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INTRODUCTION

Low Expectations



FIGURE 0.1. Protest in Dupont Circle, July 19, 2016. Reproduced from Borderstan.com with permission by ARL Now.

Metro's a loser! We took an Uber!

—ANTI-METRO PROTESTORS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.¹

And so once you go into politics, it's not like Pinterest where people are putting up pins. You're changing the way cities work, and so that's fundamentally a third rail.

—TRAVIS KALANICK, UBER CEO²

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The D.C. fight confirmed everything we needed to know: Just like Uber was seriously disrupting the status quo in the taxi industry itself, we could disrupt the status quo of governing too. Calling entrenched interests out on corruption and pay-to-play politics wasn't new. Using your own app to mobilize your customers to swamp their elected officials with complaints was. This would be the thesis behind dozens of campaigns we've run for startups ever since.

—BRADLEY TUSK, UBER CONSULTANT³

In late July 2016, Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., hosted one of the more curious protests of recent times. Under the headline “Mystery Group of Young People Protests for Metro Privatization,” journalist Raye Weigel described the event as resembling an “after-party” for a “fraternity rush.”⁴ Part of Weigel’s assessment was the preponderance of young men in polo shirts, cargo shorts, and boat shoes. Another part of it, however, was the tone of the hastily scrawled messages on the posters they carried. Along with signs reading “Do you even Metro, bro?” and “Privatize the DC Metro, #Si se puede” there were some that were even more colorful—“Thomas the Govt. Train, you’re fired” and “The Metro is more lit than my mixtape” (a pointed reference to the rash of track fires that had recently shuttered large sections of the Metro system). As Weigel reported, there were chants as well. In a video released by *Borderstan* (an online news aggregator for the Dupont Circle, U Street, and Columbia Heights neighborhoods), protestors can be heard chanting: “Metro’s a loser! We took an Uber!”⁵

With all the makings of a practical joke, the protest fizzled as quickly as it had started. Nevertheless, it served as yet another reminder of a Metro system that for many in D.C. seemed broken beyond repair. When the D.C. Metro was constructed in the 1970s, explains historian Zachary Schrag in *The Great Society Subway*, it represented a “monument to confidence in the public realm.”⁶ Like

the Apollo missions or the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts, the capital's new transportation system embodied the ideals of the Great Society: a belief in the "power of government to do good" and a commonsense commitment to promoting public investments "suited to the grandeur and dignity of the world's richest nation."⁷ Quoting Lyndon B. Johnson, Schrag adds, Metro was an attempt to build "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community."⁸

As the protest at Dupont Circle seemed to suggest, by 2016 Metro no longer represented the "power of government to do good" or "the hunger for community." The system was literally on fire. In January 2015, an electrical fire in a tunnel near L'Enfant Station had left a mother of two dead from smoke inhalation. In August of the same year, a derailment had paralyzed large chunks of the system for hours. On the eve of the papal visit in early October, local commuters experienced yet more delays following a fire at a Metro power plant. In April 2016, the launch of the semi-ironic "IsMetroOnFire.com"—a website giving visitors real-time updates on which transit lines were currently engulfed in flames—illustrated the depth of the crisis.⁹

Few in D.C. may have taken the demand to privatize Metro seriously, coming as it did from a group of "meme-crazed millennials."¹⁰ Yet they did touch on some emerging realities. The Metro system *was* unreliable and ostensibly dangerous. And so, for many in D.C., car services like Uber and Lyft—often cheaper and more convenient than taxis—were a welcome alternative. "Metro's a loser! We took an Uber!" was not simply a chant but a description of how people traveled to work. By 2016, both Uber and Lyft had become household names (see appendix D). And while Metro's failures would raise the profiles of these ride-hailing companies considerably, their growth and success were attributable to other factors. As will become clear in the following pages, some of those factors were technological and economic; others were political and ideological.

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Uber did more than offer an alternative to D.C.'s existing transportation regime. It offered an alternative view of the public realm itself. Unlike Johnson's Great Society, in Uber's world the public realm was defined less by confidence and ambition than by apathy and a deep cynicism. Rather than an expression of heightened expectations or a self-assured belief in the power of government to meet people's material and social needs, the rise of Uber expresses a set of lowered expectations.

