

Thinking Marginally: Ethno-Historical Notes on the Nature of Smuggling in Human Societies

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Volume 18, Number 2, 2007

Global Histories
Histoires mondiales

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018227ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/018227ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)
1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Tagliacozzo, E. (2007). Thinking Marginally: Ethno-Historical Notes on the Nature of Smuggling in Human Societies. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(2), 144–163.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/018227ar>

Article abstract

This essay examines a range of issues at stake in the transgression of political boundaries across a spectrum of human societies. The aim of the article is not to catalogue a vast series of boundary-crossing actions, but rather to suggest what some of the main characteristics and variables are of contrabanding across frontiers. An attempt will be made to briefly define the problem of illicit facilitation across borders, as different theorists have delineated this issue in different ways. A brief discussion will ensue on the nature of border space itself, as such spaces have been conceptualized by a range of scholars who have thought about this issue for quite some time. The nature of sources on this problem will be quickly interrogated, as the sources of reporting on illicit facilitation vary widely, and different sources impart divergent kinds of information on this topic. A brief foray into a few historical examples of cross-border facilitation will be provided, to show how contemporary contexts of this issue are connected (or sometimes disjointed) from similar notions in the past. I will then give some sense of the broad variety of global experiences of illicit facilitation, as this act is undertaken across the width and breadth of the planet on an everyday basis. I will conclude with a discussion of two interesting regional theatres – Africa and Southeast Asia – where some of these processes can be seen in more detail. I argue in this essay that it is only by looking at smuggling through a number of different vantages that we have any chance of describing this practice as a crucial component of the global political economy.

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Abstract

This essay examines a range of issues at stake in the transgression of political boundaries across a spectrum of human societies. The aim of the article is not to catalogue a vast series of boundary-crossing actions, but rather to suggest what some of the main characteristics and variables are of contrabanding across frontiers. An attempt will be made to briefly define the problem of illicit facilitation across borders, as different theorists have delineated this issue in different ways. A brief discussion will ensue on the nature of border space itself, as such spaces have been conceptualized by a range of scholars who have thought about this issue for quite some time. The nature of sources on this problem will be quickly interrogated, as the sources of reporting on illicit facilitation vary widely, and different sources impart divergent kinds of information on this topic. A brief foray into a few historical examples of cross-border facilitation will be provided, to show how contemporary contexts of this issue are connected (or sometimes disjointed) from similar notions in the past. I will then give some sense of the broad variety of global experiences of illicit facilitation, as this act is undertaken across the width and breadth of the planet on an everyday basis. I will conclude with a discussion of two interesting regional theatres – Africa and Southeast Asia – where some of these processes can be seen in more detail. I argue in this essay that it is only by looking at smuggling through a number of different vantages that we have any chance of describing this practice as a crucial component of the global political economy.

Résumé

Cet essai examine un éventail de questions en jeu dans la transgression des frontières politiques dans diverses sociétés humaines. L'objectif de cet article n'est pas de cataloguer une vaste série d'activités transfrontalières, mais plutôt de suggérer ce que sont certaines des caractéristiques et variables principales de la contrebande transfrontalière. Une tentative y est faite pour définir brièvement le problème de la facilitation illicite entre les frontières, puisque différents théoriciens ont dépeint cette question de différentes façons. Un bref exposé suit

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sur la nature de l'espace même des frontières, puisque de tels espaces ont été conceptualisés par divers chercheurs qui ont réfléchi longuement à la question. La nature des sources de ce problème sera rapidement explorée, puisque les sources de rapport sur la facilitation illicite varient grandement, et que différentes sources transmettent des renseignements divergents sur le sujet. Une brève incursion dans quelques exemples historiques de facilitation frontalière y sera faite pour démontrer comment les contextes contemporains de cette question sont liés à des notions semblables dans le passé (ou en sont quelquefois éloignés). L'auteur donne ensuite un aperçu de la grande variété d'expériences à l'échelle mondiale de facilitation illicite, puisque ce geste est posé quotidiennement sur l'étendue de la planète. Je conclurai avec un exposé sur les deux scènes régionales intéressantes – l'Afrique et l'Asie du Sud-Est – où certains de ces processus peuvent être examinés de façon plus détaillée. Dans cet essai, l'auteur fait valoir que ce n'est qu'en examinant la contrebande de divers points de vue qu'il est possible de décrire cette pratique en tant que composant crucial de l'économie politique mondiale.

Boundaries have long existed in human societies, and almost as soon as they have been set by ruling regimes they have been crossed by a variety of interested actors.¹ Historically, the ability of states to control their borders against the illicit facilitation of unwanted objects or ideas has been extremely variable; some states have succeeded better than others at this game. No one, for example, would put contemporary Singapore and Indonesia — two next-door, Southeast Asian neighbors — in the same boat for surveillance, interdiction, or control over practically any border-crossing items.² Yet most states face similar problems, whatever their abilities to solve them, in telling their own populations or other global actors what may and may not be brought across international frontiers.³ If the risks for such a venture prove to be too high, the majority of smugglers will not attempt to cross a particular boundary. More often than not, however, smugglers do take calculated risks in crossing many of the world's frontiers, as the rewards for doing so are often exceedingly generous.

1 A different version of this paper was presented in Berkeley, California, in the Fall of 2005. I am indebted to a number of men and women, in several countries, for speaking to me about these issues at some risk to themselves. Obviously, in these situations, I have endeavored to maintain their anonymity. I am grateful for the critiques and advice of the editors, as well as those of an anonymous reviewer for the journal.

