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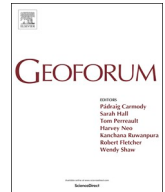
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# Moving in informal circles in the global North: An inquiry into the *navettes* in Brussels

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of informality has been largely dismissed in discussions about urban mobility in the global North. To address this, we explore the case of the *navettes*, informal vans that operate in the unlikely and unfriendly formal transport landscape of Brussels. Relying on qualitative fieldwork, we examine their economic model, low profitability, labour conditions, and the conflicts and legal struggles over their regulatory endorsement. By approaching the *navettes* as informal urban mobility practice in the global North, we attempt to bridge geographical and conceptual divides between research into urban informality and critical perspectives on urban transport and mobilities. We thereby deconstruct the dominant framing of informality as a “Third World” problem by showing that a range of supposed “negative externalities” of flexible transport are not necessarily addressed by the State’s regulatory and administrative capacity. Drawing on informality literature from global South and East, we argue that in Northern cities such as Brussels, where precarious transport workers like the *navettes* drivers are ignored and criminalised, while corporate “digitalised”, “shared” and “circular” mobility solutions are endorsed, (in)formality is a site of conflicts over what is considered (un)fair, (un)just and (il)legitimate. As a result, we demonstrate how diverse experiences and theorisations of informal mobility in the global South and East can inform inquiries into transport practices in the global North.

## 1. Introduction: informality on the margins of the Brussels-South station

On a Monday morning, the Brussels-South station (Bruxelles-Midi/Brussel-Zuid), commonly referred to as “Midi”, is teeming with travellers. Arguably the busiest transport node in Belgium, Midi is first and foremost a railway station bringing passengers from across the country, including the suburban agglomeration surrounding the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR). It also handles international intercity and high-speed trains operated by public national railway companies of Belgium, France, and Germany, as well as private international operators such as Eurostar and Thalys. To reach the station, most passengers take one of two metro lines, six tram routes and 21 bus services offered by three regional public transport companies. Those who prefer a door-to-door service can either find an official “classic” taxi, or use a “digitalised” service provided by local taxi aggregating apps. Alternatively, they may opt for one of app-based “shared” services promoted by the regional authorities responsible for mobility (Bruxelles Mobilité), enabling

short-term rental of cars, motorcycles, bicycles, and scooters.

On the margins of this complex landscape of officially recognised transport services and formal regulatory regimes, one finds a practice that enjoys much less visibility. Just ten metres from the Eurostar platform (see Fig. 1 below), alongside a small street adjacent to elevated train tracks, a string of several black vans are parked. Their destination is the Brussels South Charleroi Airport (BSCA), Belgium’s second busiest airport. It hosts primarily low-cost services, in particular those provided by Ryanair, for whom BSCA is the fourth largest base.<sup>1</sup> Commonly referred to as the *navettes*, the vans cannot be found on any official map, no signs point to their stop, nor inform of their timetable and prices. Instead, the drivers try to establish direct contact with potential passengers, as the latter head towards the “official” private bus connecting Midi with BSCA, operated by the Luxembourg-registered company FlibTravel International SA (Flibco). Herein lies the informality of the *navettes*, for the official taxi regulations in the BCR forbid taxi drivers to solicit passengers, and to offer individual seats in shared taxis.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the number of routes (airport-pairs) provided by Ryanair from BSCA in 2018. Source: OAG.



**Fig. 1.** The informal black vans (*navettes*) can be seen (bottom-left) directly from the Eurostar platform of the Bruxelles-Midi station (right), in a striking juxtaposition of transport modes that operate at radically different levels of (in)formality, (in)visibility and regulatory endorsement. Source: authors.

Albeit located in the very heart of Belgium's highly formalised, regulated and elaborate transport system, the *navettes* operate on its fringes. Relying on qualitative fieldwork, in this article we offer the first academic account of the *navettes*. We attempt to understand how they operate, and how they struggle for legitimacy in the unlikely and unfriendly context of the transport landscape of Brussels. We approach the *navettes* as one of many urban mobility practices of the global North that largely depend on informal practices as a basis for their operation, while remaining partially regulated or formalised (Best, 2016; Goldwyn, 2018). However, responding to the lack of engagement with informality in transport literature that examines cities in the global North, as well as to the recent calls for decolonising knowledge about transport (Schwanen, 2018; Wood et al., 2020), we scrutinise the *navettes* through the lens provided by the literature on informality in the global South and East.

Thus, we offer two theoretical contributions. First, we attempt to bridge geographical and conceptual divides between the literature on urban informality and critical perspectives on urban transport and mobilities. Although scholars exploring Northern cities have increasingly engaged with informality as a “site for critical analysis” (Banks et al., 2019), they have rarely examined transport practices, focusing instead on urban planning, housing, and land ownership (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019; Kamete, 2017). At the same time, critical research into urban transport has engaged with informality almost exclusively to study practices in the global South and East (cf. Best, 2016; Goldwyn, 2018). As evidenced by the rise of “disruptive”, “digitalised” and “shared” mobility platforms (Collier et al., 2018), transport may constitute one of key sectors for advancing broader processes of informalization in the global North (Malin & Chandler, 2017; Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018a). Therefore, looking into the case of the *navettes* in Brussels, we suggest that critical research into transport and mobilities may benefit from taking the lens of informality seriously, and vice versa, that transport can be a meaningful entry point for analysing urban informality.

Second, we critically scrutinise the literature on informal practices in urban transport in global South and East, revealing its epistemological and theoretical diversity, with a share of scholars exhibiting Eurocentric, economic and a-political viewpoints. Our review enables us to ask “Third World questions of First World informality” (Devlin, 2018, p. 1), and reflect “how and why studying urbanism in the global South might matter for the reconceptualization of critical urban theory” (Roy, 2016, p. 200). We do not attempt to analyse the case of the *navettes*, a practice found in the global North, in the light of Southern

and Eastern experiences *per se*. Rather, we explore it through competing and conflictual theorisations of transport and informality. As a result, we contribute to deconstructing the dominant framing of informality as a “Third World” problem, and question the myth of near-complete formality in the global North (Jaffe & Koster, 2019). The story of the *navettes* shows that a range of so called ‘negative externalities’ of flexible transport, including labour precarity and self-exploitation, are not necessarily resolved due to the State's high regulatory and administrative capacities, as anticipated by mainstream neoclassical writings on informal transport (Cervero, 2000; Gwilliam, 2001). Moreover, as voiced by post-colonial writings on urban informality, the case of the *navettes* illustrates how the State defines and uses informality as a tool for establishing boundaries between what is legal/illegal and legitimate/illegitimate, who is included and who is marginalised (Roy 2005, 2011, Moatasim, 2019). We argue that in cities such as Brussels, where precarious transport workers like those operating the *navettes* are ignored and criminalised, while corporate “digitalised”, “shared” and “circular” mobility solutions are endorsed, (in)formality becomes an important site for contestations over dignity, inclusion and justice.

