any of the aforementioned categories. I would approximate this group to make up about twenty percent of the total population of fleet drivers. These people include many older blacks and

Hispanics, Orientals and Greeks. In my interviews with these people, I found that many of them have been in businesses that have either failed or that they sold.

Since many of them have previously been involved in businesses, a lot of these drivers have invested in mini-fleets and bought their own medallions.

RACISM IN THE TAXI INDUSTRY

In the course of interviewing fleet drivers in New York City, it became clear that peer relationships among fleet drivers were very weak. Most of my conversations with drivers focused on complaints about the industry and talk about their families. It became clear that kinship ties were much more significant for drivers than occupational peer ties.

The few peer group ties in cab garages are almost always limited to drivers of the same racial and religious groups. In my observations at the Cornell Cab Company, drivers congregated along ethnic lines, i.e., racial and religious lines, and the black drivers were referred to by the dispatchers and veteran drivers as the "colored guys."

What is the explanation for this type of racism? One of the most obvious factors that I observed in the taxi industry is that it is a changing population of workers. While it used to be predominantly Jewish, Italian and Irish, it now has a large proportion of black and Hispanic drivers. Presently, fifty to sixty percent of the labor force is either black or Hispanic, while the fleet garage owners and management, i.e., dispatchers, are white.

The mood that I observed in most cab garages is that

the white power structure of the industry, i.e., the owners and dispatchers, has had to accommodate to a rapidly expanding black and Hispanic labor pool. Since they have not been willing to do this, the racial tension in most cab garages is high.

Interpersonally, cab drivers use race and religion as factors to prevent the development of any kind of class solidarity. Structurally, the industry is set up in such a way that drivers are constantly competing against each other for fares. Race and religion are convenient factors to use in an industry where the workers are already atomized by its structure.

Cab drivers have very few peer relationships with their fellow drivers (there are a few racially segregated cliques in most garages) and employ their ethnic differences to maintain rather distant interpersonal relationships with each other.

The few primary relationships that cab drivers have with each other are usually limited to drivers of the same ethnic group, in particular groups of older Jewish and some of the younger black drivers.

#### The Common Bonds That Cab Drivers Share

While fleet drivers segregate themselves along the lines of ethnicity, age and education, there are common factors that they all share. During my observations and interviews in the New York City fleet industry, it became

apparent that most of the fleet drivers with whom I talked were dissatisfied with what they were doing. In addition, there was a common sentiment of feeling powerless about doing anything about their plight. Specifically, most drivers are very aware of the increasing alliance of the fleet owners and the existing union structure.

In their study of lower class blue collar workers, Cohen and Hodges (1963) use the term "insecurity" to refer to the powerless, victim-like trait that ran through the personalities of the workers that they studied. In addition to this, the authors stressed the importance of the local kinship group as a means of emotional support in an otherwise hostile environment. The description that Cohen and Hodges present is applicable to New York City fleet drivers. However, while Cohen and Hodges present a personality pattern that has a great deal of despair, they never seek out the historical and economic basis of this patterns. It is here that I think the history of the taxi industry, in particular, the history of labor exploitation, is applicable as a means of explanation.

This section focuses on the dissatisfaction that most cab drivers express about their occupation and the tension-releasing mechanisms that they employ to release their frustrations.

Cab drivers employ many means to release tension in the course of their work day. While I have tried to use a

combination of historical and economic analysis to explain the basis of this behavior, I have chosen Erving Goffman's concepts of "primary" and "secondary" adjustments to analyze the specific adaptive mechanisms that cab drivers use to escape from this occupational role.<sup>38</sup>

While Goffman used these terms to refer to behavior in a mental hospital,<sup>39</sup> I have tried to use these same concepts in analyzing the reactions of fleet drivers to a highly exploitative labor situation.

