

The *auto-colectivo*: A cultural history of the shared taxi in Buenos Aires (1928–33)

The Journal of Transport History

2018, Vol. 39(1) 55–71

© The Author(s) 2018

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0022526618762344

journals.sagepub.com/home/jth



Dhan Zunino Singh

Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina

Abstract

By the late 1920s, Buenos Aires already had a large tramway network, buses, an underground line, and railways. However, on 24 September 1928 a new form of public transport burst onto the scene: the *auto-colectivo*. Organised in small companies without municipal authorisation, taxi drivers began using their cars for public transport. Analysing technological transformations in the transportation sector from a cultural–historical perspective, this paper focuses on both the controversies sparked by the *auto-colectivo*, and the resignification of attributes of modern transport (speed, comfort, safety) prompted by this new form of public transportation. This service, which spontaneously emerged ‘from below’ as a result of the taxi drivers’ self-organisation, ‘socialised’ the use of the automobile and brought on a new (but short-lived) mobility experience. It is argued that the latter was an experience of *passenger*ing that played an important role in the success of this mode of transport, in the context of the rising of car culture and a bad reputation of trams and buses.

Keywords

Shared taxi, Buenos Aires, mobility, 1920s–30s, passengering

On 24 September 1928, dozens of taxi drivers in Buenos Aires started, without municipal authorisation, offering a different kind of service. Instead of performing the traditional individualised trip, they proposed a new system, in which taxi drivers carried four passengers together, charged fixed fares, and followed

Corresponding author:

Dhan Zunino Singh, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Roque Saenz Peña 352, Quilmes, Buenos Aires B1876BXD, Argentina.

Email: dhansebastian@gmail.com

established routes. Just a week later, there were fifteen lines and almost nine hundred cars offering this service. These early days marked the birth of what in Argentina is known as the *colectivo*, a practice that Argentineans claim as a national invention. Today, the *colectivo* – which is now operated as a bus service – is the main mode of urban public transport in Buenos Aires. Like the ‘jitney’ in the United States in the 1910s,¹ the *colectivo* was originally a normal sedan-style automobile. By 1933, the *colectivo* evolved into a minibus: a vehicle made with a small truck chassis and a body constructed by local workshops. One of the most singular characteristics of this new type of vehicle was the external decoration (artistic drawings called *fileteado*, i.e. gilded edge) and the personal ornamentation inside the bus added by the driver.²

In this paper, I aim to investigate the origin of the service, focusing on the early success of the *colectivo* and how the service embedded cultural aspects that the automobile mobilised. This new service provided modern values of speed and comfort, as well as a new mobility experience for Buenos Aires inhabitants. Furthermore, I aim to show how prevailing complaints about the public transport service in the city, particularly tramways and buses, contributed to the positive reception of the *colectivo*.

This paper is based on two years of archival research, though it is important to note that there is a lack of official archival sources relating to the *taxi-colectivo* for the period between 1928 and 1933, as it was not a regulated service. While the taxi drivers’ union launched a regular publication in 1933, it is unfortunately unavailable today. As such, in order to investigate this topic, this paper uses a corpus of newspapers, magazines, Buenos Aires’ city council records, pamphlets, reports, maps, and photos. A useful historiography on the *colectivo*, mainly written by journalists and non-academic researchers, has also been reviewed.³ This paper offers first an overview of the emergence of the *colectivo*. It then provides an analysis of the public transport systems in Buenos Aires and the politics which shaped them in the first decades of the twentieth century. In part two, the paper analyses public and political opinion of the *colectivo*, as well as the controversies triggered by its emergence. Finally, the paper attempts to understand the system’s success by exploring the service and its cultural representations as prompted by the public use of the car.

The aim of this work is to critically review the emergence of the *colectivo*, emphasising the culture of the travel experience – mobility as a ‘meaningful practice’, as Ole Jensen claims – as a significant aspect which led to the success of the new mode of public transport.⁴ As evidenced in the press (articles, news, and cartoons) printed in the first months of the service’s existence, here I underline the importance of the ‘passenger’ experience: the experience of being carried by car and the social and spatial interactions in the vehicle.⁵

Buenos Aires’ public transport: Mobility and politics

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Buenos Aires underwent rapid growth and processes of modernisation. The population increased from 430,000 people in

the 1880s to about 2.4 million in 1930.⁶ By 1904, large portions of the population began moving from the historical downtown to the northern and western parts of the city. This movement was supported by the expansion of the electric tramway network and by the availability of affordable loans to buy lots of land in the peripheries. The city government sustained this urban enlargement through the implementation of diverse modes of public transport: By the 1920s, the city transport network serviced *c.* 860 million passengers per year; and by 1930, Buenos Aires boasted a large tramway network (about 900 km), omnibuses, two underground railway lines, and five urban railway lines. At this time, tramways were the most used mode of public transport service, followed by buses and *auto-colectivos*, finally railways and the underground. However, beginning in 1926, the number of tramway passengers began falling steadily due to the implementation of the bus system, and later the *colectivos* (see Figure 1).⁷

By the end of the 1920s, most of the capital city (equivalent to *c.* 180 km²) had been urbanised. Thanks to the railway lines, there were also settlements beyond the political limits of the city, so that altogether, the metropolitan area had a population of over three million people.⁸ Urban expansion implied an increase of mobility on daily basis. While the city expanded, the main activities (administrative, financial, commercial, and leisure) were still concentrated in the historical downtown near the port. A pendulum-like movement between suburbs and the centre (between the West and the East) was a typical image used to depict the daily trips of Buenos Aires passengers.⁹ The image of ‘human bunch’ was typical to describe people hanging from buses and tramways and the image of ‘bottleneck’