This argument contradicts much of what was promised by the on-demand or gig economy (alternatively called the app-based economy, online platform economy, or sharing economy). At least part of the growth and success of companies like Uber and Lyft (and Airbnb, TaskRabbit, Grubhub, and countless others) can be attributed to the expansion of broadband Internet, the ubiquity of smartphones, and new programming tools and Internet services.¹¹ Such technological innovations have opened up entirely new areas of economic activity while giving unprecedented power to corporations and diligent entrepreneurs eager to disrupt industries long believed to be immune to innovation.¹² The growth of these enterprises has relied on the extension of new information and communication technologies into ever more areas of people's social and economic lives. In addition, these enterprises have benefited from structural shifts in the broader economy. As writer and digital economy scholar Nick Srnicek argues, it is no coincidence that so many gig-economy companies trace their origins to the 2008 economic crisis.¹³ In a postrecession environment defined by both low interest rates and low rates of return on a "wide range of financial assets," investors were incentivized to find returns wherever possible.¹⁴ This strategy involved taking on additional risk by "investing in unprofitable and unproven tech companies."¹⁵ For tech companies associated with the gig economy, the economic conditions following the recession were favorable not only for raising venture capital but also for finding a workforce among the recently laid off and those otherwise facing a sudden loss of income.

The history of Uber offers a far more complex portrait of the gig economy. Rather than a simple story of financial capitalism, technological innovation, or a “diligent, intelligent and frugal elite” (to borrow from Marx’s quip on the “idyllic” origins of modern capitalism), the story of Uber is a story about the use and exertion of political force.¹⁶ It is a story in which Uber, in some instances, broke the law and then bent urban politics to its design, forcefully lobbying legislators to change the law it had just broken. This use of political power is what Uber CEO Travis Kalanick has called “principled confrontation” and what others have described more evocatively as “corporate civil disobedience.”¹⁷ And “disobedience,” in fact, was how Uber entered Washington, D.C.

As mentioned in the preface, in 2011 D.C. became the sixth city in the United States introduced to Uber’s nascent sedan service.¹⁸ As it had in San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, New York City, and Chicago, Uber entered D.C. with neither the approval nor the blessing of local regulators. In a matter of weeks, in a highly publicized sting by the D.C. Taxicab Commission, an Uber vehicle was impounded and its driver ticketed.¹⁹ Although Uber had faced similar resistance from regulators in San Francisco and New York City, D.C. was the first city where pushback came from municipal legislators. It was also the first city where such political resistance was overcome.

How did this take place? In early June 2012, D.C. legislators pushed back against Uber with the “Uber Amendment”: a provision proposed by the D.C. Council²⁰ mandating that fares for Uber’s sedan service start at five times that of a local taxi. The response from Uber was immediate. In an email to every D.C. resident who had used the service, Kalanick urged supporters to contact the council and voice their opposition.²¹ As he argued, the provision was plainly an attempt to prevent “Uber from being a viable alternative to taxis.”²² Rather than encourage choice and innovation, the “Uber Amendment”—according to Kalanick’s email—would accomplish the opposite. By protecting the local

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taxi industry from market competition, Kalanick added, the council was limiting consumer choice and blocking innovation. In short, the proposed legislation was antibusiness.

Kalanick's efforts proved fruitful. Over the next eighteen hours, the council was inundated with angry emails—more than fifty thousand of them—arguing against the minimum fare language. The provision, which had been introduced on a Monday at 4:00 p.m., was dead by that Tuesday afternoon.

This was what Kalanick called “Operation Rolling Thunder”—a reference to the aerial bombardment of military and civilian targets in the Vietnam War. The success of Uber's “operation” would reverberate, especially in those cities that dared to resist Uber's advance.²³

The local impact was notable. In the years that followed, D.C.'s initially combative approach to Uber was marked by a stunning reversal. By the end of 2014—just two and half years later—the D.C. Council had not only yielded to Uber's continued expansion in the city but also approved legislation that made the city, according to libertarian think tank R Street, the “best place in the country for transport app start-ups.”²⁴ Uber emerged victorious from the D.C. “taxi wars.”²⁵ To quote Uber investor Shervin Pishevar, the company had offered a glimpse of “a new local politics”—one in which tech and Silicon Valley were “exercising newfound muscles at the policy level in real-time.”²⁶

What did Uber's victory in D.C. mean? What, if anything, was “new” about Uber's approach to local politics? What exactly was at stake?

In exploring how Uber and other tech companies shape the political life of cities, this book starts from the presumption that the events in D.C. represent one of many efforts by Uber to consolidate economic and political power. At its broadest, however, the goal of this book is to place those efforts in context and to offer a critique of Uber that takes the company's popularity and its ability to inspire allegiance just as seriously as its role in undermining democratic urban governance.