Goffman defines a primary adjustment as the situation in which:

...an individual cooperatively contributes required activity to an organization and under required conditions--in our society with the support of institutionalized standards of welfare, with the drive supplied through promptings of designed penalties--he is transformed into a co-operator; he becomes the "normal," "programmed," or built-in member...He is officially asked to be no more and no less than he is prepared to be, and is obliged to dwell in a world that is in fact congenial to him.<sup>40</sup>

The terms "normal" and "programmed" are very important in studying the adjustments of cab drivers to their occupation. As far as the behaviors of the different types of drivers are concerned, the older Jewish and Italian veteran drivers would more likely conform to this pattern of behavior. While these drivers more readily accept the exploitative nature of the industry, they differ from Goffman's definition in that they don't particularly view the world of cab driving as a "congenial place."

These veteran drivers who manifest this "normal"

adjustment with their work rarely, if ever, express any satisfaction about cab driving. Most of them spend their time complaining about the terrible working conditions and low wages in the industry. Their only hopes appear to be for their children.

The situation of the veteran fleet drivers in New York City presents the following dilemma. On the one hand, they are punctual, rarely, if ever, take extra days off, and almost always have good bookings. However, in the course of interviewing fleet drivers, they almost always mention the drudgery involved in "pushing a hack (cab)."

In addition to the history of labor exploitation in the industry, the nature of cab driving is such that there is little time in the course of the work day for fellow workers to share their dissatisfactions with one another. Cab drivers always go out alone and rarely if ever congregate with each other during the course of the work day. Time to hang out with fellow drivers costs the cabbie money in terms of lost fares and is therefore very precious.

In the course of my interviews I found that most cab drivers substitute talking about their families for occupational peer relationships. As previously mentioned, most of the drivers that I interviewed emphasized the despairing nature of "pushing a hack." They expressed hope that their children would be upwardly mobile, i.e., have a more lucrative job than cab driving. This finding is consistent with the previously mentioned study of Cohen

and Hodges.

The above authors state, "The task of the LL (lower class blue collar worker) is to evolve a way of life that will reduce his insecurity and enhance his power."<sup>41</sup> They go on to further state that the kinship group is the primary means that these workers use to obtain some form of emotional support.<sup>42</sup> These findings are compatible with my interviews and observations of fleet drivers, particularly the veteran Jewish and Italian drivers.

#### Role Distance and the Cab Driver

Adaptive mechanisms, i.e., ways in which a cab driver involves himself in activities and conversations that are external to his work performance, are a necessary part of the cab driver's work day.

These role adjustments play a particularly crucial part in the taxi industry, since the manifest work performance is so tension ridden, i.e., the driver's survival is based on how many passengers he can pick up in any given day. Most of this work day is concentrated within a small geographical area, the midtown Manhattan vicinity, and he does about eighty percent of his work in this area.

This section attempts to delineate some of the common adaptive mechanisms of cab drivers: Frequenting the Belaire Cafeteria, a well-known hang-out for veteran cab drivers; Talking sports, a good deal of cab drivers' conversations; "Stoned Drivers," the frequent use of marijuana while driving;

and "Arm Jobs," riding passengers without turning on the meter.

All of these adaptive mechanisms play a tension-management function for the driver, since he is in the constant situation of having to perform in front of an audience.<sup>43</sup> Most cab drivers pick up between twenty-five and thirty passengers in the course of a work day, and desperately need to find "outs," i.e., ways in which to escape from their occupational role.

Goffman uses the term "backstage"<sup>44</sup> to refer to areas in which social actors are able to escape from their audiences. Backstage areas are a very important part of the cab driver's existence. These backstage activities are amenable to an analysis that employs Erving Goffman's dramaturgical concepts of "primary" and "secondary" adjustment.

Primary adjustments have previously been defined as keeping in line with the established rules of the organization, while secondary adjustments are defined by Goffman in the following way:

...any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organization employs unauthorized means or obtains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization's assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be. Secondary adjustments represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and self that were taken for granted for him by the organization.<sup>45</sup>

The fleet owners' expectations in the taxi industry are such that little, if any, attention is given to the

manner in which a driver performs his role. Therefore, stoned drivers who book a hundred dollars a night are considered more valuable than straight drivers who book seventy-five dollars.

A significant factor in the taxi industry is that almost any secondary adjustment short of abandoning or stealing a taxicab is what Goffman calls a contained secondary adjustment, i.e., one that does not alter the structure of the industry. Since these behaviors do not interfere with the owners' profits, the management will tolerate them as long as the driver books a sufficient amount of money.

