

Modernization's Frustration: The Motorization of Manila's Urban Transport System, 1898–1941

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Abstract

A feeling of frustration toward Manila's urban transport system was evident among the Americans at the start of their colonial rule (1898–1941) in the Philippine capital. For American colonial bureaucrats and expatriate civilians, the land- and water-based vehicles (such as carriages, bancas, and a horse-drawn streetcar) they encountered in this city hampered their intraurban mobility. Their annoyance helped shape a colonial vision of a reengineered Manila through the “modernization” of its urban transport system that could only occur with the aid of Western technology. Motorized transport modes embodied this transformation. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Americans facilitated the arrival and integration of the electric streetcar and the automobile into the city. They regarded these innovations not merely as enhancers of mobility but as vehicles of modernity that would spell the end for “traditional” transport modes. However, the success and popularity of the new vehicles did not lead to the supposed demise of pre-twentieth-century vehicles. As late as the 1930s and into the 1940s, carriages continued to ply the city streets and nonmotorized watercraft still transported freight along the canals. Moreover, cocheros (carriage drivers), whom the colonial elite had depicted as the epitome of un-civilization and un-modernity throughout the colonial period, maintained considerable influence in city politics. Optimism thus gave way to renewed frustration during the twilight years of transport motorization under American colonial rule, prompting us to question the linear narrative of modernity.