2 Singapore's abilities to check smugglers' activities are renowned throughout the world; Indonesia, on the other hand, is generally considered to be one of the most free-flowing (and corrupt) economic environments anywhere on earth.

3 See, for example, the argument put forward in Vincenzo Ruggiero, *Crime and Markets: Essays in Anti-Criminology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), where he shows how capitalism and state-making can often be uneasy bedfellows in the making of the global political economy.

This paper examines a range of issues at stake in the transgression of political boundaries across a spectrum of human societies. The aim of the paper is not to catalogue a vast series of boundary-crossing actions, but rather to suggest what some of the main characteristics and variables are of contrabanding across frontiers. First, an attempt will be made to briefly define the problem of illicit facilitation across borders, as theorists have delineated this issue in different ways. Second, a brief discussion will ensue on the nature of border space itself, as such spaces have been conceptualized by a range of scholars who have thought about this issue for quite some time. Third, the nature of sources on this problem will be quickly interrogated, as the sources of reporting on illicit facilitation vary widely, and different sources impart divergent kinds of information on this topic. Fourth, a brief foray into a few historical examples of cross-border facilitation will be provided, to show how contemporary contexts of this issue are connected (or sometimes disjointed) from similar notions in the past. Fifth, I will give some sense of the broad variety of global experiences of illicit facilitation, as this act is undertaken across the width and breadth of the planet on an everyday basis. And, finally, sixth, I will focus the discussion on two interesting regional theatres — Africa and Southeast Asia — where some of these processes can be seen in more detail.

I argue in this paper that it is only by looking at smuggling through a number of different vantages that we have any chance of describing this practice as a crucial component of the global political economy. Theorists help us situate the study of smuggling within the larger ambit of the literature on crime, while geographers help us think about the imperatives of space when contrabanders make decisions about whether to smuggle or go home. Interrogating the various kinds of sources that tell us something about smuggling is important in asking how much we can and should trust our data, while keeping one eye on the past — on history — suggests to us how much patterns change (or do not) over time. Finally, looking globally at these transactions, with slightly more focused analyses on regional theatres such as Africa and Southeast Asia, allows us to ask how human difference figures into what many people feel are economic decisions at base. I argue in the pages that follow that ethnicity and a sense of connection are important in many cases of smuggling, so much so that economic and cultural rationales must be seen to go hand in hand in the transmission of certain “commodities” across international frontiers.

What is at Stake?

A large number of scholars have pondered the dimensions of “criminality” across the width and breadth of human societies. Illicit facilitation across borders certainly falls into this overarching rubric, as one act of a series of possible actions committed in opposition to state wishes. Karl Marx saw crime as essentially an offshoot of the tension between classes in industrial and industrializing

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societies; his concern was that crime masked deeper, more fundamental instabilities that were at the heart of Western societies of his day. Crimes such as cross-border smuggling were destined to increase, in Marx's eyes, because the very nature of capitalism itself encouraged the flow of wealth across global landscapes, and into the arms of those most adapted to ensnare it. As international boundaries became more and more concretized in the middle and late decades of the nineteenth century when he was writing, such flows — both legal and illegal — became increasingly predictable as offshoots of larger processes. They also grew in size and intensity. At a critical point, Marx thought, the movement of such capital would eventually swing away from the dominant classes and be re-routed in the service of ordinary people under socialism.⁴ This vision was a bleak but hopeful one, and crime, illegal flows and seepages, and the transit of objects, people, and ideas against the designs of ruling regimes was very much a part of Marx's vision of the global future.⁵

Since Marx, there have been a number of theorists who have examined the place of crimes, such as cross-border facilitation, in the larger scheme of human activity. Two of the more important recent contributions have come from Steven Spitzer and Eric Monkonnen, both thinkers who specifically work on the nexus of criminality and modern society. Spitzer's vantage has been one almost entirely grounded in political-economy, whereby policing is seen as an apparatus of the contemporary state in order to guarantee its survival, while simultaneously allowing the continual regeneration of existing forms of authority.⁶ Monkonnen's view is less abstract but also important, in that he sees the major locus of studying crime in the history of human societies as being an exercise in measurement. He writes that "counting is the major means of understanding crime and criminal justice in the past," yet there are good reasons to see this approach as an overly-sanguine one.⁷ It is precisely because it is the job of smugglers to keep themselves out of the archives that we need to ask qualitative, not just quantitative, questions about the nature of illicit facilitation in all of its global forms. To date there is no single over-riding definition or agreed-upon explanation for what cross-border contrabanding actually is, despite the

4 Karl Marx, "The Usefulness of Crime," and "The Labeling of Crime," in *Crime and Capitalism: Readings in Marxist Criminology*, ed. David Greenberg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 52-4.

5 See also Drew Humphries and David Greenberg, "The Dialectics of Crime Control" in *Crime and Capitalism*, ed. Greenberg, 463-508; and Morton Wenger and Thomas Bonomo, "Crime, the Crisis of Capitalism, and Social Revolution," in *Crime and Capitalism*, ed. Greenberg, 674 passim.

6 Steven Spitzer, "The Political Economy of Policing," *Crime and Capitalism*, ed. Greenberg, 568-94.

7 Eric Monkonnen, "The Quantitative Historical Study of Crime and Criminal Justice" in *History and Crime: Implications for Criminal Justice Policy*, eds. James Inciardi and Charles Faupel (London: Sage Publication, 1980), 53-74.

presence of this phenomenon in almost every culture on earth. There is also the problem of definition: one person's "smuggling" is often considered to be another's legitimate trade. What we can do, perhaps, is try to take apart the problem from many sides at once, questioning space, sources, historical connections to modern forms of crime, and the global diversity of such actions in many, often analogous, milieus. In this way we get a sense of the issues at stake, and how something as common, but also something as potentially dangerous, as cross-border facilitation takes place.