In what follows, we begin by reviewing the limits of mainstream, neoclassical literature on informal transport in cities of the global South, and identify critical strands of research on informal transport and urban informality in the global South and East. Relying on these insights, we provide a brief overview of the transport landscape in Brussels, pointing out how the local urban regime obfuscates the rising informality in transport. Finally, we explore the *navettes*, examining their *modus operandi*, economic model, low profitability, labour conditions, and the conflicts and legal struggles over their regulatory endorsement. We conclude by reflecting back on implications of the discussed case on existing knowledge on informality and urban transport.

## 2. Drawing the limits of mainstream informal transport literature

To begin unpacking a mobility practice such as the *navettes*, one has to look beyond the transport and mobility research from the global North. Geographical inquiries into informality have traditionally approached it as an experience “vital to billions of people living in rapidly growing cities in the global South” (Evans et al., 2018, p. 674). Hence, most accounts have focused on localities in the global South (Ehebrecht et al., 2018; Heinrichs et al., 2017) and the global East (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018b; Sanina, 2011; Sgibnev & Vozyanov, 2016; Turdalieva & Weicker, 2019). In the global North, informality is hardly considered as a phenomenon worth exploring theoretically or empirically, and remains largely associated with a marginal and insignificant range of economic practices (Slavnic, 2010; Williams, 2013). The “supposed incommensurability” of the Southern and Northern experiences draws “a dividing line between the economic hubs of the Northern and the Southern megalopolis” (Hilbrandt et al., 2017, p. 946). Accordingly, in Northern urban contexts informality is occasionally mentioned to invoke historical practices (Dienel & Vahrenkamp, 2018; Flonneau, 2018; Schwantes, 1985), rather than applied as an analytical category for studying contemporary mobility. Yet, as suggested by the existence of the *navettes*, informality is not necessarily constrained to marginalised and peripheralised localities, but can thrive right within extensively regulated and complex transport networks and hubs. A small body of transport literature has challenged the dominant disregard for informality in the North, demonstrating how practices such as informal commuting (Mote & Whitestone, 2011) and “dollar vans” (Best, 2016; Goldwyn, 2018) enable mobility in North American cities, while in Western European municipalities informal institutions of transport governance increasingly complement formal ones (Rye et al., 2018). The importance of examining and theorising informality in urban transport is further amplified by the rise of digital technologies and “shared” modes of mobility, which, albeit rarely referred to as informal, contribute to labour informalization (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018a) and precarity (Malin & Chandler, 2017). It is to this small but growing

body of work that we contribute below, exploring informality in transport in a Northern context by drawing on experiences from the South and East.

Studying how informality shapes the *navettes* further requires deconstructing the predominantly Western gaze that has thus far scrutinised informality in predominantly a-political, economic and technocratic ways. Mainstream informal transport literature remains largely detached from critical research into mobilities (Adey, 2010; Cresswell, 2006; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006), political economy of transport (Enright, 2016; Kębłowski et al., 2019; Vanoutrive et al., 2018), and informality and diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Morris & Polese, 2014a; Williams, 2004)—particularly in urban settings (McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2009) and among marginalised urban populations (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019; Kamete, 2017). Resonating with the continued dominance of neoclassical and sustainable perspectives in transport research and policy (Kębłowski & Bassens, 2018), this literature remains Eurocentric, privileging “Western” knowledge and experience of producing and governing urban transport, promoting market-based competition, and techno-economic “best practices” and “fixes”. Equating informal transport to *laissez-faire* transportation (Cervero, 2000) geared towards economic efficiency (Gwilliam, 2001), it downplays the socio-spatial situatedness and variegation of informal transport, obfuscates questions of power, (in)justice, as well as unequal distribution of social and environmental burdens related to mobility governance.

Analysing diverse mobility services, ranging from tricycles and motorbikes to vans and minibuses (Cervero, 2000; Finn & Mulley, 2011; Kumar et al., 2016), the mainstream literature on informal transport conceptualises “informality” as lack of licencing or official endorsement from public authorities (Cervero & Golub, 2007). Fascinated with their versatility, demand-responsiveness, and adaptive capacity, informal transport scholars have accordingly called for diversifying the “transportation marketplace” in cities of the global North (Cervero, 2001; Finn, 2012). Well aware of the “downsides” of informal transport such as over-crowding, reckless driving, congestion, safety and pollution, these authors nonetheless believe these drawbacks are to be explained by the lack of investment and administrative capacity. While “such problems exist because most third-world countries are too poor to invest the resources needed to license and monitor private carriers and to enact and enforce regulations” (Cervero, 2001, p. 18), in the “developed” context of the global North the State’s regulatory capacity is expected to eliminate negative externalities generated by informality.

Hence, Eurocentric mainstream approaches to informal transport do not provide relevant tools for exploring a practice such as the *navettes*, whose existence, we argue, cannot be explained by the alleged lack of investment and regulatory capacity of public authorities. While the *navettes* might seem as an insignificant practice, unworthy of the State’s recognition and regulation, the rising popularity in Northern cities of digitally powered mobility services, which often challenge the boundaries of formality and legality, shows the urgency of attending to informality in transport. Somewhat ironically, the various “digitalised”, “shared” and “circular” platforms for ride-sharing and ride-sourcing (Rayle et al., 2016) draw on discourses of environmental sustainability, social mutuality, sharing, and opposition to private ownership (Hamari et al., 2016; John, 2013; Richardson, 2015), rather than emphasising the economic efficiency allegedly entailed by the departure from public towards more *laissez-faire* practices. Yet, the early confidence of informal transport scholars in the regulatory capacity of urban authorities in the global North, avoiding negative externalities, and bypassing “third world” problems, cannot be taken for granted. Recent research has clearly shown that municipal authorities across the North and South struggle to find regulatory responses to policy and regulatory disruptions heralded by ride-sourcing companies such as Uber (Collier et al., 2018; Spicer et al., 2019), and few critical solutions to their adverse socio-environmental impact can be found in mainstream informal transport literature.