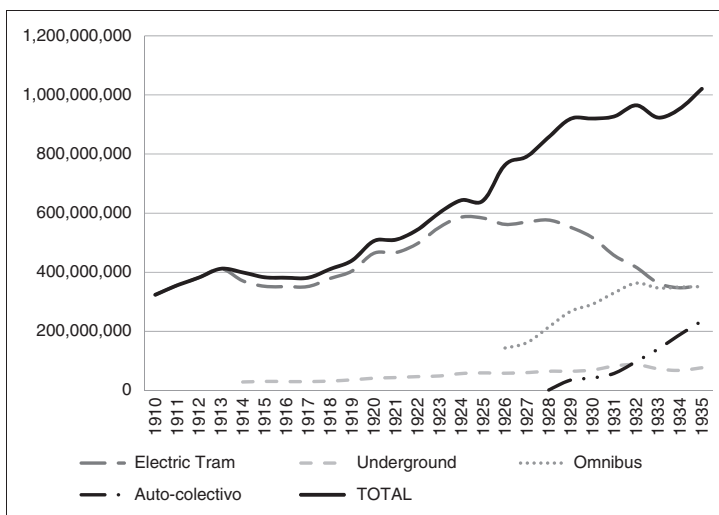


Figure 1. Annual passengers by mode of public transport (1910–35).

Source: *Revista de Estadística Municipal* (1936).

for urban congestion in the central area. The former was an indication of the inability of the public transport system to cope with the growing population, while the latter pointed out a feature of the urban development: the city has a grid street layout, which expands in a fan-like shape, but its core activities remain in the old centre. In the 1920s, urban reforms (mainly the widening of streets and the opening of new avenues, or the construction of underground lines) were carried out in order to make it feasible for the increasing numbers of vehicles and people to flow more freely.

The automobile was also becoming increasingly important in the 1920s in Buenos Aires, making Argentina one of the most motorised countries worldwide. By the end of the 1920s, there were about 340,000 cars in the whole country and 46,000 in Buenos Aires. A large percentage of these cars were rental cars (including taxis).¹⁰ As such, traffic was a major issue in the city and the problems and complaints about transport and traffic in Buenos Aires were widely covered in the press and in politicians' and planners' discourses. The imaginary of progress that daily mobility triggered was reinforced by an evolutionary idea about transport technologies, a confidence that they would evolve, eliminating old and slow vehicles and replacing them with faster, safer, more comfortable, and hygienic ones. The 1925 municipal urban plan, for example, said that circulation would not be 'achieved without certain sacrifices and some kinds of vehicles must succumb to the selective law of progress'.¹¹ In this 'evolutionary chain' of urban transport, the railway appeared in the nineteenth century as the first great progress, followed by the tramway and the underground in the turn of the twentieth century; finally, since the 1920s, the automobile has occupied a privileged place in this imagery.¹²

While the railway was a powerful metaphor of national modernisation, the expansion of tramways in Buenos Aires became a symbol of metropolitan modernisation. By 1910, the municipal authorities and tramway companies 'boasted that Buenos Aires was the streetcar capital of the world' when the tramway network reached about 640 km.¹³ Electrification had enabled the extension and improvement of the network covering almost all the streets of the city centre and extending to the periphery in radial lines. With the replacement of horse-drawn tramways, cleanliness and comfort became symbols of modern transport. As Councillor Vicente Rotta expressed in his study on Buenos Aires Transport in 1937, electric tramways both led urban development and signified social progress:

the primitive horse-drawn tramway adapted to the progress of mechanics and electricity, gradually improving the service in order to 'bring closer' the suburb, to allow economic and hygienic housing, far from large urban agglomerations and to create in each zone of the city a new town full of yearning of progress.¹⁴

Yet, in the 1920s, the tramway had an increasingly poor reputation in the public eye due to its poor, losing share of the market driven by its rivalry with the omnibus. Urban planners also viewed the tramway negatively, blaming it for congestion: At this time, the electric tramway was seen as too big a vehicle – a 'caterpillar' – for the narrow streets of the city centre. As one of the main planners, Carlos della

Paolera, stated, 'Within the narrow streets of the city centre, the tramway is out of scale and it can be compared with an annoying clot which, moving slowly within the circulation network, stops and produces [an] embolism.'¹⁵

Moreover, the Anglo-Argentine Tramway Company (hereafter ATTC), which controlled 80 per cent of the public service, was an easy target for growing nationalist sentiments and Anglophobia, representing, along with the rail companies, the hegemony of British capital in the Argentinean economy. Particularly during the 1920s, AATC faced the resistance of the Buenos Aires city council, ruled by the Socialist party and other nationalistic political forces. The city council rejected AATC's intention to raise the fare price – which was 10 Argentinian Peso cents (equivalent about to 1 US dollar today) for tramways, buses, and the underground – as a condition to complete the underground network. In 1909, AATC obtained the municipal concession to build three underground lines, and in 1913 it inaugurated the first one, but the conflicts with the city council impeded any other implementation.¹⁶