Conceptualizing Spatial Terrain

Things illegally crossing borders require, by definition, a border to cross; contrabanding within the bounds of the nation-state certainly happens on a large scale, but the most profitable ventures of this sort usually demand the transgression of international boundaries. This is because states, even closely-neighboring states, often have very different ideas of what is permissible (or what is dangerous), despite their proximity.⁸ Moral codes change on the other sides of dotted lines; economic and political imperatives certainly change on the other sides of these divides as well. Willem van Schendel and Michiel Baud have made an interesting start at trying to catalogue the different kinds of boundaries that exist in global space, the illegally crossing of which would mean very different things. As they have shown, illicit facilitation takes place across these boundaries for a variety of reasons: shuttling revolutionaries from a position of safety to a position of action; consumers moving across frontiers because commodities are cheaper on one side of a frontier than another; merchants moving across borders, because they wish to take illegal advantage of tax or price differentials that exist on either side of a boundary. Elites and officials on the border can either help or hinder such movements. If they are tightly controlled by the state, such servants of a regime can prove to be a formidable obstacle to illicit facilitation. On the other hand if the dominant classes are not held on a tight leash, they often can become facilitators for illicit facilitation itself, and sometimes to grand proportions. Baud and van Schendel argue that smuggling at frontiers happens when states cannot enforce their own impositions (on taxes, trade flows, or even movement itself), though sometimes this happens at such a brisk pace that it is not in the state's interest to stop the free-flow of *matériel*.⁹

Some spaces are better than others for contrabanding on a consistent basis, however, so that favoured geographies of illicit facilitation make them-

8 See Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan, *Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

9 Willem van Schendel and Michiel Baud, "Towards a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History*, 8, no. 2 (1997): 1-35.

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selves apparent in existing case-studies.¹⁰ Smuggling often occurs primarily in three places: at the actual boundaries themselves (furthest from the optic and grasp of a centralized regime); at natural geographic conduits, such as mountain passes and narrow straits (where commerce is funnelled because of existing topography); and in the chaos of cities, where administrations have their vision obfuscated by the maelstrom of everyday activities. Large urban complexes also offer an important base to contrabanders because of their sizable dimensions and their frenetic composites of race, class, and nationality. In cities, the ability of coercive government regulation, supposedly at its most vital because of the proximity of the arms of actual governing power, is actually diminished. There are rarely enough agents of the state (policemen, detectives, and informers) to truly enable regimes to discern what is happening in most parts of a city. When the fist of administration is brought down upon contrabanders to stop illegal facilitation, these actors counter surveillance and control in different ways.¹¹ Hidden cargo spaces in container shipping (whether by sea or by rail), false shipping papers, false end-destinations, and fast transport are all used alongside many other means of everyday escape from the law.

The Importance of Documentation

One remarkable facet of the sources used to document cross-border smuggling is that these sources are both simple and very difficult to find at the same time. The range of documentation available to a researcher on this topic is likely to be vast, as states spend a lot of time, money, and ink trying to figure out who crosses their borders illegally and why. It does not mean, however, that all documents should be believed equally. Two brief examples from Canada, a place not usually considered among the world's hot-spots for international smuggling, are instructive. The first source that is interesting is a pamphlet for distribution in airports published by the office of Environment Canada, a national regulatory commission overseen by Ottawa.¹² The pamphlet, titled "Endangered Species and the Traveller," shows exactly what is on the mind of the Canadian border authorities. Artfully produced both textually and photographically, the document informs travellers of the CITES Treaty (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), and shows the guises of various contraband items that make their way into the country. Rhinoceros horn is

10 John Lowman, "The Geography of Social Control: Clarifying Some Themes," in *The Geography of Crime*, eds. David Evans and David Herbert (London: Routledge, 1989), 228-59; David Herbert, "Crime and Place: An Introduction," *The Geography of Crime*, eds. Evans and Herbert, 1-15.

11 David Herbert, *The Geography of Urban Crime* (Essex: Longman, 1982)

12 "Endangered Species and the Traveller," Environment Canada publication (n.d.).

shown both in its natural form (on a living rhinoceros) and in pills, which are used by some Asian populations as a traditional aphrodisiac. A small ivory figurine of a walrus is also photographed, to educate tourists that it is illegal to trade or traffic in the ivory of this animal indigenous to the Canadian Arctic. This juxtaposition of the illegal objects in both their natural state and in their transportable, contraband manifestation is calculated and slightly contrived. The message is clear to the traveller: “if you transport these objects across our borders, you are endangering the environment and you are also breaking cultural taboos.” What is not shown in the brochure, however, is the apparatus of security and x-ray machines deployed to stop such trades, precisely at the “open” borders of which Canada is so proud. Coercion goes hand in hand with the imposition of societal values at borders, in other words, but that does not mean that this concept has to be graphically depicted.

