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Private/Public Transport

The Private Provision of Public Transport

Jonathan Richmond. A. Alfred Taubman Center for State and Local Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2001. 185 pages. \$25 (paperback).

Jonathan Richmond's opus, *The Private Provision of Public Transport*, should be required reading for all researchers and practitioners involved in the delivery of urban mass transportation. Surveying the current state of privately-subcontracted bus transit in Denver, Indianapolis, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and San Diego, as well as the politics of jitney vans in Miami and New York, Richmond has provided a much needed, calm, nonpolemical synopsis of where transit privatization now stands in the U.S.

Richmond makes some important points about transit privatization. He makes it clear that the privatization issue has become ideologically polarized on both sides of the debate, with too little attention being paid to the real needs of transit riders, many of whom have no alternative to transit. Organizations protect their interests, even if these conflict with those of transit users. All too often, he notes, customers are treated in a paternalistic fashion, with little attention being paid to their travel needs.

Various works (to which Richmond refers the interested reader) address the finances of privately-operated bus service, but this book goes straight to the question of how various cities have implemented privately-operated mass transit. *The Private Provision of Public Transport* is above all an examination of the interaction between politics and a vital public service. Richmond's analysis is unlikely to please either union officials digging in their heels against all change or the more strident proponents of privatization who

fail to make crucial distinctions between tactics that build public support and those that alienate it. Those seeking a more workable middle ground, however, will find this book well worth reading.

A couple of points bear mentioning so that readers will be prepared to draw the greatest benefit from *The Private Provision of Public Transport*. First, Richmond's admirable in-depth research sometimes overwhelms the unwary reader. The structure of some chapters seems to be guided more by the author's interviews than by a continuous historical narrative. Second, Richmond does not take a strong and unambiguous position on the negative aspects of the jitney van services in Miami and New York. These problems have included lack of proper insurance, failure to observe proper protocol following accidents, and such unsafe driving practices as cutting ahead of other vehicles to pick up passengers. This apparent ambivalence about jitney vans contrasts with his responsible position on the need for operators under contract to public transit authorities to provide good, reliable bus service. Nonetheless, these two issues should not distract readers from the main thrust of the book.

Richmond raises some intriguing questions that perhaps he or other authors—or transit managers—will address. Can American cities find a middle ground between the common refusal of labor to negotiate with transit management about any form of contracting and the insistence by some privatization advocates on using outsourcing to cut labor costs even if this affects the quality of service? Are innovative, customer-friendly forms of transit like the jitney vans in New York and Miami inherently deficient in such aspects as licensing, insurance, and safety? Can the customer-responsive aspects of the vans be preserved while bringing them up to transit industry standards of safe, responsible operation? In addition, what can the experiences of such cities as London, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Melbourne, and Sydney teach us about different ways to implement competitive contracting in the U.S. context?

Accessible to researchers and practitioners alike, *The Private Provision of Public Transport* promises to become the definitive coverage of the current state of affairs in transit privatization in the U.S. at the

opening of the 21st century. If transit officials, privatization advocates, and organized labor are to find ways to make contracting work in a way that delivers greater value and safeguards the fundamental interests of all parties, Richmond's book is an excellent place to start.

John G. Allen

Allen is a senior transit analyst at the Regional Transportation Authority in Chicago. A planner and researcher, he has published several articles about transit issues in *Transportation Research Record* and has conducted extensive research on transit privatization, resulting in the *RTA Bibliography on Transit Privatization* (Regional Transportation Authority, Chicago, 1999).

Counting People

Fixing the Census Until it Breaks: An Assessment of the Undercount Adjustment Puzzle

Kenneth Darga. Michigan Information Center, Lansing, MI, 2000. 320 pages. \$20 (paperback).

This is Kenneth Darga's second book on the 2000 census adjustment question. His first was essentially his 1998 congressional testimony with followup rejoinders (*Sampling and the Census*, The AEI Press, 1999). The question he asks in *Fixing the Census Until it Breaks* is, "Does the current adjustment methodology make the Census more accurate?" (p. 3). His answer is not a definitive "No," but he casts so much doubt that one cannot say "Yes" with any confidence.

In chapter 2, Darga outlines 17 obstacles to collecting accurate data for the regular census. All but two of these obstacles affect the followup Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (ACE) survey that, after being matched by name and characteristics to the full census, was to determine how many and what kind of people were missed. He argues that "... the most obvious conclusion... is that the current adjustment methodology is based upon a survey that is subject to much more serious errors than the census itself" (p. 108). As a former Census Bureau professional employee with a healthy deference to the expertise and cumulative experience of the agency, but with real field data collection and geography experience, I found