Novelty: colectivo as a spontaneous and smart solution

On Monday, 24 September 1928, a large column of cars waited outside the last underground station of the Line A, *Primera Junta*, at the western district *Caballito*. The drivers had improvised handwritten signs in the window indicating destination and fare costs, and offered the trips shouting loudly. The target was the passengers who returned to their homes using the underground but still need to complete their trip with other means. Actually, a public service *was* already offered via tramway; however, since 1926, due to management problems, the underground passengers had to stop and connect with tramways or omnibuses to continue their journey. The *colectivo* provided a faster and more comfortable alternative: During peak hours, cars left *Primera Junta* station every minute, and during off-peak hours, every 4 minutes. The service was a success, for both passengers and drivers, as reported by the press and confirmed by the sudden proliferation of the service in a few weeks in other areas of the city. This happened even if most of the public ignored that this public transport service would start on 24 September, although it was announced by the socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* the day before: 'a group of taxi drivers visited our editorial office last night', wrote the newspaper, to inform us that 'tomorrow' a new service of 'taxi-obus' numbering 150 'big American cars (Buick, Studebaker etc.)' would be inaugurated.¹⁷

The novelty of the idea was evidenced by the lack of name or the multiple names that were given by the press. It was called *auto-colectivo*, *taxi-obus*, *taxi-bus*. In Buenos Aires city council records, it appeared as a 'rental automobile for collective transport'. Excited by the novelty, the newspaper *Crítica* tried to find a name that described not only its usage but its speed (comparing it with a revolver), or the fact that it was an economical service (comparing it with a purse: *taxi-monedero*). The latter was a label similar to jitney service in the United States during the 1910s, since both names refer to coins needed for a journey.¹⁸ *Taxi-colectivo* and

auto-colectivo were, nonetheless, the most common names, as both refer to the public use of the car. This name disappeared around 1933, as the minibus replaced the car and only the term *colectivo* remained.

The public praised the *auto-colectivo* above all for its originality (it was seen as a local invention), pragmatism (there were no debates, plans, or policies), and for its innovation (as a smart solution for the failing public transport and congestion). The tramway and omnibus companies, however, viewed the *colectivo* as unfair competition – spontaneity was synonymous with illegality. The press, particularly popular newspapers such as *Crítica* and *El Mundo*, the socialist *La Vanguardia*, and magazines, expressed enthusiasm for the novelty. It is true that similar services did already exist in other cities such as Lima, Rio de Janeiro, and in the USA; nonetheless, the *auto-colectivo* was perceived as an original local invention.¹⁹ This idea was reinforced by later narratives influenced by nationalistic ideologies, which found in the *colectivo* a local opponent against the British tramways.²⁰

Primary sources and the existing literature reveal controversial questions surrounding the origin of the *colectivo*. The history of the *colectivo* has been written mostly by amateur historians, and academic research from urban and economic history have studied the *colectivo* as a case study in transport and urban growth or the history and conflicts between private capital and the State. Non-academic historians, nonetheless, offer very good information about the evolution of the *colectivo*, yet some narratives have tried to assign the invention to an individual (the pioneer), framing the service as a one-man idea. When the *colectivo* first appeared, the press described a group of taxi drivers/owners as the ‘leaders’. Some names, such as Manuel Pazos, were repeated in different newspapers as the founders and investors. However, the most common story seems influenced by the identity narrative of the Colectivo Federation which launched its periodical, *El Auto Colectivo*, in 1933. There, the name of Sandalio Fernández appears as the first chauffeur who launched the service and who knew about the *auto-colectivo* in Rio de Janeiro. In this narrative, the local origin and cleverness (*astucia*) of these taxi drivers is emphasised.²¹ On the other hand, anarchist historians have also tried to demonstrate the anarchist origin of the *colectivo*. Part of the chauffeurs’ union was anarchist, and it was claimed that the idea was given by the editor of the anarchist periodical *La Protesta*, Diego Abad de Santillán, to a member of the workers’ union.²² This version is biased, however, as it is based on Abad de Santillán’s memoir. Year 1928 issues of the anarchist periodical reveal no evidence to sustain the claim of anarchist origin of the *colectivo*; even more, the service is mentioned as a surprise in such periodicals. According to another historian, Ulises García, the origin was a consequence of a long-lasting informal discussion among stakeholders: a Studebaker car dealer named Mr Flint, for example, reported that in 1928, taxi drivers had discussed the idea in his shop.²³

Leaving open the origin of the service, the idea of the *colectivo* as a smart solution for transport and traffic was stressed by socialist councillors, party press, and other newspapers. For the taxi industry and its workers, the *colectivo* was expressly perceived as a clever solution since, as the socialist councillor

Américo Ghioldi pointed out, the taxis were no longer circulating slowly in the downtown looking for passengers and provoking congestion: quite the opposite, they were now well organised through established routes.²⁴ The *colectivo* was considered an improvement over public transportation since it reduced the waiting time and was more flexible as it could stop at any corner to allow passengers to get in and out. It was also perceived as an improvement regarding comfort and sociability, adding to the service's positive reputation.