Still in Canada, but far more informative, is a source of a different kind on illicit facilitation — the border guards who are on constant patrol against human trafficking, which has become a huge business in this nation. Source materials here are actual human beings, the men and women of the Canadian Immigration Service who guard the entrance into the country against the thousands (if not millions) of the world’s poor who would enter the country illegally. Interviews with these state servants can also tell us much about illicit facilitation on frontiers. In May 2000, I had the chance to sit down with one of these men for an in-depth interview about Chinese migrant smuggling to Canada.¹³ The interview was fascinating for what it revealed about cross-border smuggling on the northern boundary between Canada and the United States. Forgeries of official documents were becoming better and better, I was told, some of them so good that it literally took the Immigration Service days to ascertain whether a document was official or not. Human-traffickers (or “snakeheads”) were also using the latest radar, satellite technology, and marine surveillance equipment on dilapidated transport boats (usually fishing-craft) in order to hoodwink the Canadian Coast Guard into thinking that such poorly-maintained fishing fleets were normal ships. In fact, they were small, maneuvering flotillas of high-tech illegal know-how. These ships are capable of 15 knots, though the coast guard ships could only move at 10 knots, and often could not close ground in time to make high seas arrests. A recent edited volume specifically written on Chinese migrant trafficking to North America shows that this particular source was entirely accurate in these depictions. Journalists, detectives, think-tank personnel, and academics combined in the book and laid out interdisciplinary vantages on how illicit facilitation could

13 Inspector Ray Bowes, Canadian Immigration, interview by author (University of British Columbia), 4 May 2000.

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move so many people so easily from the South China coasts across a First-World border.¹⁴

Thinking Historically About Smuggling

The notion of quick patrol boats and even quicker smuggling craft does not come from thin air; this is a dance between opposing parties that has gone on for a very long time, though the technologies available to each side have changed over the years. The *history* of contrabanding across international frontiers is therefore also crucial in conceptualizing the scope and mechanics of this activity over the *longue durée* of human societies. It is difficult to conjecture when the concept of borders first came about in human societies, and in some parts of the world it was a relatively recent phenomenon, inextricably linked with colonialism, and later, with nationalism and nativist political projects.¹⁵ There is good evidence to suggest, however, that in Early Modern Europe the concept of territoriality was already beginning to extend not just to claims on land or resources, but also to the rights of sovereigns to modulate exactly what came in and out of their territories. Janice Thomson has laid out a particularly suggestive argument that this ability has been fundamentally tied to the monopoly on violence, which was slowly being claimed by sovereigns across a broad swath of Europe in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries.¹⁶ A landscape of small, directly competing polities ensured that there was competition for natural resources such as timber and precious metals. If these needed to be secreted out of one landscape to another in order to enrich local coffers at the expense of a rival's, then so be it. Lance Grahn has pushed the outlines of this reasoning into Wallersteinian World Systems Theory by suggesting that the Iberian conquest of the Americas upped the stakes on taking control of trans-regional flows of objects, with silver more important than any other after the discovery and eventual mining of the great silver mountain of Potosi, in what is today Bolivia.¹⁷ Silver became crucial to the world economy; it connected

14 Paul Smith, ed., *Human Smuggling: Chinese Migrant Trafficking and the Challenge to America's Immigration Tradition* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997); see also Chad Skelton, "Containers a New Trend in Human Cargo," *Vancouver Sun* (5 January 2000), A1-A2.

15 James Inciardi and Charles Faupel, "Introduction," in *History and Crime*, eds. Inciardi and Faupel, 11-28; Louis Knafla, "Structure, Conjunction, and Event in the Historiography of Modern Criminal Justice History," in *Crime History and Histories of Crime*, eds. Clive Emsley and Louis Knafla (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 33-46; and Mark Haller, "Illegal Enterprise: Historical Perspectives and Public Policy" in *History and Crime*, eds. Inciardi and Faupel (London: Sage Publication, 1980), 77-90.

16 Janice Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extra-Territorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

17 Lance Grahn, *The Political Economy of Smuggling: Regional Informal Economies in Early Bourbon New Granada* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

Europe not only with the Americas, but also with China and Japan, and it was used to pay for all of the silks, porcelain, and tea that was in such demand back in European capitals. It was little wonder, then, that illicit facilitation in this period was characterized so broadly by the smuggling of silver, both in the Iberian Atlantic and in the trans-Pacific voyages of the Manila galleons to Mexico. Many a European aristocrat made his start in exactly this way, coming out to the colonies from humble roots but returning to the West as an owner of great fortunes (all predicated on the control of oceanic contraband moving through channels: port masters, customs crews, etc.). Opium has a similar pedigree to silver in this respect, and will be examined more closely below.



*Antique Japanese Copper Bars
(metals such as copper and silver were often smuggled
in trans-national networks) Photo by the author*

In Asia, leading up into the modern age, patterns of smuggling were no less broad, linking continents and oceans in an increasingly enormous embrace. As with the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, the two examples referenced above, Southeast Asia was a patchwork of competing small states. Some of these were indigenous, some were Asian but with leadership from outside the region (usually built on the backs of Chinese or Arab families), and some came under direct European colonial control. As Westerners became increasingly powerful in the region, ideologies of Free Trade and *laissez-faire* commerce grew anti-

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quoted and vestigial, with monopolies the order of the day.¹⁸ The *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* / Dutch East India Company (VOC), was master of this economic tactic, burning alive the inhabitants of certain spice-growing islands in what is today Eastern Indonesia in order to ensure unfettered access to valuable spice crops (indentured labourers and slaves were then brought in to work the groves). Yet a lively smuggling trade developed nonetheless, pitting indigenous Indonesians, Chinese migrants, and many Dutchmen themselves against the VOC, which became increasingly venal and corrupt. Certain coves within sight of Batavia, the Dutch capital (modern Jakarta), became famed as places where one could go in order to smuggle spices, opium, or other valuable products. The trick was size and weight; most of the illegal products had to have a relatively high value to size or weight ratio, so that they could be stowed away efficiently and quietly in otherwise legitimate ships. Piggy-backing contraband on the back of ordinary cargo was practiced nearly everywhere in Asia; Indonesia was merely the most notorious locale.¹⁹ The Early Modern British, so high-minded and declarative in their pronouncements, practiced this quaint custom as well. The Governor of Madras in India, Elihu Yale, made enough money from his stay in that country to endow a university bearing his name in the new colonies of North America.