### 3. Learning from critical writings on informality and mobility

Given the shortcomings discussed above, we argue that an analysis of the *navettes* as an informal practice in the global North may well be informed by diverse experiences and theorisations of informal mobility in the global South and East. In what follows, we articulate a two-fold learning. First, we suggest that the still marginal critical writings on informality and urban mobility in the global South and East can provide important insights, notably regarding otherwise invisible actors, such as transport workers. Second, we believe that much is to be learned from the recent critical writings on informal economic practices in general, and urban informality in particular.

As discussed earlier, understanding the persistence of the *navettes* entails setting aside pre-existing assumptions about the State’s weakness and incapacity as root cause for informality. Given the insufficient scientific and institutional attention to the *navettes*, we argue that this case should be scrutinised by methodologies and epistemological approaches engaging with voices and rationales of individual actors that operate particular services and vehicles. In the past decade, a small but growing circuit of critical scholars of informal transport have challenged the systematic omission of these actors (be it casual wage labourers or owner-drivers) in geographical inquiries into transport and mobility (Diaz Olvera et al., 2016; Parsons & Lawreniuk, 2016). Although the growing critical work exploring the political economy of urban transport and mobility has demonstrated the profoundly uneven and unjust ways in which urban transport is provided and governed (Enright, 2016; Kirouac-Fram, 2012; Qamhaieh & Chakravarty, 2016), this research has primarily focused on power-elites on the one hand, and diversity of mobility users on the other. Put simply, while “State bureaucracies, jet-setters, business people, international elites come under scrutiny [...] when most scholars talk about the people who “control” flows, [transport] operators are seldom named” (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 122).

By contrast, the recent literature on informality and urban mobility acknowledges the implications of precarity of transport workers as well as their agency, suggesting that “transport workers need to be seen as not just impacted by, but also constitutive of mobility provision and related (in)justices” (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018b, p. 1376). This body of work challenges the assumption that informal transport systems can be self-sufficient or even profitable, and can simultaneously address social needs and equity issues expected from formal public transport systems. Recent scholarship has proposed the concept of “paratransit” as a way of deconstructing the homogenising notion of “informal transport”, embracing “services [that] are not necessarily provided by informal businesses or unregulated” (Salazar Ferro & Behrens, 2015, p. 123). In this way the construed divide between the predominantly informal South and formal North is challenged (Schalekamp & Behrens, 2010), enabling researchers to focus on a spectrum of in/formality across different transport practices, opening space for studying cases such as the *navettes*, which albeit regulated, are enabled by their partially informal character.

Importantly, critical readings of informal transport question the idea that its workers operate as thriving, free spirited entrepreneurs (De Soto, 1989, 2000). Without disregarding their agency (Agbibo, 2016) and their capacity to engage in political mobilisation (Sopranzetti, 2018), this literature shows how informal transport sector relies on extreme (self-)exploitation of labour. Sustained precarity, lengthy working hours and fierce competition for passengers may all lead to unsafe driving practices, low vehicle safety, and poor service quality (Rizzo, 2011). Informally employed labour force operates at very low profitability margins and is excluded from social or labour protection schemes, often with little to no access to vehicle or health insurance (Spooner, 2011). Nonetheless, informal transport workers should not be perceived as a homogeneous group, since complex and fragmented ownership systems and class divisions may undermine their capacity to act collectively and work towards solidarity rather than competition



(Rizzo, 2011). Given the prevalence of negative stereotyping and marginalisation of informal transport workers across geographical contexts, in their individual or collective narratives about their biographies and occupation, transport workers reassert their dignity and trustworthiness (Bürge, 2011). In sum, this literature profoundly undermines the growing fascination with private, competitive, “shared” urban mobility services by complicating their assumed free market orientation and emphasizing complex social and labour injustices arising from flexibilisation of urban transport offers.

Besides drawing on critical literature on informality and transport, we further suggest mutual learning between literatures on urban informality and urban mobilities. In mid-2000s, urban scholars from the global South emphasised the significance of informality as “a ‘new’ way of life” (AlSayyad, 2004), an important metaphor, and an analytical tool for understanding cities. They further claimed that informality would shape general theorisation of urbanities, since “older modes of urbanism are being replaced by ‘new’ forms of urban informality that challenge the relevance of previous thinking about ‘blasé’ urbanites (*Ibid.*, p. 9). Indeed, the concept of informality has been increasingly used “to point to a plethora of processes that are key to different areas of urbanization, including housing and economies” (Hilbrandt et al., 2017, p. 946). Yet, just as informal transport literature often ignored theoretical debates in urban informality literature, the latter overlooked urban mobility as an important empirical entry point and a theoretical frame. This negligence is regrettable given the increasing importance of urban mobility sector in exposing contestations over legality, legitimacy, regulations and their implications of workers and mobility users worldwide (Collier et al., 2018).

We observe several reasons why theorisations on informality arising from research in south-east Asian (Pow, 2017; Roy, 2005), African (Lindell, 2008) and Eurasian cities (Morris & Polese, 2014b; Rekhviashvili, 2016) can be critically important when discussing the case of *navettes* in particular, and urban mobility scholarship in general. First, this perspective undermines the assumption that formal and informal practices constitute analytically separable entities, and the claim that informality stems from the State’s institutional weakness and incapacity. Second, it illustrates how across the South as well as the North informality is often actively constructed by the State. As noted by Roy (2009), informality is “inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized. This relationship is both arbitrary and fickle and yet is the site of considerable state power and violence”. The State’s shifting and fluid character generates arbitrary legal structures that can be manipulated to support certain actors, while marginalising and criminalising others (Roy, 2011). Third, scholars further challenge the perception of informality as a phenomenon constrained to marginalised spaces and communities. They document how corporate and political interests are articulated through “elite informality”, a “terrain where various actors of the ruling elite, either independently or in collusion with large private developers, work to produce high-end spaces of informality” (Moatasim, 2019, p. 1010).<sup>2</sup> In sum, their findings disprove the assumption about the State’s inability to control informality, and instead highlight the active power of public authorities to draw arbitrary boundaries between formality and informality, leading to a differential treatment of urban mobility practices. Below we build on these insights and adopt a workers-centred approach for uncovering the logics of an informal transport practice such as the *navettes*.

#### 4. Transport context in Brussels: an urban regime obfuscating rising informality

The Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) is not an obvious setting for exploring informality. The capital of Belgium, the 5th richest region of the European Union (EU) in terms of GDP (Eurostat, 2019), and the seat of EU institutions, Brussels gives the appearance of a city in which, much like across the global Northern landscape, transport is a matter (over-) regulated by various authorities and regimes. At Midi, the particular node where we began this paper, the amalgam of transport services and modes involves a multitude of operators embedded in legislative and political frameworks articulated at the regional (BCR, Flanders, Wallonia), federal/national (Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom), and international level (the EU regulations). The core regulatory framework is provided by regional authorities responsible for mobility, Bruxelles Mobilité, governed by one of BCR’s five ministers.