#### The Belaire Cafeteria

The Belaire Cafeteria plays a significant role in the lives of many veteran cab drivers. Located on Twenty-Eighth Street and Park Avenue South, it is the most popular eating and hangout place for New York City cab drivers, and can easily be spotted by its collection of yellow taxis on Park Avenue South.

Cab drivers make up about one-third of the total trade of the Belaire, and they almost always occupy the rear section of the cafeteria. This section is what might be considered the "home territory" of the cafeteria,<sup>46</sup> i.e., a place that veteran drivers claim for themselves.

Conversations usually take place in groups of five or six drivers at the rear tables of the cafeteria. An additional place where drivers converse is the Belaire's men's

room, which is frequently used by cab drivers.<sup>47</sup> Conversations among the drivers consist of such topics as police harrassment, the poor working conditions in the industry, sports talk and talk about their families. Also, a great deal of time is spent talking about passengers.

While many cab drivers hate the idea of going to the Belaire Cafeteria, it is my belief that the cafeteria serves a useful tension-management function for the drivers who frequent it. Since a cab driver spends most of his time under the pressure of being in the presence of strangers, the Belaire Cafeteria serves the function of providing some minimal form of relaxation in the course of an otherwise tension-filled day. Furthermore, it is considered to be one of the most socially acceptable places for the veteran cab driver to go.

#### Sports Talk

This particular adaptive mechanism is different from frequenting the Belaire Cafeteria, because it is a verbal interactional pattern rather than a physical region.

Sports talk is an important source of tension management for the cab driver, enabling him to curse, groan or shout, all of which are significant tension releasing devices.

In addition, sports talk plays the crucial role of being able to overcome the interpersonal distances that exist among fellow cab drivers, i.e., one of the few ways

that one can strike up a conversation in a cab garage is by talking about sports. It is a rather common occurrence to hear the names of different racetracks thrown around while drivers are waiting to be dispatched.

Why is there such a great emphasis on "playing the horses" among a group of workers who are barely paid subsistence wages? While playing the horses is an accepted part of the conversations in cab garages, it also provides the worker with an opportunity to make choices in an otherwise constricted environment. In his study of race trace fans, Scott (1968) uses the term "rationality," i.e., the use of circumscribed choices, to refer to this process of deliberation involved in playing the horses. This is one opportunity for fleet drivers to exercise their own choice in a workplace where there is little, if any, opportunity for this.

The other sporting events that cab drivers talk about a great deal are boxing matches and baseball, particularly the New York Mets.

The older drivers spend a great deal of time talking about boxing matches, and seem to get a great deal of pleasure in identifying with the "tough guy" in boxing. This is a socially programmed interaction that plays a significant function in the world of the taxi industry. It appears that this kind of activity is an important tension releasing mechanism for fleet drivers.

It is interesting to note that cab drivers spend a considerable amount of time in the cab garage participating in these decision making types of activities. Activities such as card playing among the older veteran drivers and chess playing among the younger drivers are other examples of such types of behavior, all of which seemed to be determined by the tension-ridden world of cab driving.

These activities are all highly approved by the owners and management of the garages and are often a source of driver-dispatcher interaction because they don't interfere with the profit making function of cab garages. Furthermore, sports serve the function of being one of the few forms of interaction that cut across the various distancing factors that exist among fellow cab drivers, while they serve no purpose in unifying the drivers against their common plight, i.e., the fleet garage owners.

#### Stoned Drivers

The term "stoned" drivers refers to the many young drivers who get "high" on marijuana or other drugs either before, during or after they take their cabs out.

In an interview with a young cab driver who frequently goes out of his garage stoned, I asked the question, "Why do so many young drivers get stoned?" He replied, "Why does everyone get stoned?" He went on to explain that getting stoned on pot was not found only in the taxi industry and that it was characteristic of the culture in general.

However, while pot smoking is widespread in our culture, its particularly frequent occurrence in the taxi industry can partially be explained by the unique tensions of spending ten to twelve hours in heavy traffic. The extreme pressures of this situation are conducive to this type of insulating behavior.

