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Finnegan, Ruth (2022) *The Hidden Lives of Taxi Drivers. A Question of Knowledge*. Milton Keynes: Callender Press

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In her 2022 ethnography *The Hidden Lives of Taxi Drivers. A Question of Knowledge*, Irish anthropologist Ruth Finnegan explores the little researched field of private transport in western Europe. From hundreds of informal interviews conducted during twenty- to thirty-minute taxi journeys in her hometown of Milton Keynes, she goes beyond simply exploring a profession to paint a picture of the diversity and individuality of taxi drivers. The work is embedded in her extensive knowledge of the city and the historical background on the development of the transportation business. It becomes clear that the field unites many areas of anthropological interest that can only be discovered through expanding one's own view of the urban environment. With her results, Finnegan presents an omnipresent field, one that most readers will already have encountered in their lives, though one that holds many surprises. The publication not only gives deep insight into the work practices of a whole industry but proves that dealing with the seemingly banal can lead to a fundamental examination of the ideas, fantasies, dreams, and meanings of human existence.

Beginning with the preface to her 102-page book, the author explores why the aesthetic familiarity of private transport in western cities does not lead to attention to the individuals behind the steering wheels. The drivers of the countless taxis on the streets, together with their life stories and internalised knowledge, are 'hidden in plain sight' (p. 9); they are only seen as regards to their function as service providers. Finnegan's first direct contact with her field of study came when she began to rely on taxis to get around her city after deciding to stop driving her private car in her older age. This already demonstrates that the world of taxi drivers and its importance to society is always linked to external factors, such as the infrastructure of a particular place. The author organises these overlaps with other subject areas of cultural research under the headings 'transport networks', 'work experiences', 'life stories', 'migration', and 'social mobility'. In doing so, she makes clear how rooted the taxi business is within society and, conversely, how relevant it can be for an anthropological perspective on urban identities.

In the first three chapters, Finnegan establishes the theoretical ground on which she subsequently builds her ethnography. By emphasising the pop-cultural relevance of taxis in the street scene and their symbolic power in books and films, where they are mostly used as a symbol of departure or the start of an adventure, the author makes it unmistakably clear how

all-present the topic is in everyday life. The second chapter provides insight into the historical development of the private transport business, from human-powered to animal-run to motorised. Through continuous innovation and the development of a system of convenient mobility, modern taxis could effectively be called the result of the constant and transculturally prevalent need to be transported from one place to another. Although Finnegan conducted most of her research in the small British town of Milton Keynes, she shows in her third chapter, 'Urban Setting', that the taxi industry there overlaps with that across the world. For this she draws comparisons with the taxi industry in cities and on continents she visited during her five years of field research. Particularly important for the universality of the results, however, is her in-depth exploration of the working methods and environments in which taxis operate and the resulting embodied knowledge of the humans taking part in the business.

The ethnographic core of the book, which consists of two parts, each with three chapters, presents the drivers on a more personal level, exploring with the reader which type of people choose to work in the industry and for what motivations. Finnegan focuses especially on the migration factor, which she states is directly linked to the world of taxi driving. For instance, many of the interviewees shared with her their history of migrating to the United Kingdom, which still affects them in their daily lives. Key factors here are financial dependencies in their former homes, self-founded families in the new country, and the hope of giving their own children a future, linked with education and a professional career. In her portrayal of the drivers, however, the author reflects not only on her interview partners' current situations but explicitly on their dreams and visions for the future. This shows the different layers of dealing with cultural identities, gaining autonomy over the workforce, and creating real opportunities to improve the economic situation for their families abroad and in the United Kingdom. Through the portrayal of individual fates, Finnegan offers a complex and all-encompassing description of real working conditions. Amongst other things, she examines the basic requirements that every taxi driver must fulfil in order to carry out their work. Presented are the role of the state in the form of regulations, associations within the community, and different business models available to drivers, including the people involved and the financial and human resources required. A separate chapter entitled 'Ignorant Riff Raff ...' is dedicated to the complexity of the field and the high standards that taxi drivers must uphold in their daily work. In contrast to the prevailing social stigmas surrounding the taxi industry, disciplined behaviour and adherence to a high code of ethics are commonplace for the vast majority of drivers.

The author notes that, despite her open-mindedness on the subject, she was surprised at how positive her actual impression turned out to be compared to her expectations. In most cases, it was not the drivers themselves

but rude passengers who caused conflict in the workflow. Finnegan shows how much value the drivers place on education and respect – and how a determined approach to work could lead some of her interviewees to become well-off business owners with their own vehicles and employees.