Transport policies in the BCR are shaped by a long-standing domination of neoclassical perspectives on the urban mobility, which continue to perceive it as a motor of economic growth (Kębłowski & Bassens, 2018). Ever since the 1950s, investment in car infrastructure was meant to provide essential links between jobs located in the BCR and workers who predominantly reside in the suburbs, located beyond the city’s administrative boundaries. In recent years, this rationale has been increasingly questioned by “sustainable” approaches to transport policy, which notably emphasise the need to reduce private car mobility and improve the quality of public transport. Yet, this debate obfuscates several key issues, which are in turn noted by marginalised and fragmented critical views on the transport *status quo* in Brussels (Kębłowski et al., 2019). First, the BCR continues to be governed by a techno-managerial urban regime that aligns the interests of engineering and construction business with political agendas of the local officials. This regime produces a post-political consensus around transport provision that hinges on investing in costly underground public transport infrastructure to bypass the challenge of limiting automobility (Zitouni & Tellier, 2013). Second, current mobility agendas do not address deep-rooted socio-spatial inequality in terms of access to different modes of transport (Lebrun, 2018), which contributes to rising poverty and (youth) unemployment. Third—a critique that is particularly relevant to the arguments developed in this paper—official agendas of policy makers as well as transport researchers veil ongoing informalization of the transport sector by making little (if any) reference to diverse informal practices, of which *navettes* are but one example. Put simply, transport informality is supposedly absent in the BCR.

Instead, the growing variety of transport practices that involve informality are framed by Bruxelles Mobilité as instances of “shared”, “smart” and “circular” mobility, allegedly working towards puncturing and, eventually, breaking the paradigm of individual vehicle ownership (Kębłowski et al., 2020). Many “digitalised” forms of mobility have flourished in the BCR in recent years, providing app-based access to “shared” cars, motorbikes, bicycles and electric scooters. In 2018 the then BCR’s Minister for Mobility, Public Works and Road Safety publicly encouraged e-scooter companies to use Brussels as their playground for testing mobility solutions to “change the paradigm” of mobility (Carton, 2018). While the regional authorities welcome such services, they pose urgent regulatory challenges, notably regarding the working conditions they offer. At the same time, the transport landscape in the BCR also embraces services that enjoy much less visibility and regulatory support. Besides the *navettes*, they include buses and vans connecting Brussels with a smattering of international destinations—primarily in North Africa and Eastern Europe—reflecting the city’s super-diverse migrant communities. In line with insights from urban contexts in the global South and East (Moatasim, 2019; Roy 2005, 2011), these bottom-up, non-“digitalised” practices are largely absent from the public debate, with much more attention given to app-based, corporate services.

<sup>2</sup> Even if it sometimes disconnected from the post-structuralist literature on urban informality, the research on post-socialist Eurasia has made similar observations, pointing out widespread informalization of lifeworlds as well as public governance systems (Ledeneva, 2006; Rasanayagam, 2011).

## 5. Moving in informal circles: the case of the *navettes*

### 5.1. Methodology

Our interest in the *navettes* has grown as one of the authors frequently used their services as a passenger, travelling the Midi-BSCA route at least 40 times in the past nine years. Since the *navettes* had attracted no scientific scrutiny before, we approached them in an exploratory manner. Inspired by “geographical ethnography” that explores “what further insights might come from a fuller engagement with social action in situ” (Hitchings & Latham, 2019, p. 1), as well as by critical literatures on transport and informality, we began by engaging in participant observations on board of vehicles, and at their stops at Midi and the BSCA, to observe the drivers’ behaviour and organisation. This method provided insights into the daily routines of drivers, their in-group relationships as well as ways they relate to passengers and navigate the urban space. Building on knowledge about diversity of informal transport practices in the global South and East, we prepared a list of broad themes, including external regulations to which the *navettes* are exposed, their organisation, and labour conditions, which we discussed with 15 drivers in 62 short interviews. Each interview was informal and semi-structured, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and was conducted in French.

The fieldwork took place from February to October 2019, and was strongly affected by the sensitive nature of the case. As we explain below, since the drivers partly engage in an illegal activity, they risk police controls, and therefore fear giving potentially incriminating evidence. Crucially, this means that some of our questions about the drivers’ personal biographies and professional backgrounds, as well as in-group organisation and decision-making—could not be answered, or even asked. Following reflexive social scientists that observe how “each research site presents its own unique challenges” (Hitchings & Latham, 2019, p. 2), we interpret these absences to be meaningful for understanding the positionality of the *navettes* as an informal practice located in a highly formalised and regulated urban context. Nonetheless, a number of drivers were supportive of our research, and expressed their hope that informed knowledge about the *navettes* reaches the local media and policy-makers. To address the drivers’ concerns and comply with ethical guidelines of our institutions, we did not record the interviews, and instead took extensive post-interview notes, making detailed observations, and recalling specific quotes verbatim. This material, as well as excerpts from regional laws regulating mobility in the BCR, was subsequently translated to English, and coded according to research themes suggested by literatures reviewed in sections 2 and 3 above.

### 5.2. *Navettes*: what they are and how they work

The drivers’ *modus operandi* is simple. Officially, the *navettes* operate as individual taxis, licensed by the Bruxelles Mobilité, albeit they use large vans rather than regular sedan cars. At Midi, they are parked at a taxi stand located directly opposite the official stop of the formal bus to BSCA, run by a Luxembourg-based operator FlibTravel International SA (Flibco) (see Fig. 2 below). According to the BCR regulations, the drivers cannot offer individual seats in their vehicles (Moniteur belge of 1 June 1995)<sup>3</sup>, and are prohibited from directly approaching potential passengers, or “touting” for business (Moniteur belge of 3 May 2007)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Article 1, point c) of the document stipulates that “where the vehicle is used as a taxi, provision of transport shall relate to the whole vehicle and not to the individual seats, and where it is used as a shared taxi with the authorisation of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, provision of the transport shall relate to individual seats and not to the vehicle itself”.

<sup>4</sup> Article 31, point 7 of the document stipulates that drivers are to be prohibited from “touting for custom or having others tout on their behalf”.