One young cab driver explained to me that getting stoned is a good way to insulate himself from the various interpersonal encounters that he has with his passengers. Specifically, he added that getting stoned slows things down and prevents the pressures of cab driving from getting to him. He further remarked how the traffic and the honking horns become much easier to cope with when he was stoned.

In an occupation such as cab driving the relationship between the worker and his client (the passenger) becomes a highly exploitable one, since the driver is dependent on his fares for his survival. A driver's salary is dependent on the number of passengers that he can turn over in one day, and getting stoned served the useful function of keeping the driver oblivious to his passengers.

#### Arm Jobs

This term refers to the practice of driving a passenger without turning the meter on, thus enabling the driver to pocket whatever money he receives from the passenger. Cab drivers usually initiate this type of interaction with the passenger by asking the question, "Do you mind if I

do this trip off the meter?" If the passenger agrees to do this, the cab driver can either suggest a "fair" rate for the trip, or can agree upon a rate with the passenger once they reach the destination.

It is to the cab driver's advantage to know what he will be getting for the trip, since it is an illegal act, and he (the driver) is powerless to argue with the passenger once they reach the destination.

One of the means that fleet owners use to combat arm jobs is through the use of "hot seats." If a taxi has a hot seat, the meter is turned on automatically twenty to thirty seconds after the passenger sits down. This is all done through the use of wires that run underneath all of the seating areas of the cab except for the driver's seat. The pressure of the person's weight will be enough to complete the circuit that turns on the meter.

Cab drivers have a number of different ways to combat the strict rules regarding arm jobs. The most popular way of doing an arm job is to disconnect the roof lights. If the meter is off, the letters T-A-X-I are lit up on the roof of the cab. The most popular way to turn these roof lights off without turning on the meter is through the use of a circuit breaker which will turn off the roof lights without completing the circuit which turns on the meter.

While various explanations have been proposed to explain why cab drivers take such a big risk in doing arm jobs, the most important point to be made is that arm jobs are the

only time that fleet drivers don't have to share the fare with fleet owners.

The major point to be made about the aforementioned adaptive mechanisms is that they are an integral part of the life of the New York City taxi driver. While the cultural descriptions of these adaptive mechanisms perform an important function, I think that it is necessary to develop the economic basis for the existence of these adaptive mechanisms.

## CONCLUSION

It is my hope that this analysis of the New York City taxi industry has contributed to the field of the sociology of work in both a methodological and theoretical way.

In the first place, one of the things that I consider to be most important about this dissertation is that it has utilized fairly traditional methodological techniques in its data gathering process. Since this study started out as a descriptive ethnography of the taxi industry in the mid-nineteen seventies, it was fairly obvious to me as a student and a teacher of sociology that the methods of observation and participant observation were then and continue to be important methodological techniques in studying society.

However, what struck me as problematic about this approach was that all of the ethnographies that I have studied in both sociology and anthropology tended to isolate the particular social situation from both its historical and its political economic base. This is where I hope that the use of historical analysis and critical theory can be a valuable supplement to traditional descriptive studies.

One of the biggest problems that I encountered in

the writing of the dissertation was the integration of historical and political economic analysis within the framework of a verbally descriptive ethnography where this type of analysis was completely absent.

Theoretically, there was a very similar situation. As a Master's student, I had been taught a Symbolic Interactionist theoretical perspective by my former advisor, Marvin Scott. My master's thesis totally emphasized the interactional components of the taxi industry, i.e., how drivers interacted with their passengers and with each other. This proved to be very limiting, since it completely lacked any structural analysis.

During my first two years in the doctoral program, my theoretical perspective began to change to a much more structural one, particularly emphasizing the class relations of American capitalism as the basis of the traditional cultural components.

However, what was also occurring to me both as a student and as a teacher of sociology was that there was a lot to be gained from the Goffmanesque Symbolic Interactionist theoretical school, particularly in regard to occupational studies. Thus the idea of synthesizing a class analysis with an interactionist type ethnography seemed to me to be a very worthwhile dissertation topic.