Rethinking the Gig Economy

The material developed in the following chapters draws from interviews conducted in D.C. from 2016 to 2022. These were interviews with gig workers, city legislators, transit planners, staffers at regulatory agencies, tech consultants, Uber lobbyists, journalists, and others either directly or indirectly connected to Uber and the debates that erupted in D.C. following Uber's entrance there. In drawing on these interviews to make an argument about Uber, tech, and the nature of urban politics, *Disrupting D.C.* finds common cause with other scholars who—in their attempt to make sense of the changes wrought by the gig economy—have, like us, seen value in starting with the voices and lives of real people in real places.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a considerable number of these scholars have focused on questions of labor, particularly on what sociologist Alexandra Ravenelle, in her book *Hustle and Gig*, describes as the “contradiction between the lofty promises of the gig economy and the lived experience of workers.”²⁷ Companies like Uber, Lyft, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit have routinely pledged to provide workers a way to “be their own boss” or to “work when they want.” A growing number of writers and scholars—Alex Rosenblat in *Uberland*, Sarah Kessler in *Gigged*, Juliet Schor in *After the Gig*, Trebor Scholz in *Uberworked and Underpaid*, Tom Slee in *What's Yours Is Mine*, and Veena Dubal in “The Drive to Precarity”—have shown how such promises have fallen short.²⁸ Rather than countering wage stagnation, underemployment, or economic insecurity, the actually-existing gig economy, they argue, represents “crowd fleeing”²⁹ or, worse still, a return to “the bleak employment and living conditions of the early industrial age.”³⁰ The Dickensian mills of the industrial age, which once drew the scorn of everyone from Friedrich Engels to Jane Addams, have been transposed to city streets and thousands of glowing screens.

Yet the gap between the rhetoric and reality of the gig economy is, for many of these scholars, not the central concern. It is

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certainly worth noting that there are “contradictions between the lofty promises of the gig economy and the lived experience of the workers.”³¹ But this contradiction is just as concerning as the gig economy’s role in “upending generations of workplace protections,”³² “eviscerating a hundred years of workers’ rights,”³³ and extending harsh free-market principles into ever more areas of people’s social lives.³⁴ For many, the arrival of the gig economy simply marks the latest iteration of neoliberalism’s four-decades-long assault on workers, the public sector, and the poor.

For others, the dangers of the gig economy intersect with the dangers of what sociologist Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.³⁵ Pointing to the growth of corporations whose profits derive from the accumulation and commodification of personal data, Zuboff cites the increasing risks such corporations pose to both privacy and democratic accountability. Whether as an expression of neoliberalism or as an expression of an emergent surveillance capitalism, the consequences of the gig economy are similar. Gig supporters promise consumer choice, entrepreneurship, and market competition. But behind the rhetoric, we find a society increasingly defined by inequality, the erosion of public institutions, and the consolidation of elite class power—whether measured by wealth or measured by control of data.

Many of the preceding criticisms of the gig economy are crucial to an assessment of Uber’s role in catalyzing what one Uber investor described as a “new local politics” in D.C. Given the writings of Ravenelle, Kessler, Schor, and other scholars on the subject, it is easy to view Uber’s promise of “choice” and “innovation” as an expression of a quintessentially neoliberal project: behind the pledge to boost the income of D.C.’s low-wage workers is a simple attempt to secure market dominance. And Uber’s rollout in D.C. can be seen as a manifestation of Zuboff’s new surveillance capitalism.

Yet, in the chapters ahead, we paint a more complex portrait of D.C.’s “new local politics.” Most people we interviewed rarely spoke of class power, capital accumulation, neoliberalism, or the

political ramifications of surveillance capitalism. More often than not, they seemed to see Uber through the prism of a narrower set of questions, such as these: “To what extent is Uber a solution to the city’s transportation woes? In what ways will Uber redress D.C.’s legacy of racial discrimination, especially in the taxi industry? How might Uber build local economic capacity, encourage tech investment, or catalyze innovation?” And, for residents looking to supplement their income, “To what degree will Uber provide a solution?”

Few with whom we spoke held up Uber as a real solution to D.C.’s transportation, racial, economic, or employment challenges. Yet their expectations of the city and its democratic institutions were even lower. These people did not trust Uber to solve problems of racial polarization, stalled economic mobility, or concentrated poverty, but neither did they expect that such problems might be solved through public provision, urban public policy, or—dare we say—“politics.” This is the foundation of the book’s argument: that Uber’s success in D.C. and elsewhere hinges on exploiting a political and infrastructural vacuum and, in so doing, redefining what people expect from cities and the urban public realm.

Uber’s rise in D.C. was not simply a top-down imposition of its worldview on unsuspecting citizens. To see it as such fails to reckon with its popularity or to give full consideration to the many people we met for whom Uber was important precisely because it made sense. We met commuters frustrated with the Metro system and others long burdened by the inability to get a cab. We met drivers who were working for Uber to pay for an engagement ring, to monetize their commute to work, to afford their children’s college tuition, or to arrange their schedules so that they could take care of their families. We even met people who drove for Uber because they professed having too much spare time or because they were lonely.