A new experience

The way in which the *colectivo* was appreciated needs to be seen in the context of the daily mobility experience in Buenos Aires public transport. Tramways and omnibuses were the main modes used in the mid-1920s, while the underground line carried a small, but increasing number of passengers. The experiences of discomfort in buses and tramways as well as the feeling of unsafety (due to accidents) were recurring topics in the press (news, articles, reports, columns, cartoons, readers' letters in newspapers and magazines), in Buenos Aires city council debates, and recognised by urban and transport experts.²⁵ The underground was the safest mode of transport (as no fatal accidents had been registered), but it was perceived as uncomfortable, as delays in the service were frequent.²⁶

The discomfort provoked by overcrowded vehicles was symbolised by the 'full' (*completo*) sign posted on tramway wagons. The *completo* sign indicated that the vehicle was full of passengers. The transport network and its fleet were indeed insufficient to meet an increasing mobility demand and a growing urban population. In this context, passengers either had to wait for the next vehicle, or hang on to doors of buses and tramways, fighting and pushing one another. The experience became violent, affecting mainly female passengers.²⁷

The element of comfort was the most important for the success of the *colectivo*, as it fundamentally contrasted with the discomfort of the massive transport forms such as buses, tramways, trains, and underground. Such comfort lay mainly in the chance of travelling seated, as a passenger mentioned in 1928:

There is no comparison, one goes comfortably sitting, although the car is full, there are no more than five passengers. If one wishes, one can smoke [...] Also, it must be mentioned as an advantage no longer hearing the galling 'move along' [...] And people keep boarding although they are piled up together.²⁸

The *colectivo* was thus perceived as an unregulated social space. It seemed to be a place where the typical norms (and unpleasant aspects) of public transport did not apply.²⁹

Colectivo was also faster than other modes of transportation thanks to the versatility of the automobile and its ability to weave its way through traffic. As the newspaper *Crítica* commented, the car is 'more mobile, smaller, more manual and elusive', and as such, 'has a big advantage over the omnibus, heavy and, thus, less urban'.³⁰ Although speed was appreciated as an advantage of the car, at the same

time, there were recurrent notes in the press about the lack of speed control in the city and the accidents produced by 'irresponsible' car drivers – among them taxi drivers. 'The lack of intelligence', said a column in a magazine, was the reason for excessive speed and car accidents.³¹

The perception of the *colectivo* as safer, faster, and more comfortable than other transport modes was based not only on experience, but also stressed by the technological and cultural attributes of the automobile, the epitome of a 'kinetic modernity' as Giucci points out.³² Indeed in the 1920s in Argentina an emerging car culture gained importance in the opinion not only of the public but, more importantly, also among decision makers and urban planners. As Melina Piglia has shown, Argentinian car culture was supported not only by the industry (especially by the American car industry) through advertising and commercial strategies (instalment options for automobile purchase, for example), but also through automobile clubs, which had existed since the 1910s, were managed by the elites, and promoted the use of cars through tourism, car races, and road building.³³

In this context, I argue that the *colectivo* was more than a comfortable and fast means of transport: As the term 'collective' indicates, this signified a massive use of the car, a 'democratisation' of this modern technology, as claimed by Buenos Aires councillor Ghioldi.³⁴ However, I point out how such a democratisation did not ask individuals to become automobile owners or drivers, but instead to experience 'passenger'. As reported in the press by a male user, 'we suddenly find the rental car, the taxi, which often was a luxury, now competing with the omnibus transport passengers [...] enjoying the car's comfort for very low sums'.³⁵

If the automobile offered the comfort of travelling seated (although passengers had to travel squeezed together inside the car), sharing the seat with male strangers could be perceived as unpleasant (and morally dangerous) for women. Some weeks after the inauguration of the service, a *colectivo* line introduced a female-only service, to encourage women to use *colectivo*.³⁶ Male reports on the use of the *colectivo* showed how the intimacy of the *colectivo* (two seats for three people each) triggered unrequested attention. As the writer and journalist Roberto Arlt stated in 1928 in his daily column: 'Two people of a different sex that travel together in the same seat cannot see each other with the same indifference as in the omnibus. That is not possible.' He reported that travelling with a young lady in a car was 'something profoundly appealing' and now, 'with the new system of rapid transit, one has the chance of sitting beside nice girls' and, then, 'the courtesy of a smile and three kind words prevail'.³⁷

Another sign of new forms of sociability was the relationship between the driver and the passengers. Some newspapers highlighted the good manners of the taxi drivers in contrast to the tramway guards and bus drivers. The newspaper *El Mundo* described the experience as follows: 'The chauffeur of the taxi-bus has thoroughly studied a treatise of urbanity and courtesy: he knows he has to be different from his workmate, the omnibus driver, and heaps good manners on his clients.' The story adds how the chauffeur opens the door while asking the passengers' forgiveness, blushes when he receives the money as if his purpose

was to transport people for free, and ‘we, passengers largely mistreated by all the locomotion systems, keep quiet and admire him. And when we get off we are at the point of thinking that the chauffeur is a Russian prince fallen on hard times.’³⁸

This new relationship between the driver and the passenger was made more possible in the intimate and smaller space of the car. Means of public transport are in general a mixture of private–public space, forcing a bodily proximity among strangers.³⁹ But unlike the anonymity within the mass that one can experience in a tramway, train, or bus, inside an automobile with six people the social distance in a close bodily proximity or *proxemia* seemed to be more difficult to maintain.⁴⁰

While the *colectivo* signified hope of improvement for the daily experience of mobility in Buenos Aires, in terms of safety, it did not escape from the quotidian tragedy of Buenos Aires traffic: accidents. After the electric tramway was implemented in 1900, for example, the number of road accidents increased sharply.⁴¹ The omnibus was another common cause of accidents in the 1920s and in this context, it was expected that the *auto-colectivo* would avoid accidents thanks to the versatility of the car. Nonetheless, the driver’s lack of control over the speed of the car often resulted in the vehicle overturning or crashing into a shop window. For example, on 5 October 1928, a *colectivo* overturned due to a wrong manoeuvre at high speed. The driver and two passengers died. *La Razón* newspaper ran an article entitled ‘Speed excess caused the death of three people in an automobile of collective service’, which reported on the accident and argued for more regulations and effective penalties for car drivers.⁴²