Cross-Border Contraband on the World Stage

If smuggling followed along the above lines in the historical arc of human societies, it is just as important as a driving force in our common present. One only has to look out across the planet and see the remarkable vistas of smuggling that still exist in almost every corner of the globe, whether situated in first-world or third-world locales. In Bangladesh, one of the earth's poorest nations, cross-border contrabanding over the Ganges into (and out of) India is normal, everyday business. It is also remarkably profitable. Kinship, friendship, religion (both Hinduism and Islam), and language (predominantly Bengali) facilitate these economic arrangements. This smuggling is not the high-value trade referenced earlier in this essay; it is not silver or opium or gems crossing the frontier. Rather, it is everyday commodities, such as lentils and textiles made from cloth, daily-use items for the body and table that are demanded by people on both sides of the frontier. Facilitation in this arena requires the connivance of a broad range of people: border officials, lookouts, traders, runners, bicycle-transport teams, and villagers who live in the vicinity of operations.

18 In this light, many local polities were completely just in seeing the European companies and later European states as "smugglers," rather than having themselves branded as such for disobeying the rules of newly-formed political economies.

19 Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders; Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

Everyone gets a cut; everyone knows their place. But what oils the entire process is trust, trust built of these associations of common language, culture, family, and religion, and which is understood by all interested parties. Without trust, there can be only infrequent illegal border-crossing on the *ghats* of the Ganges; the operations take place too often for the transaction to exist without this single, overriding imperative.²⁰ This notion is different in other global locales of illicit facilitation, however, as will be discussed below.

It is somewhat easy to assume that contrabanding such as this exists primarily in the poorer nations of the world, because of a notion that strong states would never allow such breaches of their own well-planned economies. But this assumption is not the case. In Italy, one of the major members of the European Union and a large economy in and of itself, cigarettes are smuggled into the country at a frenetic pace, mostly from the tiny Republic of Montenegro across the Adriatic Sea. Many of the cigarettes are consumed by Italians, who have to pay much higher taxes and duties on these luxury items than people in the Balkans; but a large number of them are merely transhipped through the peninsula to the rest of Northern and Western Europe. Here, there is no common bond of language or culture; illicit facilitation works more on a profit rationale. Shipments do not come every day or even every week, so there is more risk involved in transactions and less contact between merchants on either side of the chain. Moreover, violence enters into this particular theatre in a way that does not happen on a daily basis among the lentil-smugglers of Bangladesh. In some safe-houses in Southern Italy, police and anti-graft units have found armored trucks parked in rows, replete with lances installed on the sides of the vehicles to repulse approaching police cars.²¹ Organized crime realized long ago that the smuggling of such prosaic items as cigarettes was good business, even if it was less risqué than the contrabanding of heroin. Not to be outdone, the Russian mafia, no less accomplished in the international marketing of illegal goods than their Italian counterparts, have got extremely involved in the smuggling of caviar from the Caspian to other European markets. Again, violence is part of the equation, as is paid-protection from the authorities, which is organized on local and sub-local levels. The poaching of sturgeon has set off an environmental crisis in the Caspian Sea, but this will mean little to Russian smugglers until profits start to dip as a result of scarcities.²²

If this kind of illicit cross-border trade has a long history in Europe, going back even to Early Modern times, as Janice Thompson's well-researched his-

20 Willem van Schendel, "Easy Come, Easy Go: Smugglers on the Ganges," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 23, no. 2 (1993): 189-213.

21 Patrick Graham "Smugglers' Paradiso," *National Post* (Canada) (3 June 2000), 41-6.

22 Patrick Tyler, "Poaching May Kill Fish That Lay the Golden Eggs," *New York Times* (24 September 2000), A3.

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tory suggests, then East Asia has an equally-long tradition of smuggling items deemed valuable in particular contexts and situations. We will have an occasion below to view some of these patterns in more depth in Southeast Asia, but it is enough to point out that the centuries' old mercantile traditions of China have helped smuggling to prosper in today's world.²³ Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in China itself. In China the art of document fabrication for illegal movement across borders has now become a high art in this extremely literate society. A false pilot's license that would enable someone to fly out of the country (hopefully knowing how to fly a plane) costs merely \$80 US. In Shanghai a few years ago the city police raided homes and found thousands of fake drivers' licenses, beautifully-crafted and accomplished enough in quality so that any could be used to drive across China's frontiers to neighboring countries (these licenses work as identity-papers as well).²⁴ Here again, as in the Italian case, it is less trust that oils the gears than cold, hard cash. Perhaps the best example of this dialectic, however, concerns China's near-neighbor to the East, with which it has been in an unofficial state of war for the last fifty years. Smugglers trying to get across the maritime boundary between China and Taiwan have been successful for decades, despite the enmity between the two nations. As tensions have risen since 2000 over the pro-independence statements of Taiwan's new government, the people losing out most seem to have been smugglers on both sides.²⁵ Here, as in the Bangladeshi case, the products are mundane (mostly fish and dried foodstuffs) and language and culture is shared on both sides of the Straits. Yet, as opposed to the situation in South Asia, rising geo-political tensions have made such illegal facilitation increasingly difficult. It simply is not worth being shot as a potential spy for biscuits or peanuts, and cross-border smuggling has fallen off as a result.