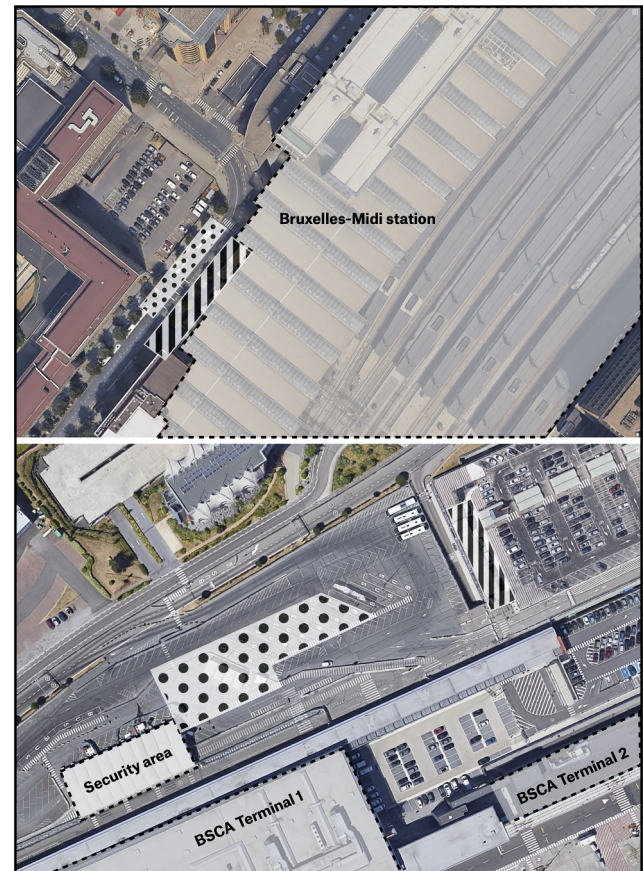


Fig. 2. The position of the *navettes* stands (marked in striped pattern) at Midi (top) and BSCA (bottom), compared to Flibco bus stops (in dotted pattern). Source: authors. Background: Google Maps (Accessed 15 December 2019).

However, customers are allowed to decide sharing a vehicle. Providing a shared means of transport is thus the core informal aspect of the *navettes*. As sharing is banned by formal regulations, it relies on an informal, indirect and *ad hoc* agreement between the driver and passengers. Once passengers exit the Midi station building and walk towards the Flibco bus stop, they are informally (and illegally) approached by taxi drivers, who offer them a ride to BSCA. Unlike many contexts in the global South and East, where informal shared transport often forms part of a daily urban experience, at Midi many passengers realise that they are about to share a ride only upon seeing and talking to other passengers waiting inside or around a van. Nonetheless, some passengers approach the taxi stand on their own initiative, presumably knowing what the *navettes* are, and how they function. Drivers load each passenger’s luggage into the trunk of the car, and charge them upfront for each seat. Normally, all eight seats need to be taken for the vehicle to depart, although when there is less customers, drivers occasionally leave before their van gets full.

At the BSCA, the location of the *navettes* is much less strategic. Before the terrorist attacks in Paris (in November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016), a taxi stand was located directly in front of the exit from the arrival hall, and the drivers were allowed to enter the terminal building to approach customers. Tightened security at the BSCA means that the taxi stand is now located approximately 200 metres outside the terminal building. On their way from the airport, passengers first pass an additional security area installed in a large tent, from which they head directly towards the Flibco bus stop. The taxi stand is located 70 metres further, but is not signposted in any way. The drivers are strictly forbidden from approaching potential customers. Hence, only the customers with prior knowledge of collective taxis opt for this mode of transport from BSCA to Brussels South, resulting in smaller passenger



volumes. According to some of the drivers interviewed, the *navettes* have existed in this form for at least 20 years. At first, however, similarly to the official bus linking Brussels with BSCA, they departed from the European quarter, a neighbourhood located approximately three kilometres north-east from Midi, in which most offices of key European Union (EU) institutions are located.

### 5.3. How does one become a *navettes* driver: “in theory, anybody can join us”

At first glance, the *navettes* operators seem to comply with the assumptions of neoclassical, mainstream informal transport literature (Cervero & Golub, 2007; Finn, 2008). They act as flexible economic actors geared towards generating profit and building competitive advantage in the supposedly “free” framework offered by the market—seemingly in line with De Soto’s (1989, 2000) conceptualisation of informal workers as free spirited and potentially prosperous entrepreneurs. The drivers themselves claim that the informal character of their labour means that the entry threshold for their activity is attractively low. They proudly state that “in theory, anybody can join us, anybody can show up one day with their car, and start picking up passengers” (Driver2, 8 February 2019). Seemingly corroborating the claim that informality entails high individual flexibility and adaptability (Cervero, 2000), a few drivers describe themselves as individual entrepreneurs taking economic and personal risks by breaching local regulations to seek additional income on a seemingly profitable route: “here, everybody takes care of himself [sic] [...] and everybody works for himself [sic]” (Driver7, 22 February 2019). Yet, before arriving at Midi to look for passengers, a driver needs to accumulate significant capital. To begin with, they require a vehicle. Typically, the *navettes* use an 8- or 9-seat diesel Mercedes Vito Tourer, which, according to the carmaker’s official website for Belgium<sup>5</sup>, costs between 34,122€ and 36,545.63€. However, adding automatic gearbox (observed in nearly all taxis we entered), and black colour (obligatory for all taxis in Brussels) puts the cost above the 40,000€ bar. The cars often have leather seats and air-conditioning, incurring further costs. As in several taxis we have observed two personal licences on display, it is possible that drivers share their vehicles. However, none of the drivers interviewed wanted to discuss this issue.

Besides purchasing the vehicle, each operator needs to become an official licensed taxi driver, by obtaining a “taximan” licence. Its cost is established by a regional law (Moniteur belge of 1 June 1995) and amounts to 575€ per year (Article 14). Other fixed costs related to obtaining the official “taximan” status (Article 33) include exam enrolment, introductory course, test enrolment, official certificate, ID card, and official authorisation demand. Besides spending 10 days attending courses and exams, these costs amount to the total of 194,5€. The drivers also need to invest in a taxi metre (ca. 2600€), credit card reader, receipt printer and vehicle insurance (350€ to 550€ per year<sup>6</sup>). To navigate the complexities of the Belgian tax system, many drivers pay for an accountant. Therefore, contrary to the mainstream vision of informal transport as an open and easy-entry market, becoming a taxi driver requires, to the least, significant entry investment. Equally important seems prior knowledge about the taxi sector in Brussels. Despite their reluctance to discuss their personal background, nearly all our interviewees had worked as taxi drivers outside the Midi-BSCA route, an experience they consider essential to operating the *navettes*. Moreover, all *navettes* drivers we have encountered are of immigrant background, which—following insights from other urban contexts where taxi markets are characterised by ethnic segmentation (Mitra, 2012;

Slavnic, 2015)—suggests that they are more likely to be dis-embedded from the local labour market.