What we found is that Uber’s growth in D.C. depended not only on its ability to exploit gaps in the city’s social safety net

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but also on its appeal to “common sense.” Common sense, here, refers to “the basic human faculty that lets us make elemental judgments about everyday matters based on everyday real-world experience.”³⁶ Common sense is “plain wisdom.” To quote media studies scholar Daniel Greene, common sense “emerges organically from practical responses to real problems in the real world.”³⁷ Can’t get a taxi? Call an Uber. Metro isn’t working? Take an Uber. Struggling with work scheduling or underemployment? Drive for Uber. Uber is commonsense because it is a sensible, practical, and rational response to any number of urban problems. For individuals and cities alike, Uber’s benefits “need no sophistication to grasp and no proof to accept.”³⁸

But to understand how Uber has reshaped cities around the world, it is worth invoking a different yet related meaning of common sense. Here, common sense resides in the realm of politics and ideology. It is shaped and diffused by institutions, political interests, and economic regimes. The prevailing common sense is both historically contingent and the product of political and class struggle. In this second meaning, Uber’s rise to the status of common sense is less a product of “plain wisdom” than it is an impressive political achievement and the product of a political struggle to reshape expectations.

The central argument of this book starts from here. *Disrupting D.C.* argues that where Uber (and tech in general) have intervened to shape local politics, such interventions have not been limited to legislation or public policy. Uber has intervened in the realm of people’s “commonsense” ideas of what cities can and should be. These ideas include where public transit goes, what constitutes a good job, how cities use data, and the nature of racial justice. Uber’s success in D.C.—and the success of the “new local politics” it catalyzed—is evidenced not only by the sheer number of people who seem eager to look to anything other than formal democratic politics as a way of solving urban problems but also by how many look to Uber for those solutions.

Uber and the Urban Question

This book focuses on the growth and expansion of Uber in D.C. We hope it will speak directly to anyone interested in how something as broad as the gig economy shapes urban politics. The chapters that follow draw connections to the work of scholars in many areas, from those working at the intersection of labor and urban studies³⁹ to the full range of scholars now documenting the tech sector's role in reshaping both the physical structure and the cultural life of cities.⁴⁰ Most significantly, however, the arguments advanced in the book will be of special interest to those working in the area of urban governance.

Since the 1970s, the bulk of studies analyzing urban governance have focused on questions of economic development.⁴¹ Often those analyses begin with some variation of the claim advanced by political scientist Paul Peterson in his book *City Limits*—namely, that “city politics is limited politics.” Peterson argues that cities are “limited in what they can do” and that “the powers remaining to them are exercised within very noticeable constraints.”⁴² Many of the debates both within and across disciplinary approaches to urban governance have hinged on how scholars interpret those constraints and how much political agency cities still exercise.

There is, however, a broad consensus in urban studies about the need for cities to be entrepreneurial. Specifically, many scholars agree that globalization, federal devolution, and state retrenchment (in areas of social provision, deindustrialization, suburban capital flight, and the hypermobility of capital) have all, in varying ways, forced cities to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach to economic development. As geographer David Harvey noted, the rise of the “entrepreneurial city” has erased substantive political differences and produced “greater polarization in the social distribution of real income.”⁴³ Other geographers, as well as political scientists like Peter Eisinger, have noted the same. In abandoning demand-side strategies to economic development, mayors and elected officials of widely different political orientations and

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cultural backgrounds have been forced to adopt the same suite of policies aimed at responding to interurban competition: aggressively courting real estate development through the use of tax abatements, enterprise zones, privatization schemes, and the selling-off of public property.⁴⁴ In this context, to quote Harvey, “even the most resolute and avant-garde municipal socialists will find themselves, in the end, playing the capitalist game, and performing as agents of discipline for the very process they are trying to resist.”⁴⁵ The distributional effects of such policies are almost always regressive. Municipal resources are directed toward enhancing the local business climate and attracting capital investment. Meanwhile, social services aimed at supporting poor and working-class residents invariably take a back seat. In some instances, the active presence and visibility of the urban poor themselves become a problem and threaten the business climate. Here, the response is the cleansing of public spaces and the promotion of “quality-of-life” policing.⁴⁶

Whereas studies of urban politics often begin by acknowledging the constraints on the development of more redistributive urban public policies, they differ in their treatment of the nature and extent of those constraints. In some instances, those constraints are unambiguous products of legal convention. It is generally understood that cities, as Peterson says, “cannot make war or peace; . . . issue passports or forbid outsiders from entering their territory; . . . issue currency; [or] control imports or erect tariff walls.”⁴⁷ For the most part, these are activities that cities just cannot do. The nature of party politics, the power of local elites, and the internal class structure of cities all pose their own limits. Cities, as a result, face a profound set of *political* and legal limits.