What appeared to be very problematic at this point was the integration of historical and political economic analysis with a fairly traditional ethnography. In

particular, I had no idea of how to present a historical class analysis of the New York City taxi industry, so that the ethnographic data that I had collected would supplement the class analysis. This has remained somewhat of a thorny problem throughout the writing of the dissertation.

My interest in the New York City taxi industry has now been active for the past five years, and the more recent developments in the industry were particularly important in synthesizing the ethnography with a class analysis.

The first problem that I encountered was trying to defend an ethnography which never explained why cab drivers in New York City place such a heavy premium on trying to escape from the occupational role of being a taxi driver. This is where I first began to see the value of synthesizing an interactionist perspective with a class analysis. Thus my search into the nature of the class relations of the New York City taxi industry began.

As a former cab driver, it began to appear more and more clear to me that the public image of the cab driver as being a thief who liked to rob fares from his passengers was a totally unjustified way of viewing this working class occupation, i.e., there had to be something beyond the worker that explained this behavior. It is here that I began the task of reconstructing the history of the taxi industry with particular emphasis given to how the remuneration system of the New York City fleet driver is related to the above phenomena.

One excellent suggestion that was made to me was that the owner-worker relationship in the taxi industry is transferred on to the driver-passenger relationship. In other words, the exploitation that the driver is involved in with the owner of the fleet garage is transferred to his own exploitation of his passengers, who never consciously see the former exploitative relationship.

Thus, studies such as Davis' and Henslin's, in which the cab driver's interactions with his passengers are emphasized, isolate the most important part of the exchange relationship that drivers are involved in, i.e., the one in which they are paid. Interactional studies can only be seen as a function of this former relationship.

Another factor that began to interest me was the fact that about three quarters of the midtown cab garages that I was familiar with (including the Cornell Cab Company) had sold out their medallions to mini-fleets in the past three or four years.

The idea that developed from this was how the taxi industry was following a developmental course that was different from the traditional capitalist process of monopolization, i.e., selling out large cab fleets to small owners. Of course, tremendous profits have been made from this de-monopolization process, since taxi medallions that were purchased by fleets for ten dollars in the late nineteen thirties are now being sold for close

to seventy thousand dollars apiece on the very highly inflated market.

As usual, this issue has plagued the fleet driver, since approximately fifteen thousand fleet jobs have been lost in the past four years because of the leasing of taxicabs. It occurred to me that this is a logical latter stage in the development of an industry that has had a notorious reputation for exploiting labor to the fullest. It is this point in the history of the New York City taxi industry that needs to be more fully analyzed.

In addition, "gypsy" taxicabs have taken over a greater share of the market. Gypsies are cars that do not have medallions, but are used to transport passengers. Traditionally, they have mostly stayed in the ghetto areas where yellow cabs refuse to cruise. However, they will occasionally cruise in the same areas as medallion cabs. The owners of the fleet industry in New York City have always sanctioned gypsies, since they would prefer to not have their drivers cruise in areas in which there is a high probability of being robbed.

#### The Future of the New York City Taxi Industry

The idea of taxi leasing became very popular in the mid-nineteen seventies when fleet owners began to complain about falling profits due to increased maintenance costs of running a taxi fleet in New York City.

It was about at this time that gasoline prices had

undergone their first doubling in price. It occurred to the major fleet owners that it would be much more profitable to sell their medallions, which had already become very inflated in value, to people who were interested in purchasing either an individual medallion or a mini-fleet, usually consisting of two or three cab medallions.

For fleet drivers this meant the loss of many jobs, while for the garage owners this meant that they could reinvest the capital into more stable investments without having to worry about rising fuel costs, inflated car prices and the perpetual enemy of the New York City fleet owner, the increasing population of Third World drivers. Because of the availability of G.I. loans and the high rate of job layoffs in other areas, there has been a very profitable market for selling medallions.

The major blame for the loss of over fifteen thousand fleets jobs can be attributed to the Taxi and Limousine Commission of New York City which endorsed the original plan for taxi leasing that was proposed by the Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade, an association which represents the fleet owners.