### 5.4. Low profitability, poor working conditions and stiff competition: “it’s a dog’s job”

Operating the *navettes* means experiencing low profitability, poor working conditions and stiff competition, contrasting with the neo-classical narrative that praises alleged flexibility and market orientation of informal mobility services. Herein become relevant the insights offered by the literatures on urban informality, and informal transport in the global South and East. For, much like in a plethora of post-Soviet, Latin American or African cities, driving an informal van in Brussels involves precarity and self-exploitation of workforce. Put simply, there is little money to be made on the Midi-BSCA route. A return trip generates an income of 240€, as passengers (maximum eight per ride) pay 15€ for a single trip<sup>7</sup>. The fuel cost for a return trip amounts to approximately 20€<sup>8</sup>. Airport parking costs vary, as some drivers pay per entry, while others use daily or long-term passes. Drivers claim that on most days they make one or two round trips. Moreover, they suffer from low visibility at Midi: “it often happens that I drive to [BSCA], and wait for hours to get enough passengers to return. I sometimes return to Brussels empty, or with just one or two passengers. [...] I lose money this way.” Because of many idle trips from the airport, most drivers who agreed to talk about their personal income assess that, with fixed costs deducted, a day’s work allows them to make a profit of approximately 40–60€. Hence, if a driver works five days a week, their average monthly income falls between 900€ and 1350€. Adding a sixth working day, a practice reported by most drivers, increases the salary to 1080€ to 1620€, which nonetheless remains a low figure compared to average monthly net salary in Belgium (2025€) and Brussels (1870€) (BISA, 2019).

Notably, these figures reflect only the profits made from illegally operating on the Midi-BSCA route. Some of the drivers occasionally quit the route to provide legal rides to individual passengers heading to other destinations, within or around Brussels. However, engaging in these infrequent trips may constitute an economic risk and disruption for the drivers, since upon their return to Midi or BSCA they are positioned at the very end of the queue. As one driver describes it: “You may have to wait hours to get your van filled, but once you do, it’s decent money. It’s worth the wait. You have to be patient. [...] But if somebody wants to go somewhere near, here in Brussels, I may go for it. Sometimes you need the money right away” (Driver12, 23 October 2019). Others point out the reliability of the Midi-BSCA route for both passengers and drivers: “It’s the most honest taxi post in all of the 19 municipalities of Brussels. In other taxis sometimes passengers take a ride for only 3€ or 5€, or drivers try to get more money [by taking a detour]. Here it is clear how much you pay, and how much you earn” (Driver 9, 2 April 2019).

The drivers’ readiness to take high individual risks comes at a high price, showing that an allegedly flexible and “shared” transport practice such as the *navettes* involves a series of complex social and labour injustices. Even though, unlike many informal transport operators elsewhere (Spooner, 2011), taxi workers in Brussels are protected by health and vehicle insurance, embraced by labour protection schemes, and required to follow regulations stipulating maximum working time, a

<sup>7</sup> Until winter 2019, this income was slightly lower, as passengers paid 13€ departing from Midi, and 15€ departing from BSCA.

<sup>8</sup> For average diesel fuel price in Belgium 2018 (obtained from [www.mylpg.eu](http://www.mylpg.eu), personal communication) which amounted to 1,502€ per litre) this cost should amount to 14,58€ both ways. However, as the vehicles used are not new, and the drivers often engage in speeding, or are stuck in traffic, this amount could be increased by at least one third, reaching approximately 20€ both ways. This calculation has been confirmed by several drivers.

<sup>5</sup> [www.mercedes-benz.be](http://www.mercedes-benz.be), accessed on 10 May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> The precise insurance cost is difficult to determine, as it depends on each driver’s age, the date when they obtained their first driver’s licence, the insurance company’s general policy, and current market offer.

large share of the operators interviewed complain about their working conditions and economic situation. Similarly to their faraway peers in cities of the global South and East (Agbiboa, 2016; Rizzo, 2016), the *navettes* drivers, too, engage in sustained self-exploitation. Their working hours are very flexible and long, and nearly all interviewees claim to suffer from persistent tiredness, sleep deprivation and high stress levels. As one driver reports, “one of the best ‘shifts’ begins in early morning hours, soon after 3am. But some of us begin even earlier.” (Driver11, 10 April 2019). An unofficial division of labour is in place, as “there’s attackers and defenders. Attackers start at 12.30am, they are there very early. Defenders start at 9am” (Driver8, 10 April 2019). Moreover, at neither Midi nor BSCA is there sufficient infrastructure sheltering workers from bad weather, or providing space for resting in-between trips. Instead, the drivers try to relax in their own vehicles, or stand in small groups on bare asphalt and concrete, near the vehicles. Crucially, they admit that their current profession does not open up new prospects, and laugh when asked about career perspectives: “you don’t even realise how time flies here, I’ve been working here for 10 years, I don’t know where they have gone. [...] I’m stuck here, I have nowhere to go” (Driver13, 14 May 2019). Another driver conveys the gist of his profession, “it’s a dog’s job, write it down” (Driver2, 11 October 2019).

The grim reality of the *navettes* is strongly related to the unpredictability and instability of generated income. The drivers report that they can “hardly make any money here” (Driver1, 8 April 2019). As one operator told us, “sometimes I come back home with 10 euros in my pocket, after I paid the gas. I can’t look my wife in the eye. I feel broken” (Driver 7, 11 October 2019). Thus, in line with insights into informal transport workers elsewhere (Spoonner, 2011), engaging in informal transport provision in Brussels involves operating at extremely low profitability margins, which are influenced by a variety of external factors remaining beyond the workers’ control, or even out of their sight. Importantly, their willingness to continue working within the sector suggests that they are excluded from formal labour market.