For many people, the most significant constraints for urban politics are *economic*.⁴⁸ The fact that cities require revenue to provide public services means that local politicians are limited by the imperatives of economic growth. Political coalitions form and dissolve based on their capacity to attract and retain capital and people. But they direct public policy to those ends too. From

broader transformations in the global economy to federal industrial policy, economic factors are decisive in shaping the outer limits of what types of public policies cities can and do undertake. Whether the focus is on deindustrialization in the Global North and suburban capital flight or the financialization of the municipal bond market, the consensus among scholars of urban politics is that the changes of the last fifty years have narrowed the options available to local policymakers, especially those seeking to prioritize the needs of their city's poorest residents.⁴⁹

Earlier studies of the urban growth machine, the entrepreneurial city, and urban regime theory have been succeeded by studies of the neoliberal city, the post-democratic city, and the post-political city.⁵⁰ Added to this list are the now numerous works on planetary urbanism.⁵¹

Many of the central questions, however, have remained the same. Given the imperatives of economic growth and the pressures of interurban competition, are cities capable of enacting policies that redistribute real income or that mitigate income inequality? What limits and constraints do city governments seeking to increase public provisions for marginalized or working-class communities face? How do such limits and constraints shape what local politics can be or what city residents expect from cities and politics? If “proper urban politics,” to quote geographer Eric Swyngedouw, “fosters dissent, creates disagreement and triggers the debating of and experimentation with more egalitarian and inclusive urban futures,” then what sorts of “proper politics” remain viable?⁵²

Consider how the rise of companies like Uber answers such a question. In 2015, before an audience assembled at a D.C.-based tech incubator, Uber strategic adviser David Plouffe touted the company's role in advancing the economic prospects of American workers.⁵³ As Plouffe argued, some of these economic benefits were indirect. He pointed to Uber's capacity to expand urban transportation options and provide service to communities that had long been marginalized. Noting the prevalence of “transportation

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deserts in every city in the world,” Uber was well placed, he said, to “quite literally transport people out of poverty.”⁵⁴ The days of transportation discrimination, he added, were over.

Plouffe claimed Uber offered a set of more direct economic benefits too. Citing problems of wage stagnation, student debt, and underemployment, Uber, he said, provided people a way of putting money “back in their pocket” and gave workers the “pay raise that they’ve been denied for years.”⁵⁵ Uber offered a necessary and flexible solution that would help the many people still struggling to recover from the 2008 recession. Toward the end of his remarks, Plouffe made a special appeal to city leaders and city regulators who were skeptical of Uber. He argued:

These are powerful economic effects—and by the way, they’re economic benefits that require zero government funding. We are not asking for special tax breaks like those who want to build a factory or headquarters in a city often do. We’re simply asking cities to allow their citizens to use their personal assets—their cars—to make money by driving their fellow citizens around their city.⁵⁶

As a senior adviser to President Barack Obama, Plouffe had spent five years intimately involved in federal debates on economic policy. His arguments for placing Uber, rather than the government itself, at the center of debates on wage stagnation and economic mobility are as notable as they are ironic.

Plouffe’s claims remain unsupported by evidence. Studies on Uber’s impact on low-wage workers are just as likely to prove that Uber has contributed to lowering labor standards or driving down wages as to prove that—as Plouffe would have it—the company has generally improved the prospects of American workers.⁵⁷ But what is worth noting is *not* that Plouffe’s claims are inaccurate. More important is that by making such claims, Plouffe is not just outlining a business model but advancing a political project. That project, to quote Uber CEO Travis Kalanick, is about “changing how cities work”—and doing so in the interest of securing market

share, increasing shareholder value, and consolidating economic and political power.⁵⁸ It is also a project that reinforces the widely perceived limits on what urban politics can be.

In discussing the problems of economic inequality and transportation injustice, Plouffe began where scholars of urban politics leave off. The fact that “city politics is limited politics”—that the power afforded to cities is invariably constrained by the imperatives of economic growth and a competitive global economy—helps explain why city governments of all political stripes so often fail their poorest residents. For Plouffe, unlike scholars like David Harvey and Peter Eisinger, this reality is not an indictment of federal policy or neoliberal capitalism. Instead, for Plouffe, such a failure is an argument for allowing Uber to do what city governments and politics allegedly cannot. The following chapters explore how this idea—to *just let Uber do it*—has become common sense.