By this time, the taxicab drivers' union, the A.F. of L.-C.I.O. was so weakened that it included owner-drivers among its ranks. This has been a perpetual curse for the fleet driver, since the owner-drivers are constantly pushing for fare increases which do not necessarily help

the fleet driver who works for commission and tips.

The following newspaper article explains the abortive fight of the fleet drivers to stop the leasing issue:

A judge yesterday cleared the way for New York taxi fleet owners to lease cabs to drivers.

Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Nathaniel Helman denied a move by the Taxi Drivers Union to block the plan approved last month by the Taxi and Limousine Commission.

The union, which stands to lose members as drivers become "contractors," claims the fleets will have no incentive to maintain cabs while taking in a steady income.

Under the plan, owners can charge up to \$350 (now \$400) a week for cabs-while the drivers take home all fare money and tips they make per shift.<sup>48</sup>

In a somewhat stronger statement, Taxi Driver's Voice, the publication of the Taxi Drivers Union Local 3036, A.F. of L.-C.I.O., printed the following statement:

Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, and New Year's Day all had something in common other than times of celebration. It was more difficult to get a taxi during this holiday period than any in history. The reason is obvious. Fewer taxis on the streets. As we have been saying right along, the failure of the Taxi and Limousine Commission to enforce its double shift rules on minifleets, and rampant illegal horsehirings has severely reduced the number of taxis on the streets evenings, weekends, and holidays. Certainly in the past the holiday season was a difficult time to walk out and just hail a taxi. Lately though, it has become impossible.<sup>49</sup>

It appears now that the New York City taxi industry has reached its final stage of development, i.e., the elimination of the fleet driver. At present, about three quarters of the taxi medallions are in the hands of individual owners who either drive their own cabs or

lease them out. There are only two or three fleet garages left in Manhattan, and the number of fleet drivers has diminished by about fifteen thousand over the past five years.

What implications does this have for the cab driver as a member of the working class in late capitalist society? It appears that cab drivers are really no longer part of the working class, and that the efforts of the Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade to create a class of small entrepreneurs have been successful. For the consumer it means continually climbing fares.

The question that continues to plague me is why did the taxi industry in New York City undergo such a change?

In the first place, fleet drivers never really had any kind of collective support in fighting off actions that the fleet owners decided on. In the case of the elimination of the industry, drivers had little, if any, collective support in fighting the owner's moves. By the mid-nineteen seventies, the fleet drivers' union, the A.F. of L.-C.I.O., had already incorporated owner drivers into its ranks, and therefore no longer represented solely fleet drivers.

Secondly, fleet owners were very quick to sell their medallions when they saw the rising fuel costs. While it is true that fuel costs and maintenance costs have gone up in this inflated economy, it is clear that fleet owners were still able to make profits by the increased taxi

fares in the past five years.

What has seemed to me to be more problematic for the fleet owners has been the increasing proportion of Third World drivers who now work for the fleet garages. In my observations in the industry, it became particularly clear to me that the fleet owners did not want to cope with the increasing population of particularly black drivers who were replacing many of the older Jewish and Italian drivers.

Lastly, it appears that cab driving as an occupation presents an intrinsic problem for any type of worker solidarity in that occupational peers are never working in the same place at the same time.

While this is certainly not a total explanation for the unionization failure in the industry, there exists a very atomizing way of making a living as a taxi driver.

However, above all I hope that the reader realizes that the plight of the New York City fleet driver goes beyond the New York City taxi industry and is seen as part of the class relations of capitalist society.