Most drivers agree that while “some days are good, others are terrible. It almost feels like a lottery” (Driver9, 2 April 2019). The *navettes* operators, first, depend on a steady flow of passengers to and from BSCA. Passenger figures have increased almost every year since Europe’s largest low-cost carrier, Ryanair, opened its first route from BSCA in 1997. Today, Ryanair offers 88 routes from the airport, which helped it to pass the 8 million passenger threshold in 2018<sup>9</sup>. However, operations at BSCA are occasionally suspended due to strikes of airport staff, traffic control, and airline personnel. According to our interviews, while these events are nearly impossible for the *navettes* operators to predict, they severely affect their income, as occasional periods of low or no demand rapidly erode their extremely low capital. Second, the informal *navettes* face a strong and direct competition with an established, “official” bus, operated by Flibco. The company offers a dynamically priced tickets, issued for the day of travel, although it is very unlikely to purchase them at less than the maximum price (14€ one way if purchased on-line; 17€ if on board of the bus<sup>10</sup>). A one-way trip takes approximately 55 minutes. The competitive advantage of buses run by Flibco clearly relates to their formal character: advertising in arrival halls at BSCA and at the airport’s website, signposting at both termini, following a formal schedule with departures at regular intervals (every 20–30 minutes), cladding the buses and staff in characteristic bright green colour. Moreover, in November 2019 Flibco began to operate Gate2Door, an on-demand minivan service connecting passengers from BSCA to specific drop-off and pick-up address in Brussels, and part of its suburbs. Customers can either pay for the whole van, or for individual

seats, in which case they ride in a shared vehicle, paying from 14€ to 34,99€ per seat<sup>11</sup>.

In competition with Flibco, the *navettes* operate at higher speeds, reaching the airport in 30–40 minutes. They are also more flexible: when demand on the Midi-BSCA route suddenly increases, they can run more frequently, while Flibco is unable to provide additional buses, making its passengers experience longer waiting times. The drivers do not appear to raise fares at periods of high demand, nor to decrease them when demand is low. Similarly, we have not observed any instances in which drivers would cheat passengers by offering higher or lower fares to specific types of passengers (e.g. overcharging tourists while providing discounts for children, friends or family). The advantage of the *navettes* comes at a price, however, as drivers frequently engage in speeding and reckless driving, and do not check if passengers wear seatbelts. The drivers further identify among their “violent competitors” (Driver1, 8 February 2019) the many ride-hailing apps such as Uber and Heetch, which “are the darlings of Bruxelles Mobilité” (Driver3, 13 February 2019), even though “they don’t give a sh\*t about any regulations” (Driver4, 13 February 2019). However, this conflict does not seem to be affecting the Midi-BSCA route, where the *navettes* offer lower prices than the taxi-aggregating apps<sup>12</sup>, presumably attracting customers that accept to share a vehicle with strangers, and to follow an established route to/from Midi, instead of opting for an individual and more expensive door-to-door ride.

Hence, the *navettes* prevail to a large degree not because of their market-likeness and flexibility as falsely predicted by the neoclassical literature, but rather due to their stance against market-likeness, avoidance of demand-driven price fluctuations, and emphasis on honesty, reliability and predictability. Similar to observations regarding informality and urban mobility in the South and East (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2019; Rizzo, 2016; Sopranzetti, 2018), the decision to drive a *navette* is not merely an entrepreneurial choice, but rather a tactical move allowing to compete with formal actors, which leads to insecurity, self-exploitation and marginal profit rates.

### 5.5. Struggling for and against formal regulations: “we feel forgotten, we feel ignored”

The informal character of the *navettes* has further consequences regarding how the drivers position themselves vis-à-vis formal institutions and regulations. As discussed above, the BCR authorities forbid taxi operators from offering shared vehicles and touting for business. Breaking these rules exposes the drivers to occasional police controls and fines, a process they describe as a “something like a game [...] between a cat and a mouse. The cops know we [approach] passengers, but we can’t be too obvious. When they are around, we have to stop [soliciting passengers] for a while, then we continue” (Driver 14, 30 May 2019). This is in tune with punctual yet regular media coverage, largely portraying the *navettes* as a “pirate” (Meulders, 2018) mode of transport run by a “mafia” (Lacapitale.be, 2018). The *navettes* are said to offer “clandestine” services (Belga, 2018) that are dangerous, chaotic, and in urgent need of regulation (Keszei, 2017), which resembles negative stereotyping of informal transport observed in urban contexts elsewhere (Bürge, 2011).

The (re)articulation of illegality of the *navettes* relates to a court case initiated by Flibco. In May 2014 Flibco brought in to the Commercial

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.brussels-charleroi-airport.com/en/key-figures>, accessed on 4 June 2020.

<sup>10</sup> See “General Terms and Conditions of Sales at flibco.com”, <https://www.flibco.com/en/agbs>, accessed on 2 December 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The price varies depending on the point of departure/destination in Brussels, time of booking, and number of passengers. At the time of research, for a trip from Midi to BSCA booked one month in advance the price per seat amounted to 29,99€ (when booking is made for one passenger), 24€ (booking for two passengers), 19€ (three passengers) and 16€ (four passengers).

<sup>12</sup> According to the official apps (accessed on 30 January 2020), a single Midi-BSCA ride costs approximately 80€ with Heetch, from 73 to 98€ with UberX (4 seats), 111–148€ with Uber Black (4 seats) and 120–160€ with Uber Van (6 seats).



Court (Tribunal de l'entreprise Francophone de Bruxelles) a legal action against a group of 54 drivers on grounds of “unfair competition”. Flibco rightly identified two areas in which the operators broke the law: they “tout for custom among passengers at the Bruxelles-Midi train station who are travelling to Charleroi Airport in order to group them together in ‘van-type taxis’” and “group passengers together who have the same destination, [and] charge for the service by passenger” (Flibtravel International SA and Leonard Travel International SA v. AAL Renting SA and Others, Case C-253/16, ECLI:EU:C:2017:211, decided 15 March 2017). Consequently, the bus company was “seeking an order preventing the continuation of practices which [...] are acts contrary to honest market practice.” (Ibid.).

The legal quest for “honesty” on the Midi-BSA route took several years. Even if the *navettes* drivers do not form an official association, and given unfavourable media coverage shy away from discussing whether and how they make collective decisions, they did mobilise to respond to the legal case opened by Flibco. They attempted to defend their economic activity by referring to EU law. Specifically, as advised by their lawyers, they evoked Article 96(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012) that protects the free market in transport sector, stating that no EU Member State can support or protect specific transport providers, unless authorised by the European Commission. The operators mustered a number of arguments to defend the claim that the *navettes* should be protected by the Treaty: first, a significant part of their customers are EU citizens that are not citizens or residents in Belgium; second, for majority of passengers the taxi ride constitutes a part of a longer journey that begins or ends in another EU Member State than Belgium; therefore, third, they provide an international rather than national service, even if they not cross international borders. Consequently, the drivers argued, regional and federal authorities in Belgium cannot prohibit operators from providing collective taxi services, offering individual seats, predetermining ride destination and touting for custom. Nonetheless, in July 2016 the Court of Justice ruled that Article 96(1) TFEU did not apply to this case, and drivers were condemned by the court for unfair competition against Flibco.