A final reference can be made to a border that many people know very well: the American/Mexican border, which stretches from San Diego to eastern Texas along a wide swath of desert. Partially, because of the media and the numbers of crossings involved, this border has to be one of the most extensively researched international boundaries anywhere in the world.²⁶ Illicit facilitation in the form of drugs and people-smuggling happens on a very large scale, alongside the much less heralded (but probably no less economically important) contrabanding of everyday goods. Because the United States is so concerned about smuggling along this frontier, the data composite available for research on this particular border is exceedingly detailed. This data tells us certain important things about the nature of illicit crossings along this very long

23 For an in-depth study, see Yiu Kong Chu, *The Triads as Business* (London: Routledge, 2000).

24 Tim McGirk, "Chasing Shadows," *Time Magazine* (11 June 2001): 30-5.

25 Mark Landler, "Smugglers on Taiwan Isle Are Glum," *New York Times* (12 January 2001), A4.

26 See Robert Jackson, ed., *New Views of Borderlands History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

divide. First, most human deaths occurring on this border take place in some of the most unforgiving terrain: extreme desert conditions in the El Centro sector of inland California, and the Tucson sector of Southern Arizona. In other words, those attempting to move “things” illegally across a well-patrolled border — in this case human beings — often do so in geographies furthest away from the tentacles of the state.²⁷ Second, the connections made by Spanish-speaking gangs on both sides of the boundary are essential for the successful conclusion of nearly any operation. Culture aids illicit facilitation in this case, as the conditions of interdiction and control are far superior to those found in Bangladesh, Russia, or Southern Italy. Finally, it is clear that the risk/reward calculus for border-crossing here is low enough that, despite hundreds of deaths every year by border-crossing migrants, people continue to come in search of a better life. This is an important calculation, therefore, in trying to unravel any illegal transaction across international frontiers — will it make someone’s life better? It is evident that despite the formidable odds and resources of the state stacked against illegal migrants from the south, many people are still willing to make the attempt regardless of such risks.²⁸

Africa as a Regional Example

It is helpful to think of the broad scope of smuggling across a number of human societies, but it is equally salutary to narrow the field of vision to regional examples to study this phenomenon in greater detail. There are many different kinds of objects in motion across African frontiers; for example: traditional African art would be one category, and the prices paid by museums and collectors — sometimes through illegal channels — have made the quest for these commodities into big business.²⁹ Diamonds are also a high-ticket item crossing these boundaries, especially in Western Africa where instability and civil war in places such as Sierra Leone have often been linked to turf wars for diamond-producing landscapes.³⁰ Moving art or precious stones from the small nation-states of Western Africa is relatively easy; the commodities themselves are often small and light-weight, and border-controls in much of this part of Africa are weak or non-existent, especially in turbulent areas. Facilitation is therefore a comparatively mundane task compared to many other places, as the

27 Tom Zeller, “Migrants Take Their Chances on a Harsh Path of Hope,” *New York Times* (18 March 2001), 14. This movement into the more distant sections of the boundary is a relatively recent result of heightened policing (and wall-building) closer to high-density population centres.

28 To see how far south of the Mexican border these tendrils actually exist, see “Guatemala-Immigration Portillo Dismisses Guatemalan Immigration Director,” *Global News Wire* (26 June 2001).

29 Aishi Labi, “Looting Africa,” *Time Magazine* (30 July 2001): 50-2.

30 Norimitsu Onishi, “Africa Diamond Hub Defies Smuggling Rules,” *New York Times* (2 January 2001), A1 and A8.

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networks of corruption and violence that have plagued this arena have made moving such commodities a common way of making a living. But West Africa has also become an important transit-station for moving human cargoes in recent decades, sending thousands upon thousands of illegal migrants to Southern Europe through what has been described as the “soft under-belly” of that continent.³¹ Towns in the Sahara, often in Mali or Niger, are famed trans-shipment points for such migrants, who usually have to pay a significant price up-front before trafficking gangs will consent to ship them through the desert (and later, across the Mediterranean). The French language, vestigial from colonial times, and a shared bond in Islam have facilitated this commerce, as both traffickers and the trafficked have similar cultural idioms in arranging these extremely dangerous journeys.³²



Ivory and Gold Tea Container

(African ivory has been trafficked out of the continent into luxury markets for years) Photo courtesy of Martha Chaiklin

Firearms are also an important commodity in Africa, and these items have strong links not only with colonial but also recent history. In Southern Africa in particular, the smuggling of firearms across area frontiers has been a common practice since the age of decolonization. Guerrilla wars in Angola on the Atlantic coast and Mozambique on the Indian Ocean coast have meant that thousands, if not millions, of high-end firearms (such as AK-47s) have seeped from these conflicts down to South Africa to be used by a variety of individuals.