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NOTES

1. Frances R. Donovan, The Woman Who Waits (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1920); Nels Anderson, The Hobo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923); Clifford R. Shaw, The Jack Roller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930); Paul G. Cressey, The Taxi-Dance Hall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); Edwin H. Sutherland, The Professional Thief (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937).
2. Davis, Fred. "The Cabdriver and His Fare: Facets of A Fleeting Relationship." American Journal of Sociology. 65, 1959. p. 159.
3. Ibid.
4. New York City fleet drivers receive anywhere between 43% to 50% of the meter intake, depending on how long they have worked for the same fleet garage.
5. Henslin, James M. "The Cab Driver: An Interactional Analysis of An Occupational Culture." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. 1967.
6. Ibid., p. 243.
7. Henslin, James M. "Craps and Magic." American Journal of Sociology, 73, (Nov.) p. 316). In this article, Henslin emphasizes the deviant nature of this activity.
8. Schlosberg, Richard. "A Descriptive Analysis of The New York City Taxi Industry." unpublished Master's thesis, Hunter College. 1975. pp. 72-73.
9. Vidich, Charles. The New York Cab Driver and His Fare. Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman. 1976. p. 1.
10. Ibid., p. 8.
11. Goffman, Erving. Interaction Ritual. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books. 1967. p. 48.
12. While fleet drivers are asked to report their tips at the end of the work day, ninety percent of the drivers never report these earnings.

13. Braverman, Harry. Labor and Monopoly Capital. New York: Monthly Review Press. 1974. pp. 360-361.
14. Ibid., p. 362.
15. Ibid., p. 367.
16. O'Connor, James. The Fiscal Crisis And The State. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1973. p. 13.
17. This was particularly brought out in a movie in 1976, entitled "Taxi Driver," in which a young fleet driver is portrayed as a psychopathic killer.
18. I am indebted to my advisor, Michael Brown, for this idea.

#### Chapter Two

19. This brief history was essentially constructed through a combination of secondary sources, i.e., the New York Times, Scientific American and Vidich (1976), The New York Cab Driver And His Fare.
20. The New York Times. July 19, 1910. p. 6.
21. Ibid., March 13, 1910. Part 4, p. 5.
22. Ibid., June 2, 1937. p. 12.
23. Ibid., Jan. 4, 1939. p. 1.
24. Ibid., Jan. 31, 1958. p. 20.
25. Ibid., Dec. 21, 1964. p. 1.
26. Ibid., Sept. 5, 1971. p. 32.

#### Chapter Three

27. Ohr, Stephen. "Stinking of Money." (unpublished manuscript) 1974.
28. Told to the author by an informant.
29. Henslin, James. "The Cab Driver: An Interactional Analysis of An Occupational Culture." pp. 214-250. In particular, see chart on p. 243.

30. Davis, Fred. "The Cabdriver and His Fare: Facets Of a Fleeting Relationship." American Journal of Sociology. 65, 1959, p. 159.
31. Told to the author by an informant.
32. The New York Times. July 21, 1944. p. 21.
33. Davis, Fred. op. cit., p. 164.
34. Ibid., pp. 158-165.
35. Approximately twenty percent of these drivers have bought their own medallions and formed "mini-fleets."
36. Terkel, Studs. Working. New York: Avon Books. 1972. p. 270.
37. "Mini-fleets" consist of two or more owner drivers who usually share a radio dispatcher.
38. Goffman (1961) elaborates on these concepts in a section of Asylums entitled "The Underlife of a Public Institution," pp. 188-207.
39. This dissertation attempts to demonstrate how the concepts of "primary" and "secondary" adjustments are a function of the class system of the taxi industry, i.e., the fleet garage owners and the fleet drivers.
40. Goffman, Erving. Asylums, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor. 1961. p. 188.
41. Cohen, Albert and Harold M. Hodges. "Characteristics Of the Lower Blue-Collar Class." Social Problems. 10, 1963. p. 307.
42. Cohen and Hodges used quantitative methods, i.e., close-ended interviews and questionnaires, to establish these findings.
43. For an elaboration of this and other dramaturgical concepts, see Goffman's The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959).
44. This is another one of Goffman's dramaturgical concepts found in the above work.

45. Goffman, Erving. Asylums. 1963. p. 189.

46. Lyman, Stanford and Marvin B. Scott (1970) in their book, A Sociology of the Absurd, define a "home territory" in the following way: "...areas where the regular participants have a relative freedom of behavior and a sense of intimacy and control over the area." p. 92.

47. Due to the stress placed on the kidneys, cab drivers often have to urinate as much as five times a day.

48. The New York Post. March 9, 1979. p. 15.

49. Taxi Driver's Voice. Dec. 30, 1978. p. 1.