The imperatives of growth, federal retrenchment, and the pressures of interurban competition have all limited the policy choices available to city governments. And so it is not surprising that arguments like Plouffe’s resonate. After all, Plouffe literally says it won’t cost the city any money to let Uber operate. As city politics and policies have ossified in the face of ever more rapid global flows of capital, tech companies like Uber have flowed into the economic and political vacuum to offer market-based and technocratic solutions. People’s level of trust in these solutions is low. But their belief that urban politics can do any better is even lower. Uber and similar companies benefit from these lowered expectations of city government.

Building on and extending scholarship about urban politics, this book maintains that lowered expectations are yet another constraint on policymakers seeking to secure a more egalitarian city. On the one hand, the truism stands that “city politics is limited politics.”⁵⁹ On the other hand, city politics is never more limited than when people stop expecting politics, especially democratic politics, to do anything at all.

Every Person for Themselves, Uber for Us All

Part of the story we've told thus far about Uber's success concerns the erosion of public confidence in cities. In addition, the story of Uber showcases the language of trust and confidence that has long served as the currency of many gig-economy behemoths associated with Silicon Valley. Indeed, the language of trust underpinned the early days of "the sharing economy."⁶⁰ This language was powerful but was also criticized.

Writing for *The Nation* in 2015, journalist Doug Henwood penned a trenchant critique of what was then still being described as the "sharing economy,"⁶¹ with a focus on Uber and Airbnb. Both companies, Henwood admits, embody the central appeal of the sharing economy—"the promise of using technology to connect disparate individuals in mutually profitable enterprise, or at least in warm feelings."⁶² But he adds that these warm feelings are belied by significant social costs. Airbnb, for example, has "grease[d] the wheels of gentrification" and exacerbated the housing affordability crisis.⁶³ Media coverage of Uber's sexual-harassment and corporate-espionage scandals overshadowed its broader costs to cities—be they due to urban congestion, falling transit ridership, increased pollution, or indebted drivers.

For Henwood, perhaps the most irksome element of the sharing economy is the language itself. The constant use of the words "disruption," "revolution," "movement," "collaborative consumption," and "sharing" seems designed to mystify what, for many, is merely the continuity of the "race-to-the-bottom" capitalism that has defined the last four decades. The sharing economy, Henwood argues, is, at its core, "a classically neoliberal response to neoliberalism."⁶⁴ In addition to representing the continued push for market-driven and individualized solutions to all of society's problems, the leading sharing-economy enterprises consciously seek to take advantage of the postrecession economic instability. Henwood's core argument is straightforward: "The sharing economy is a nice way for rapacious capitalists to monetize the

desperation of people in the post-crisis economy while sounding generous, and to evoke a fantasy of community in an atomized population.”⁶⁵

This book expands on many of Henwood’s claims. In D.C., for example, Uber has attempted to monetize the post-2008 economic anxieties of people in many ways: from Black residents’ frustration with a discriminatory taxi industry (chapter 2) or the anxiety of workers looking for extra income (chapter 5), to the harried attempts by elected officials to make D.C. appear either innovative (chapter 1) or smart (chapter 3) or invested in the future itself (chapter 4). Though *Disrupting D.C.* shares Henwood’s criticism of the sharing economy, it endeavors to go beyond the “‘simple Scooby-Doo Marxist’ exercise of pulling the mask off the villain to reveal that, yes, indeed, it was capitalism . . . all along.”⁶⁶ This means acknowledging how Uber speaks to people’s real and genuine needs while also pointing to the dangers it poses to the democratic institutions that define our cities. The argument to *let Uber do it* is an argument that sacrifices democratic accountability for consumer convenience.

Few people expect Uber to completely solve problems of economic inequality, or even to offer a suitable alternative to something as vital as public transit. Still, the fact that even fewer people expect city governments to offer an alternative is a problem not purely for policymakers but for all people committed to the idea of self-government. After all, despite their problems and limitations, cities remain accountable to a polity in ways that companies like Uber do not.

For some observers, the rise and expansion of Uber and companies like Uber is further evidence of a decades-long process that has restyled citizens as consumers. As *n+1* contributing editor Nikil Saval has argued, such a campaign has always been a core part of Uber’s strategy.⁶⁷ What Uber and other ride-hailing companies understand, Saval argues, is that “under capitalism . . . the figure of the consumer can be invoked against the figure of the citizen.” Where consumption “has come to replace our original

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ideas of citizenship,” the ultimate role of the state becomes offering citizens choices or stepping aside so that enterprises like Uber can do so.⁶⁸ The dangers posed by Uber are not merely the dangers of unfettered capitalism. They are dangers associated with control.