The perception of unsafety in the *colectivo* taxis was fuelled by sensationalist photojournalism, which stressed the spectacular character of such accidents with photos in the ‘crime’ section (*policiales*) of the newspapers or magazines. Accidents became one of the main complaints against the *colectivo*, eventually leading, in 1933, to regulation for compulsory accident insurance. This concern did not disappear when the *colectivos* started using minibuses, since the hybrid model was in fact *more* unstable, and it was necessary to incorporate double rear wheels to avoid overturning.⁴³

Tramways vs. *colectivo*

To a large extent, the appearance of the *colectivos* can be traced back to a conflict between the new system and the tramways. The *colectivo* emerged without permission from the local transportation authorities. While tramways, the underground, and omnibuses required permissions, large investment, and the involvement of several actors, the *colectivo* was implemented by a group of taxi drivers working cooperatively to operate a particular route. The success of the experiment not only encouraged other drivers to leave the taxi business and initiate other *colectivo* services but also prevented the municipality from applying a regulation that could affect the new enterprise.⁴⁴

Between 1928 and 1930, the *colectivo* ran informally, and with no opposition from the authorities. Actually, while the chief of Buenos Aires traffic department

was willing to ban the service,⁴⁵ the city Mayor did not take any decision. In fact, just two months before the *colectivo* service opened he gave c. 1500 permissions for 'ultra-rapid service' transport, a vague definition, which could fit also innovative systems. Once the debate reached the city council a few weeks after the inauguration of the service, the councillors complained that they had not been informed about this permission, thus showing that there was not an official debate about the use of automobiles for public transport.⁴⁶ However, the councillors did not take actions to stop the service. The reasons for this inaction are twofold: On the one hand, the rapid and popular acceptance of the *colectivo* conditioned politicians, who based their power in the electoral machinery and were aware of the poor conditions of daily mobility in the city. On the other hand, for the socialists and for members of the *Unión Cívica Radical* ('Radical Civic Union', the party which ruled the country), the *colectivo* represented a local enterprise that eroded the British transport monopoly.

While the topic was being debated in the city council, due to the increasing demand, the motor vehicles running as *colectivo* were steadily modified in order to carry more passengers. By 1930, the chassis of the cars were enlarged to add three more seats, so as to carry eight passengers in total. Because these cars were of good quality, most of them North American made, these kinds of modifications were possible. This rapid growth of the system and the increasing improvised changes to the vehicles demanded some sort of regulation. The first municipal regulation about the routes was ordered in 1930. This regulation aimed to organise the proliferation of lines without impeding the expansion of the service. In December 1932, the city council finally established through an ordinance (*Resolución 4478*) the material form of the motor vehicle, the norms of the service, the standard fares, and other aspects. The 1932 ordinance did not specify a particular form for vehicles, but defined the dimensions of the *colectivo*: the vehicle had to carry up to ten passengers plus the driver; it had to be a maximum of 5.3 m long (excluding bumpers), 2 m wide, and 2.5 m high.⁴⁷

The combination of bottom-up modification and top-down regulation created a new kind of vehicle used for the *colectivo*. The automobile was replaced by a sort of minibus built over a truck chassis (mostly Chevrolet). A rounded body, made by national manufacturers who had gained expertise working for the car industry and building omnibuses, was installed over the chassis. The *colectivo*, although no longer a car, maintained some characteristics of it, like the shape of the windows. It is at this stage that models varied according to the manufacturer, but they were all richly decorated in popular *fileteado* style.

The regulations, however, did not resolve the conflict with tramways. The *colectivo* still covered similar routes to the tramway lines – mostly in the central city – usurping potential tramway passengers. The AATC still considered the *colectivo* a threat because passengers were willing to pay higher fares for the shared taxis. While the tramway fare remained at 10 Argentinian Peso cents, the *colectivo* cost between 10 and 40 cents, according to the distance. Paradoxically, while the Buenos Aires city council considered tramway transport accessibility a social issue, and as

such instituted a ‘price freeze’ program, such a policy was not instituted for *colectivo*’s fares. While in the city tramways and *colectivo*’s routes could overlap, in the suburbs the latter – like the omnibus – tended to cover streets where tramway lines did not reach (Figure 2). In other words, the *colectivos*, despite the higher price, remained popular, serving working and middle-classes who lived in the suburbs.

In a context of rising automobilism, AATC launched a public campaign to show the advantage of the tramway over the automobile. The campaign highlighted the historical importance of the tramway for Buenos Aires suburbanisation and commuting and contested the negative views held by councillors and the press about the tramways. For example, a 1930 advertising campaign called ‘know the truth’ in the magazine *Aconcgua*, showed how railway sleepers made out of Quebracho trees (typical of Argentina) assured speed and safety, and described the role of the tramway in Buenos Aires urban development. It also claimed to serve 90 per cent of the local industry’s workers. Posters and slogans were placed in tramways and in the underground, and notes were published in the press. The AATC also