31 Philip Smucker, “Sahara Town Booms with People Smuggling,” *International Herald Tribune* (25 October 2004).

32 Norimitsu Onishi, “Out of Africa or Bust, With a Desert to Cross,” *New York Times* (4 January 2001), A1 and A16.

The borders of South Africa are porous at best; the land boundary extends for nearly 4000 kilometers (most of it desert) and the coastline for nearly 3000 kilometers, making the landing of such items on South African soil a matter of relative ease. Because there was resistance to the apartheid regime by South Africans who crossed to and from the nation's neighbors (especially the ANC), a substantial number of guns found their way back into the country. Facilitation in this particular arena was not usually helped along by official corruption, as the racial segregation ideology was so strongly inculcated into the RSA security forces that boundary malfeasance was not a pressing issue. But the cultural links (again, as with the United States/Mexico and China/Taiwan borders) played a role, uniting Africans of extended clans on both sides of international frontiers. By the late 1990s and with the death of apartheid, the traffic in illegal arms switched from high-power armaments, such as assault rifles to hand-guns, as crime in the country's inner cities become more and more pronounced and rival gangs armed themselves via foreign sources.³³

Finally, the movement of illegal drugs has also become big business in parts of Africa. Here again, the centre of activity has been southern Africa, with South Africa itself the largest importer and exporter of the continent's narcotics. Though the nature of the former regime may influence the statistics to some degree on this issue, there seems to have been comparatively little drug smuggling in and out of South Africa under the various apartheid administrations. By the late 1990s and the fall of the rightist government, however, South Africa was accounting for half the heroin and three-quarters of the cocaine seized on the continent, and nearly half of the synthetic drug methaqualone confiscated globally. Air routes that had been limited or non-existent during the apartheid years suddenly opened South Africa to the world; this seems to have been the main artery for moving drugs, but also for moving the people who in turn moved drugs, from South Africa to various global locales. The geographic and trans-border ethnicity factors alluded to previously with regards to arms shipments helped along facilitation, but it also seems to have been true that South Africa began to produce large quantities of narcotics for shipment to the rest of the world. Satellite communities of South African nationals sprouted up in London, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, and even Jakarta. Though there had been countrymen in many of these places before, these new travellers were not migrants, but rather international businessmen who arranged for the circuit of such commodities through the radials of air cargo. Since most South Africans speak excellent English, the *lingua franca* of this particular commerce was English, spoken with a variety of the globe's peoples who represented local

33 G. Oosthuysen, *Small Arms Proliferation and Control in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Institute for International Affairs, 1996); G. Simpson, "The Politics and Economics of the Arms Industry in South Africa," in *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa*, eds. J. Cok and L. Nathan (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989), 217-31.

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demand in their own corners of the world.³⁴ This dialectic of trading diasporas using English to further their commercial concerns happened in many cities and countries around the world.

Southeast Asia as a Case Study

As is the case with Africa, Southeast Asia is also made up of a large number of relatively small states, each possessing differing ethnicities, linguistic groups, religious affiliations, and topographies. As is the African case, Southeast Asia is a home to a bewildering number of illicit trans-border practices, all predicated on government rules against certain shipments, and popular desire to make money by transgressing these very same regulations. Though diamonds and artifacts do not make up a large value percentage of smuggled items in this part of the world (as they do in Africa), there are certainly a vast number of items that *do* transit illegally on an everyday basis in the region. Timber is one of these commodities, as also are consumer goods such as electronics, Levi's jeans, and knock-off watches sold for profit. The Motion Picture Association of America has estimated that 99 percent of all vcd's sold in Indonesia are pirated copies, topped only by the 100 percent of these same items sold in nearby Vietnam.³⁵ But, as in the case of Africa, it is the smuggling of human beings that is certainly more worrying to the concerned observer. The traffic in women and children for sexual purposes is a huge business in this part of the world, with Bangkok renowned globally as a centre for paid sexual services. Most of the women and girls come from the poor north of the country (*Issan*), but many also come from Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, Thailand's poorer neighbors to the west, north, and east, respectively. Increasingly, children are being sold into slavery, sexual or otherwise, as in the region there is an international clientele that caters for such a "product." Facilitation in the case of human trafficking in Southeast Asia is nuanced and complex: sometimes victims are sold by their own relatives in order to remove a local mouth to feed in poor districts, but more often than not security forces are implicated in one way or another, either as traffickers themselves (especially along parts of Burma's border), or by looking the other way as shipments ride by (as in Thailand and Cambodia). Spiriting trucks filled with humans through dense jungles does not take extraordinary ingenuity, and still less if border guards are paid to not notice them going by.³⁶

34 Laurent Laniel, "Illegal Drugs as Geopolitical Instruments in Southern Africa," Unpublished paper prepared for "Beyond Borders" Workshop, SSRC/Paris, 1-3 July, 2000.

35 Eric Tagliacozzo, "Border Permeability and the State in Southeast Asia: Contraband and Regional Security," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 23, no. 2 (2001): 254-74.

36 Asia Watch, *A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand* (Human Rights Watch Report, 1993).



*17th Century Dutch East India Co. Ceramics Packed in Straw
(Antique ceramics have often been smuggled into international art markets)
Photo by the author*

Arms also cross Southeast Asian borders in large quantities, though perhaps in lesser amounts than they did in the 1960s and 1970s, when several area conflagrations (such as the Cambodia conflict and the Vietnam War) were fully underway. The majority of arms that were until very recently transiting through the region have moved to separatist organizations in a variety of locales — the Free Aceh Movement (*GAM*) in North Sumatra; various separatist Muslim organizations in the Southern Philippines (such as *Abu Sayyaf*); and several lingering insurgencies on the Thai/Burmese frontier (such as the Karen Liberation Army). Arms merchants are more often local than trans-local, making deals via fax or email with suppliers to get weapons to upland locales away from the eyes of national security forces. But trans-local facilitation takes place as well, with the Tamil Liberation Tigers (in Sri Lanka) and even Al Qaeda (in the Middle East) pitching in hardware on occasion. Because these cargoes are high-ticket and high risk, corruption at international airports and at international ports is the rule of the day in shipping weapons. False lading bills and misrepresentation move many munitions through Southeast Asia, but it is the connivance of officials that really allows such awkward and heavy cargoes to pass, especially when they move in large quantities. With the radicalization of certain Muslim movements in the 1980s and 1990s, an increasing number of weapons have wound their way out to Southeast Asia, as the direct result of connections made between Southeast Asians and Middle Eastern arms suppliers in the latter