To what extent, Saval asks, “do we want an entire transportation order at the mercy of the ride-sharing companies?” Can the idea that we should control how we move through a city be made a matter of public policy? Since Uber seeks to push legislators to answer yes to the first question and no to the second, the lesson should be clear. What Uber wants “cannot exist alongside a democratic society.”⁶⁹ This statement makes a rather bold claim, and many people with whom we spoke in D.C. might think it too bold. *Disrupting D.C.* not only offers a defense of this claim; it lays out what happens when the idea of *just let Uber do it* becomes common sense. This idea, we argue, leads to a politics of greatly diminished expectations. It also leads to cities where the “we” of politics is narrowed to the citizen consumer alone. In such cities, active political participation becomes indistinguishable from brand loyalty, democracy becomes little more than clicktivism, and the most important decisions facing voters are consigned to choosing between Uber and Lyft rather than choosing between policies aimed at improving transit and creating more living-wage jobs.⁷⁰

The Case Study: Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., occupies a unique place in the history of Uber. It was in D.C. that the company “created a playbook” for how to deal with intransigent regulators.⁷¹ It was also in D.C. where the success of “Operation Rolling Thunder” offered critics a glimpse of the company’s political power—a power that would find expression in campaigns the world over.⁷² As will become evident in subsequent chapters, in D.C. Uber trialed many of the tactics that it would later deploy nationwide in its efforts to stay exempt from

providing workers with employee benefits, such as its 2020 campaign for Proposition 22 in California and a copycat ballot initiative in 2022 in Massachusetts.⁷³

In the context of debates about urban governance, however, D.C. is hardly unusual at all. Despite its status as a federal district—and, thus, something of a jurisdictional anomaly—few cities offer a clearer picture of the problems of income inequality, racial polarization, and municipal sclerosis, as well as the constraints on what elected officials can do to resolve such issues. As in many North American cities, decades of underinvestment have left our nation’s capital in a bind and with a stunning list of delayed infrastructure projects. The shame of its crumbling transit infrastructure has been particularly notable and was illustrated by the wave of track fires that beset Metro in 2016—the target of the “Metro’s a loser!” protest with which we started this chapter.⁷⁴

The historic dominance of the federal government has separated D.C. from most American cities.⁷⁵ However, the relative strength of D.C.’s service sector—which is largely a by-product of this dominance—has made the capital a forerunner for the postindustrial city.⁷⁶ The trajectory of local politics has been familiar too. Irrespective of political orientation, every administration since its founding—from the mayor down to the D.C. Council—has placed the promotion of real estate development at the core of its economic strategy.⁷⁷ A 1969 *Washington Post* article began by noting, “What steel means to Pittsburgh, cars to Detroit, tobacco to Durham, cattle to Kansas City, oil to Houston—that’s what real estate means to Washington.”⁷⁸ On this score, little has changed.

At least since the mid-1990s, the specter of gentrification has hovered over almost every policy debate—from those on education and charter schools, to those on housing and economic development, to those on bike lanes, coffee shops, and go-go music.⁷⁹ After D.C. lost its designation as a majority minority city in 2011, such debates have only intensified in a city that has, as scholar Brandi Summers writes, long been a “fiercely and firmly recognized Black place.”⁸⁰

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In short, D.C. residents face challenges similar to those in cities across the country, and they do so despite the city's distinct history and the particularity of its institutions. These are challenges directly related to the ever-familiar gap between what cities can actually do and the various crises they must work to resolve. Uber has succeeded in D.C. precisely by presenting itself as a solution to these crises. As such, the city is an augur for all those concerned about the quality and future of urban life across the United States.⁸¹

The Plan of the Book

Across five chapters, *Disrupting D.C.* traces Uber's political intervention into local debates over regulation (chapter 1), racial discrimination (chapter 2), data (chapter 3), automation (chapter 4), and labor (chapter 5). As we note in each chapter, Uber appeals directly to those seeking a ready fix to urban problems that are often structural in origin. While the chapters take up different topics, each builds toward the argument that Uber's intervention in local politics works at the level of public policy as well as at the level of people's commonsense expectations.

As we illustrate in chapters 1 and 2, to the extent that Uber has succeeded in pitching itself as a fix to an allegedly racist and archaic local taxi industry, it has reduced people's faith in the public institutions mandated to address such problems. And, even worse, it has advanced notions of racial justice and modernization that leave many inequalities intact. We show in chapter 3 that, for transportation planners and regulators (who view data sharing as central to solving various problems associated with traffic congestion), Uber has been both a resource and cause for frustration. While the expectation that data sharing will benefit the city has gone unquestioned, even less attention has been paid to the labor conditions under which that data is produced. Although many people expect D.C. to become a smart city, few expect that such a city will require giving workers rights to the data they produce.