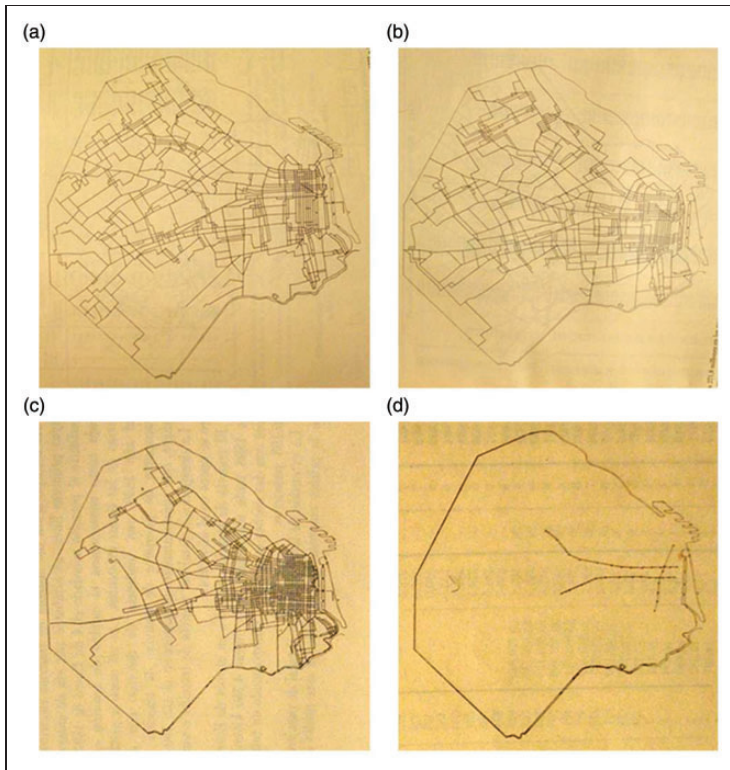


Figure 2. Public transport networks in 1936. (a) Colectivo network, (b) omnibus network, (c) tramway network and (d) underground network. Source: Revista de Estadística Municipal.

published reports about the traffic in Buenos Aires, supporting their arguments with 'scientific' studies. A 1928 pamphlet called *El Problema de la Congestión del Tráfico* [*The Problems of Traffic Congestion*], for example, was a study about congestion in many cities. The front cover of the pamphlet was emblazoned with propagandistic slogans such as 'the solution is not to remove the tramways and replace one tramway car with two buses or thirty cars'; 'tramways and omnibuses occupy ten per cent of the street and carry ninety per cent of passengers; private cars and taxis occupy ninety per cent of the street and carry ten per cent of passengers'.⁴⁸

AATC found a more favourable context for its campaigns in the early 1930s when the Argentinian national government rearranged the commercial relationships with Great Britain through Roca-Runciman treaty (1933). Under this agreement, Argentina had to give British transport companies preferential treatment in order to continue selling meat to Great Britain. This pact caused irritation among nationalistic groups and landowning oligarchy, although the sectors related to agriculture and ranching benefited from exportation (even though they also suffered from the tariff railway policy of British companies).⁴⁹ The President of AATC, Duke of Atholl, initiated a lobby in London with Argentinian and British authorities between 1931 and 1933.⁵⁰ For AATC management, this lobby was intended to deal with questions of competition of other motor vehicles, namely buses and *colectivo*. In terms of busses, the AATC had dealt with competition in 1920s by buying bus companies and including them in its own network, especially the lines in the peripheries, which fed the main central routes of tramways and the underground.⁵¹ The struggle against the *colectivo* involved a longer political fight, however. AATC's goal was the creation of a transport corporation, a private-public entity in charge of controlling all the modes of public transport, except railways. This was not a totally new idea. The concept had been debated in the previous decade among planners and politicians as a solution to organise and enhance the public transport system (though, naturally, for AATC the transport corporation was a tool to keep under control the *colectivo* business). Eventually, in 1936, the Argentina National Congress approved the formation of the *Corporación de Transportes de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* (Transport Corporation of Buenos Aires).

The making of the corporation did not stop the *colectivo*, but it did imply the end of the (horizontal) management of the *colectivo* by drivers' associations as the vehicles were expropriated. Drivers resisted through strikes – the most important of which took place in September 1936 during the parliament debates – refusing the confiscation of the vehicles, and simply moving the business beyond the city borders, offering the service in other towns. Although the strike of September 1936, which received popular support, was a hallmark of *colectivo* drivers' resistance, it could not prevent the expropriation. The change was momentary, because in 1940, under a new nationalistic government, the authorities privileged the motor public transport (omnibuses and *colectivos*) over tramways (which would be totally removed two decades later). A 1940 study of the Buenos Aires Transport

Commission recognised *colectivo* as a mode of public transport, with a wide acceptance. In the report, the passengers' preference for the *colectivo* was due to the service's 'fast-running vehicles' and 'having proved their worth in actual practice [...] they have definitely earned for themselves the favour of the travelling public'.⁵² Moreover, the opening the parkway *Nueve de Julio* in the central area (1936) and the ring-road *General Paz* (1937) offered new rapid spaces for car circulation.

Conclusions

The early years of the *colectivo* in Buenos Aires provide an interesting lens through which to analyse the use of cars for public transport, and particularly to view taxi sharing as a (bottom-up) technological and business innovation in urban mobility, supported by a new travel experience. The history of the *colectivo* clearly shows how mobility is, following Urry and Cresswell, an assemblage of movement, practices, meanings, technologies, and power.⁵³ The latter was expressed by the economic and political conflicts between *colectivo*'s drivers, authorities, and tramway companies and by the way in which the *colectivo* history was written and interpreted as a local invention that resisted 'imperialism'. Such power relations resulted in legislations that shaped the material form of the *colectivo*, eventually turning it into a hybrid vehicle, and eroded the self-organisation of *colectivos* cooperatives. This cooperativism is important to rethink the matter of the *colectivo*'s origin because it shows that it was not the creation of a single person but a social collaboration and production. In this sense, the controversies about the origin or the inventor are symptomatic of this more distributed agency.