Having lost the legal battle against the State authorities that allegedly protect the “honesty” and “freedom” of the transport market, the operators of the *navettes* nonetheless insist that “authorities should find a solution for us” (Driver15, 27 September 2019). As emphasized by post-colonial theorists, when informally operating actors face their limits in making claims on legal terrain, they evoke their right to livelihood and habitation (Chatterjee, 2004). In a similar vein, the *navettes* workers point out the State’s responsibility to support them, and ensure their livelihoods despite the odds of the adverse legal verdict. They wish to obtain a permission to “put clear signs [at the stops] saying where we go and how much it costs” (Driver14, 30 May 2019), as they are convinced that “proper signage and promotion [...] is 80% guarantee of market success” (Ibid.) and “today, many potential clients don’t even know we exist” (Driver8, 2 April 2019). Consequently, they reiterate both the unfairness of existing legal framework and the importance of formal recognition. The latter carries the promise of increasing the drivers’ visibility, legitimacy and dignity, enabling them to mark their place in the transport landscape in Brussels. Yet, they have no contact with the BSA authorities, and feel ignored by regional officials: “we sent an entire file describing our case [...] to the [then] Minister [for Mobility, Public Works and Road Safety], but he didn’t respond” (Driver5, 22 February 2019). Another driver complains: “we feel forgotten, we feel ignored” (Driver7, 11 October 2019).

Importantly, the drivers point out double standards applied to corporate actors providing “digitalised” informal transport services, versus individual and bottom-up operators: “it is unfair that we can’t do ride-sharing, but companies like Uber can do whatever they want” (Driver3, 13 February 2019). In this sense, they implicitly agree with Roy’s (2009) conceptualisation of informality as a *modus operandi* that formal State institutions control by criminalising subaltern “low-tech”

activities, while promoting “disruptive” informal economic models involving corporate actors. The drivers further highlight a common hypocrisy and regulatory bias among State officials, often observed in the global East (Kovács et al., 2017), who apply different criteria to assess diverse informal economic practices, privileging those organised through online platforms. Indeed, as the *navettes* are exposed for breaching the local regulations, the BCR authorities turn a blind eye to the rise of taxi-aggregating apps such as Uber, which operate without an official authorisation violating the very same regional law that makes operating the *navettes* illegal (Moniteur belge of 1 June 1995).<sup>13</sup> This paradox is even more striking in the case of Flibco’s Door2Gate service. Although Flibco accused the *navettes* of breaking the law by offering individual seats in shared vehicles, the company’s new service follows the very same principle. Yet, Door2Gate is accepted by regional authorities due its packaging as “greener [than] private cars and generating less traffic”, supposedly enabling its passengers to “travel like a VIP, guilt-free.”<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

In this article, we explored the *navettes*, a thus far understudied informal ride-sharing practice in Brussels. We intend to make a twofold contribution to debates on urban informality and mobility. First, by articulating questions about labour precarity and social safety, against those regarding market-openness, we add to the literature on *informality in transport*. While thus far it has focused primarily on the global South and East, we analysed a case located in the global North. In this way, we challenge mainstream neoclassical transport literature, showing how labour precarity and other “negative externalities” of informality are neither constrained to the so-called “third world”, nor can be explained by the lack of State investment and administrative capacities. As we have observed in Brussels, in the aftermath of the legal defeat against the formal bus company Flibco, the drivers of informal *navettes* make a social claim, rather than an entrepreneurial one. They emphasize the reliability and predictability of their services rather than their market flexibility, express frustration over dire working conditions and low income, and strive to achieve regulatory endorsement.

Second, we contribute to the literatures on *urban informality and critical transport and mobilities* by articulating the need for dialogue between these fields, as they remain disconnected both conceptually and empirically. We suggest that the literature on critical mobilities, which has recently formulated a call for “mobility justice” (Cook & Butz, 2016; Sheller, 2018), should take note of how (in)formality and (il)legality are becoming important sites of contesting what is (un)fair, (un)just and (il)legitimate (Roy, 2009, 2011), as the State and corporate actors arbitrarily apply legal-regulatory frameworks to govern informality as a political construct, and a tool for inclusion and exclusion. Our study shows that questions about informality and (in)justice are intertwined. Notably, we observe that although the State deems the informal operation of the *navettes* illegal, their drivers assert that this economic activity remains crucial for their livelihood, demonstrating that they seek justice beyond the notions of formality and legality, as defined and exercised by the State. Moreover, we have observed the unfairness of existing institutional settings in Brussels, which condemn the *navettes* for engaging in unfair competition by sharing vehicles informally, while condoning a similar door-to-door service offered by their main formal competitor (Flibco), and disregarding essentially informal *modus operandi* of several “digitalised” taxi-sharing platforms

<sup>13</sup> Articles 3 and 16 of the law state, respectively, that “No person may, without authorisation from the Government, operate a taxi service with one or more vehicles departing from a public road or any other location not open to public traffic situated in the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region” and “operate [...] a private hire vehicle service with one or more vehicles”.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.flibco.com/en/d2g>, accessed on 4 June 2020.

(Uber, Heetch). Further research exploring this contradiction could learn from studies of elite informality (Pow, 2017), which expose how ruling elites collaborate with private actors to “produce high-end spaces of informality” (Moatasim, 2019, p. 1010), allowing corporate ride-sharing practices to obtain the State’s endorsement, while marginalising and criminalising subaltern “low-tech” sharing practices.

Finally, we emphasise that *urban informality* literature should account for the central role that transport plays in facilitating the rise of informality in contemporary cities. Alongside small-scale practices such as the *navettes*, an ever-growing plethora of mobility practices claim to advance the “innovation” of “sharing” bicycles, scooters, cars and taxis. They may signal a profound transformation of urban mobility, whose actual innovative character does not lie in sharing vehicles, but in facilitating informality. As shown by research into “digitalised” ride-sourcing companies such as Uber, corporate actors utilise the notion of “shared”, “smart” and “circular” mobility to purposefully cause a “regulatory upheaval in [...] markets controlled by municipal authorities” (Spicer et al., 2019, p. 147), side-lining and disrupting existing regulations (Collier et al., 2018). Consequently, they informalize the transport sector to offer sub-standard labour conditions, undermine formal public transport services, and exacerbate social inequalities in transport (Rayle et al., 2016; Rogers, 2015; Slee, 2015). As such practices are becoming more common across the global North, where transport services increasingly hinge on informality as strategy for legitimizing sustained precarity, exclusion, self-exploitation and hide-and-seek play with formal regulations, exploring them requires learning from urban theories and experiences of cities in the South and the East.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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