In chapter 4, we look at Uber’s promise of the self-driving car and its role in shaping drivers’, venture capitalists’, and city boosters’ expectations. Irrespective of their feasibility, autonomous vehicles function ideologically to provide an outlet for investment capital and to ensure labor compliance. These fantastic promises relegate the concerns of present-day workers and residents to the figurative back seat. As we illustrate in chapter 5, Uber—especially in its appeals to flexibility—has played on workers’ expectations. In addition, it has worked to structure the job in ways that limit collective action, that individuate work, and that lower expectations concerning what the job should provide. We show how the very strategies that Uber has employed to manage its workforce have also, at certain moments, unintentionally laid the groundwork for solidarity among workers.

In the book’s conclusion, we explore what is required to raise expectations and to offer a new commonsense view of urban politics. The economic aftershocks of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we argue, pose new challenges and opportunities for those seeking to reimagine what cities and city politics can be—with or without Uber.



With the exception of the introduction and the conclusion, each of this book’s chapters is adapted from material published or presented in other venues. Chapter 1, developed and written by Katie J. Wells, is adapted from “Urban Governance in the Age of Apps,” a talk delivered at Data and Society in New York City in March 2020. Chapter 2, developed and written by Kafui Attoh, is adapted from “Uber’s Racial Strategy and Our Own,” a talk delivered at the November 2018 *Anti-Blackness and the City* conference in Baltimore. Chapter 3 was developed and written by Kafui Attoh and is adapted from “‘We’re Building Their Data’: Labor, Alienation and Idiocy in the Smart City,” published in 2019 in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Chapter 4 was

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developed and written by Declan Cullen and is adapted from “Taking Back the Wheel,” published in *Dissent* magazine (online) in 2019. Chapter 5 was developed and written by Katie J. Wells and is adapted from “Just-in-Place Labor: Driver Organizing in the Uber Workplace,” published in 2021 in *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*. While Katie J. Wells and Declan Cullen took the lead on the conclusion, Kafui Attoh took the lead on the preface and introduction. The appendixes and figures were developed by Katie J. Wells, with the cartographic help of Alicia Sabatino.

1

On Not Being a Dinosaur

So, D.C., they adopted our view of the world, I think. And that's why it's one of the best models for us.

—UBER LOBBYIST¹

There is nothing more difficult than to be a stepson of time; there is no heavier fate than to live in an age that is not your own. . . . Time loves only those it has given birth to itself: its own children, its own heroes, its own laborers. Never can it come to love the children of a past age.

—VASILY GROSSMAN, *LIFE AND FATE*²

On January 13, 2012, Ron Linton, the chair of the D.C. Taxicab Commission, ordered an Uber car from his smartphone. At the time, Uber was operating in only five other American cities. Linton, an eighty-two-year-old man who had spent six decades in local public service, including the police department, was frustrated. D.C.'s municipal government—the D.C. Council, the office of the attorney general, and the mayor—had yet to confront Uber about whether the company was breaking the law by offering a chauffeur service whose unlicensed livery drivers lacked

commercial insurance policies and charged by mileage (instead of time). So, Linton took matters into his own hands. He scheduled an Uber ride to a hotel downtown. At the end of the ride, and just as planned, taxi enforcement officials were waiting. They issued the Uber driver a \$1,650 fine and impounded the vehicle.³ Linton had set up and starred in his own sting.

Public debate arose immediately. While few denied that Uber's operations in D.C. violated the law, the question remained: What should D.C. policymakers do about it? Three answers emerged: (1) change Uber to accommodate the law; (2) change the law to accommodate Uber; and (3) whatever is done, make sure the city does not appear to be anti-innovation.

Linton argued for the first option. In making his case, he found himself on shaky ground. While attacking Uber for breaking the law, he stood at the head of an organization with its own legal issues and with a questionable public-relations record. In 2009, the commission had been caught in an FBI investigation of thirty-nine taxi drivers charged with conspiracy to bribe officials for taxi-company licenses.⁴ Leon Swain Jr., Linton's predecessor, who notoriously carried a gun to taxi-commission meetings, was fired for unknown reasons in 2011.⁵ Then, a few months later, the arrest of two journalists for taking photographs⁶ at one of the taxi commission's supposedly public meetings added to the general sense that the taxi commission was corrupt.

Linton wanted Uber to agree to licenses, inspections, and other requirements akin to those for the taxi industry. "Regulations," he wrote, "make sense out of chaos."⁷ But Linton's belief in the power of the government to regulate seemed old-fashioned. It made him not only a dinosaur in the age of apps but what author Vasily Grossman might call "a stepson of time."⁸

The second option for what to do about Uber was argued by David Alpert, a young Google retiree with a locally focused blog called *Greater Greater Washington*.⁹ Alpert was sympathetic to Uber and advocated to change local laws to accommodate Uber. He wrote that his preference for Uber derived from a preference

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