Historians in Argentina have shown the emergence and evolution of the *colectivo*, and beyond the ideological interpretation about its success, the popularity of the *colectivo* deserved a deeper exploration which cannot be based only on the technological advantages of the car (like versatility) or the idea of convenience (like speed). It is important to understand why a mode of transport more expensive than the tramways, buses, and underground became an option for workers and professionals: this should be done avoiding explanations limited to economic or technological aspects. If mobility is a lived and meaningful experience, a cultural analysis becomes significant to understand and explain the effects of sharing an automobile for daily mobility in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Rather than social status, the experience of sharing a taxi offered a new experience of travelling based on comfort and sociability. If sharing a taxi signified the democratisation of the automobile, as claimed by some voices, what became democratic was not car ownership nor driving, but the experience of 'passengering', a concept used for ethnographic approaches, which might be adapted for a history of car travel.⁵⁴ This perspective is an important contribution not only to understand the success of the *colectivo*, but the historiography on the city and the car, which has been mainly based on the experience of driving.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors received financial support by CONICET.

Notes

1. See W. Locke, 'The Jitney Bus and Its Future', *National Civic Review*, 4:4 (1915), 604–10. See also D. Ross and G. W. Hilton, 'The Jitneys', *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 15:2 (1972), 293–325; B. A. Brownell, 'The Notorious Jitney and the Urban Transport Crisis in Birmingham in the 1920s', *The Alabama Review*, 25 (1972), 105–118; D. F. Davis, 'The Jitney Bus and Corporate Capitalism in the Canadian City, 1914–1929', *Urban History Review*, 18:2 (1989), 103–122.
2. For a genealogy of the models of *colectivo*, see http://www.busarg.com.ar/all_frm.htm (accessed 31 January 2018).
3. The most diffused story was H. Casal, *Historia del Colectivo* (Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1971). For a more critical approach: C. Achával, 'El Colectivo. ¿Un Invento Argentino?', *Todo es Historia*, 338 (1995), 8–25; A. Scartaccini, 'Las Cosas en Claro (El Colectivo no es un Invento Argentino)', *BusArg* (2010), http://www.busarg.com.ar/all_frm.htm (accessed 8 December 2014). An early and significant contribution is U. García, *El Colectivo* (Buenos Aires, Cámara Gremial del Transporte Automotor de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 1978).
4. O. Jensen, 'Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements – Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice', *Mobilities*, 4:1 (2009), 139–58.
5. E. Laurier, H. Lorimer, B. Brown, *et al.*, 'Driving and "Passenger": Notes on the Ordinary Organization of Car Travel', *Mobilities*, 3:1 (2008), 1–23.
6. C. Sargent, *The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1870–1930* (Tempe, Arizona State University, 1974).
7. Between 1928 and 1932 statistics about *colectivo* passengers are estimated using different sources.
8. Sargent, *The Spatial Evolution*.
9. C. della Paolera, 'Urbanismo y Problemas Urbanos de Buenos Aires', *La Ingeniería*, 660 (1929), 1–18.
10. 'Transporte', *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, 42:3 (1930), 66.
11. Comisión de Estética Edilicia, *Proyecto Urbano para la Urbanización del Municipio* (Buenos Aires, MCBA, 1925), p. 191.
12. Regarding the car in Argentina, see M. Piglia, *Autos, Rutas y Turismo: El Automóvil Club Argentino y el Estado* (Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2014).
13. J. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 166.
14. V. Rotta, *El Problema de los Transportes Colectivos en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, Concejo Deliberante de la MCBA, 1937), p. 69.
15. Della Paolera, 'Urbanismo', 12.

16. D. Zunino Singh, 'The Circulation and Reception of Mobility Technologies: The Construction of Buenos Aires's Underground Railways', in S. Fari and M. Moraglio (eds), *Peripheral Flows: A Historical Perspective on Mobilities Between Cores and Fringes* (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholar Press, 2016), pp. 128–153.
17. 'Se inaugurará el lunes un servicio de taxi-obus', *La Vanguardia*, 23 September 1928. Another Buenos Aires newspaper, *Crítica*, reported, one year later, that the Police central office was informed by the taxi drivers about the new service and that they were allowed by the Police, but there is no record about any official permission. See 'El Nuevo servicio de transporte tiene muchas ventajas', *Crítica*, 26 September 1929, p. 4.
18. '¿Cómo se va a llamar el nuevo servicio de taxímetros baratos?', *Crítica*, 29 September 1928, p. 2.
19. For similar experiences in other countries, see Scartaccini, 'Las Cosas en Claro'.
20. For example, Casal, *Historia del Colectivo*.
21. See Casal, *Historia del Colectivo*.
22. J. M. Ferrairo, 'Los Anarquistas y la Invención del Colectivo', <http://taxi.cnt.cat/associacio/article/1619> (accessed 27 January 2018); V. Gesualdo, 'La Historia del Colectivo', *Todo es Historia* (1988), 54–61.
23. García, *El Colectivo*.
24. 'El taxi-obus se impone al público', *La Vanguardia*, 30 September 1928, p. 1.
25. Feelings of discomfort with the public transport service are also registered in other cities of South America. See T. Errázuriz and G. Giucci, 'The Ambiguities of Progress. Cultural Appropriation of Electric Tramways in the Southern Cone, 1890–1950 (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil)', *ICON*, 22 (2016), 55–77; D. Zunino Singh, 'Meaningful Mobilities: The Experience of Underground Travel in the Buenos Aires Subte (1913–1944)', *Journal of Transport History*, 35:1 (2014), 97–113.
26. Zunino Singh, 'Meaningful Mobilities'.
27. In 1912 a Buenos Aires women's association demanded to be allowed to travel on the tramway's running board – which used to be forbidden for women – or to create exclusive tramways for women. In 1928, one car of the underground was reserved during the rush hours for women, children, and old people (who were considered weaker passengers) due to the hostility that these passengers suffered in the daily mobility. See D. Zunino Singh, 'A Genealogy of Sexual Harassment of Female Passengers in Buenos Aires' Public Transport', *Transfers*, 7:2 (2017), 79–99.
28. '¿Qué opina Ud. del taxi monedero', *Crítica*, 29 September 1928, p. 7.
29. This is well illustrated by a writer who in 1933 recalled with nostalgia the benefits of the car as a place free of rules (*libre de trabas reglamentarias*) in comparison with the new minibus: 'the classic urban *colectivo*' was 'fresh and ventilated' but with the new norm, 'under the pretext of evolution and progress', it came to be a 'reshaped *supercolectivo*, with nine or ten seats in an cage', which is moreover 'adorned with educational signs' such as 'Be nice to the ladies'; 'Do not smoke if there are women'; 'Close the doors carefully'; 'Pay with change'. See R. Parpagnoli, 'El Hombre Providencial', *Revista Crítica*, 22 (1933), 6.
30. '¿Cómo se va a llamar...?', *Crítica*, 29 September 1928, p. 2.
31. '¿Cuál es la Causa de tantos Accidentes Automovilísticos?', *Atlántida*, 29 September 1928.
32. G. Giucci, *La Vida Cultural del Automóvil. Rutas de la Modernidad Cinética* (Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2007).