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region itself. Afghanistan was home to more than a few Indonesians, Malaysians, and Filipinos in the past ten years, all of them fighting against American forces. The movement of arms cargoes by men such as these seems to have taken place on many occasions, as Southeast Asian *mujahedeen* eventually returned to their own homes in the monsoon countries of Asia.³⁷

Finally, there is perhaps no place more famous globally for the transit of narcotics than Southeast Asia, and particularly the Golden Triangle, the area that joins the independent nation-states of Burma, China, Thailand, and Laos. Opium poppies grown in this region have been used locally for centuries, especially against nausea, altitude sickness, stomach ailments, and also hunger. When opium started to stream out of this region toward the rest of Southeast Asia (particularly during the Vietnam War, when GI's used it to forget their daily lives at the front) and even after war, the Golden Triangle became internationally infamous as a source for illegal narcotics.³⁸ In the 1970s and early 1980s, Hong Kong and Amsterdam became linking nodes for this commerce, which was carried via the expanding air travel routes that were built to satisfy the explosion of international tourism. Pilots were caught as drug couriers, as were flight attendants and airport maintenance workers; common passengers also attempted to get heroin across vast distances using a variety of clever hiding techniques (occasionally using body cavities, which killed more than a few of these couriers). Because heroin is so valuable in its size to weight ratio, there were always people willing to take this risk, even as penalties for trafficking got more and more severe. Though Amsterdam and Hong Kong have since lost their places as renowned conduits or feeder-cities for Southeast Asia's narcotics, many of these same drugs — and some new ones, such as designer pills like "ice" and "X" — still make the trip. It is now the middle classes of many of these same Southeast Asian countries who pay to taste the drugs fabricated in jungle laboratories along the Thai/Burmese frontier.³⁹ Cheaply sold and easy to hide, the transit of amphetamines now reaches into the millions *per shipment*. More than perhaps any other image, this one gives an idea of how much things have changed, and how much they have remained the same.

Concluding Remarks

Smuggling across international frontiers occurs on a daily, systemic basis across the length and breadth of the planet's political boundaries. Some of the

37 Pasuk Phongpaichit, et al., *Guns, Girls, and Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy* (Chiang Mai [Thailand]: Silksworm Books, 1998); see also Bertil Lintner and Shawn Crispin, "Brothers in Arms," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Internet Edition, <http://www.feer.com/> Hong Kong, 11 May 2000 (viewed).

38 Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

39 Eric Tagliacozzo, "Smuggling in Southeast Asia: History and its Contemporary Vectors in an Unbounded Region," *Critical Asian Studies*, 34, no. 2 (2002): 193-220.

“things” that travel across these spaces are deemed relatively benign by governments and non-governmental agencies: rice, textiles, and even human beings in certain contexts would all be included in this group. There is a far more troubling traffic, however, including narcotics, weapons, and unwilling human beings, in a variety of situations and contexts. Illicit facilitation is needed to move these cargoes across the world’s frontiers, and large industries have sprung up to service these demands. Yet these kinds of transactions also take place on an everyday scale via existing networks of exchange, which are bent toward illicit facilitation when opportunities present themselves to a range of interested parties.

I have argued in this paper that a multivalent approach is likely the best way to try to understand the nature of smuggling as it has appeared and still functions across a range of human societies. Theorists can help us with this understanding by pointing out the big picture of how and why aspects of the global political economy are malleable to smugglers. These theories are important, yet it is often geographers who are most helpful in deciphering meaning in the spatiality of smugglers’ movements. Historical inquiries ground the patterns that we see all around us today, as smuggling is truly a global activity that reaches across ethnicities and varied populations, connecting human beings in often unexpected ways. Indeed, I have shown that ethnicity can be seen as both a potent connective tool and a meaningless construct when it comes to smuggling, depending on the context of any transaction or set of transactions being attempted. This paper suggests some unity to these movements in terms of mechanics, dynamics, and outcomes, but also shows the particularities of experience based on regional circumstances in places such as Africa and Southeast Asia. I argue that any sustained examination of smuggling as a social-scientific concept should bring many of these branches of knowledge to the table at the same time, or risk being hopefully marooned in an economic or political science vacuum that does little to explain such an important and widespread behavior.⁴⁰

The challenge for the world’s regimes in dealing with these flows is two-fold. First, there are indeed criminal elements in existence — on a global scale — that move items transnationally for profit, regardless of the consequences to human (or animal) life and without regard to any kind of moral calculus affecting these cargoes. These forms of illicit facilitation can be fought vigorously if there is a will and a way to do so. But there needs to be some recognition by global power-brokers that these flows also happen without criminal intent; in

40 A good example of this are OECD reports, which purport to show in astonishing detail the economies of nation states, but which ignore the role, scope, and importance of smuggling to a very large degree, rendering the truth of the assembled numbers in many respects essentially meaningless.

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other words, some cargoes travel in some contexts because people need to make a living, whether it is criminalized by administrations or not. This division is an uneasy juxtaposition and one with plenty of gray area at its margins for interpretive overlap, both by states and the many actors who find themselves labelled as smugglers by these same regimes. It is this tension — of definition, interpretation, and interdiction — that makes the problem of illicit facilitation so important, intractable, and fascinating at the same time.

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