The ‘question of knowledge’, which is already presented in the title of the book, forms the essence of Finnegan’s ethnography and gets explored in detail in Chapter Seven. Technical knowledge and the ability to drive a car, Finnegan argues, form only the foundation of the profession and are by no means enough to pursue it successfully. Starting with the amount of learning required for a prospective driver to know the roads by heart, she explains the complex requirements for such an individual to pass a driver’s certificate. Although modern aids such as navigation systems can assist drivers, their actual learning starts when they begin to drive. Because of the customers’ expectations that taxi drivers can answer any question or fulfil any request relating to transport, drivers have to learn everything that could be relevant to their clients. The nature of the job, of dealing with people in a wide range of emotional and physical states, demands from them a significant measure of social and emotional intelligence. These levels of practical knowledge cannot be acquired in theory but are learnt in the course of daily work – and thus are embodied knowledge. This learning from and passing on of knowledge to passengers is further enabled by the anonymity and time-limited nature of the interaction between client and driver in the interior of the car. Finnegan describes this location as an ‘intimate temporary place’ where it feels safe to share knowledge (p. 68). As neutral actors who encounter people of all kinds in their work time, the drivers hold a quasi-diplomatic immunity which enables them to participate in – and learn from – all parts of society.

A practical connection of knowledge to individual biographies and fates is the focus of the sixth ethnographic chapter and the concluding chapters. Reflecting on her research methods of involving drivers in informal interviews, Finnegan examines the role of her using first names in her research. She compares the sharing of names to the classic anthropological concept of a gift exchange. By exchanging what she classifies as one essential feature that differentiates people from each other, one’s personal name, she was able to dissolve the general interpersonal separation between strangers. Her way of exploring the possible meanings of her driver’s names and related topics like childhood and cultural identity open a level of dialogue that deals with individual biographies and personal life perspectives.

In Finnegan’s detailed descriptions of particular rides, she allows the drivers to express themselves about values, religion, future prospects, and the duality between work and private life, as well as hobbies and interests. At this point, the manner in which Finnegan relates to the drivers changes. She no longer engages with them as service providers but focuses on their individuality as humans, with goals, dreams, and idiosyncratic ideas of what

a good life is. In her sympathetic conclusion to the final chapter, Finnegan presents taxi drivers as nothing less than modern philosophers, collecting and reflecting on societal knowledge whilst working. They are not only responsible for the safe transportation of their passengers but are also active but silent listeners in the helpful way of priests and therapists. By doing so, drivers accumulate knowledge from a wide variety of sources, which their customers can then draw on, implied in the unspoken contract of each taxi journey.

Although Finnegan engages self-reflexively with her methods and the dynamics between researcher and interviewees throughout the ethnography, she provides additional insight into her methodology in the appendix. As she conducted her research on occasion, alongside running everyday errands, her spontaneous interview style is ideally suited to the ephemeral nature of the subject. She certainly fulfils her aim not only to describe the patterns she encountered in the field but to provide explicit examples that capture the elusive and spiritually charged dimension of human life embedded in a taxi ride. By providing a rich collection of graphics, photos, and quotes from the taxi drivers' environments, the author succeeds in writing an empathetic ethnography that communicates on a fundamental level of humanity. She takes the reader close to the subject, which makes for an immersive reading experience. Through a structured processing of the collected data, Finnegan locates the individual drivers and their feelings in work processes and in underlying forces, even without applying any major theoretical concepts. This allows an understanding to emerge beyond the academic level, which makes the book accessible to a wide audience. In terms of its range of content, the ethnography is just as versatile as the people it describes.

When taxis are recognised as intercultural meeting places, they can be considered as sites for negotiating matters such as migration, labour, and identity. The focus on the individuals in the taxi business marks an essential addition to the exploration of urban spaces and is therefore as relevant to the subject as the concealed knowledge that they reveal. A comparison with taxi ethnographies outside of Europe proves many intercultural similarities in the industry. Kathy Taylor's (1999) *Through the Rearview Mirror* or Tracy Luedke's (2010) *Driving Lives: An Ethnography of Chicago Taxi Drivers* also deal with the image of the all-knowing taxi driver and the struggle of having to accumulate the knowledge of a whole city as a working environment. Finnegan shows that whilst her drivers are far from any Mexican or American metropole, they deal with similar issues and ways of building knowledge. Expanding this image, she successfully empathises with the uniqueness of the drivers and the relevance of their biographies in relation to gaining, keeping, and sharing this valuable expertise on human living.

With *The Hidden Lives of Taxi Drivers. A Question of Knowledge*, Ruth Finnegan expands the anthropological perspective on the subject by

approaching and depicting the field in an empathetic way. By exploring individual emotional layers, she succeeds in humanising what would otherwise remain anonymous and, through that, revealing the constructive elements that make up said knowledge.

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