33. Piglia, *Autos, Rutas y Turismo*.
34. See Councillor Ghioldi's claims in *La Vanguardia*, 2 October 1928, p. 4.
35. 'Qué piensa usted del taxi-monedero?', *Crítica*, 29 September 1928, p. 7.
36. Looking at the sources, it seems to be a fear fed more by morality rather than practice. A popular magazine, *El Hogar*, claimed that a women-only service was not necessary since cordiality was 'inevitable' in a *colectivo*. It commented with irony that maybe cordiality bothered the tramway and bus managers. For the magazine, 'unlike what happens in omnibuses and tramway-cars, where to address another passenger is indiscreet, in the *taxi-colectivo* to initiate a conversation would be right' because 'the *taxi-colectivo* establish human fraternity'. See 'El Taxi-Colectivo', *El Hogar*, 9 October 1928, p. 4.
37. R. Arlt, 'Resurrección Inesperada de los Chauffeurs', *El Mundo*, 9 October 1928, p. 4.
38. 'Ecos del Día', *El Mundo*, 10 October 1928, p. 7.
39. B. Schmucki, 'On the Trams: Women, Men and Urban Public Transport in Germany', *Journal of Transport History*, 23:1 (2002), 60–72; D. Zunino Singh, "'Sea Amable, Ceda el Asiento". Un Análisis Histórico Cultural del Comportamiento de los Pasajeros en el Transporte Público de Buenos Aires a Principios de Siglo XX', *Cuaderno Urbano*, 20 (2016), 5–26.
40. Or *proxemia* see E. T. Hall, *La Dimensión Oculta* (México D.F., Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2003).
41. Scobie, *Buenos Aires*.
42. 'Cuidado con los ómnibus', *La Razón*, 5 October 1928, p. 11.
43. Achával, 'El Colectivo. ¿Un Invento Argentino?'
44. For a detailed account of City Council debates on *colectivos*, see R. Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires, 1910–1942* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).
45. Concejo Deliberante de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Versiones Taquigráficas* (hereafter VTCD), 2 October, 1928, p. 1828.
46. VTCD, 9 October 1928, pp. 1927–44.
47. VTCD, 26 December 1932, pp. 4992–93.
48. Compañía de Tranvías Anglo Argentina, *El Problema de la Congestión del Tráfico* (Buenos Aires, s.p., ca. 1928).
49. M. Lobato and J. Suriano, *Nueva Historia Argentina. Atlas Histórico De La Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 2000).
50. García Heras, in his history of AATC, claims that railways were contemplated by the treaty, but not the AATC, as the latter was not supported by the UK government (AATC 50 per cent of share belonged to SOFINA, e.g. a German, Belgian, French syndicate). Nonetheless, an important Argentinian rail company, 'Southern Railways', which was not directly affected by the *colectivo*, supported AATC's claims by celebrating the Act. And, as Gorelik points out, the political context contributed to the AATC purposes. See R. García, *Heras, Transportes, Negocios y Política: La Compañía Anglo Argentina de Tranvías, 1876–1981* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1994); W. Rögind, *Historia del Ferrocarril Sud* (Buenos Aires, Establecimiento Gráfico Argentino, 1937); A. Gorelik, *La Grilla y el Parque* (Buenos Aires, UNQ, 1998).
51. García, *Heras, Transportes, Negocios y Política*.

-
52. Transport Control Committee of Buenos Aires, *New Principles in Urban Transportation Economy* (Buenos Aires, Ministerio del Interior, 1941), p. 17.
 53. J. Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge, Polity, 2007); T. Cresswell, 'The Production of Mobilities', in T. Oakes and P. Lynn Price (eds), *The Cultural Geography Reader* (London and New York, Routledge, 2008), pp. 325–333.
 54. Laurier *et al.*, 'Driving and "Passengering"'.