Seeing Like a Smuggler

‘This conceptually vivid book refreshes our vision. We can see how vulnerable people combine, innovate, and revise what they do to make geography from below. There, at the margins, is life in rehearsal.’

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore, author of Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation

‘At last, an urgent and brilliant collection of histories “from below”, about the people and goods transgressing the borders of global capitalism. Thanks to Shahram Khosravi, Mahmoud Keshavarz, and their fellow contributors, the world economy will never look quite the same.’

—Marcus Rediker, co-author of The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic

‘Seeing Like a Smuggler inverts Seeing Like a State and for good reasons. With views and presentations from various sites and angles, it tells amazing stories from the ground of how people negotiate with borders, states, local officials and carry on lives in the midst of everyday border violence and the precarity of borderland existence. There is no morality play here. Migration, clandestine existence, and illegal activities like smuggling – these are not acts to be found in some independent criminal universe. These are part of society’s subterranean life. Mahmoud Keshavarz and Shahram Khosravi have done a remarkable job of interrogating the received sense of state, law and order, protection, and morals.’

—Ranabir Samaddar, Distinguished Chair in Migration and Forced Migration Studies, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group
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Borders from Below

Edited by
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On 22 February 2021 a lethal incident along the Iran-Pakistan border became huge news in the region. In the Askan area, near the city of Saravan, Iranian border guards opened fire on a group of Baluch gasoline carriers (sokhtbar) resulting in several deaths. The incident took place in the Sistan-Baluchistan Province in south-eastern Iran, the poorest province of the country and home of the Baluch ethnic group. The higher price of gasoline over the previous two decades in Pakistan has opened a tiny window of income for local people. Although cross-border trade has a long history in the region, it tends to increase during crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in soaring unemployment. In the official language this cross-border trade has been presented as criminal act of smuggling, while local people call it sokhtbari (lit. ‘fuel carrying’). The terminology poses an epistemological problem with ethical and political implications. While sokhtbari demands urgent supportive policy responses and accountability from the state, smuggling grants the state authority to police and punish. Local unrest followed the incident. People stormed the police station and other official buildings. Soon the protests spread to other cities in the province, growing into widespread ethnic unrest against government authorities. Unofficial sources report dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrests.

Like the cases discussed throughout this book, sokhtbari is principally about protracted poverty and social marginalisation. Throughout the period of unrest, a slogan was circulated in the social media: ‘If we are going to die foaming at the mouth [from hunger], then it is better to die while bleeding at the mouth.’ Smuggling makes the precarity of the borderlands visible. As a response to the condition of precariousness, smuggling can no longer be seen merely as a criminal act, as the state authorities would claim, but becomes part of social protest against different oppressions: economic inequality, differential access to welfare and nation-state hegemony over borders and borderland communities. These events show how smuggling
merges into a political movement, which demands social justice. It intertwines with class struggle, ethnic revolts, and anti- (domestic) colonial rule. Acts of smuggling such as sokhtbari are well anchored in the local social structures, not only economically but also socially and culturally. The so-called smugglers are admired and regarded as local heroes who jeopardise their lives to support their families. There are countless popular ballads praising them. This makes smuggling ‘social’, meaning it is historically and socially articulated.

In line with Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of ‘social banditry’, we approach smuggling as a widespread social phenomenon, which takes place along many borders across the globe. Either praised as local heroes or pursued as criminals, the position of smugglers in the sociality of borderlands cannot be overlooked. Similarly, smuggling – as a situated activity that is enmeshed within the historical and geopolitical conditions of borderlands – cannot merely be approached through the detached, simplified and centralised gaze of the state.

To avoid the state-centric approach, this book recognises the so-called smuggling activities in the context of their histories and localities, and from the subject position of those who find smuggling necessary in order to survive. To see like a smuggler is a tactical move that involves reading the mobility of people and things in ways that unsettle state-centric perspectives.

The state perspective reduces all practices outside the law to a single and simplified criminal action, such as smuggling or banditry. Such a perspective is based on a series of dichotomies such as law/outlaw, legal/illegal, or trade/smuggling. It externalises social forces, processes, and actors that do not fit in the state narrative. For example historical accounts show banditry as a form of anti-colonial resistance in Algeria. Banditry has also played a central role in the emergence of nationalist myths of the modern Greek state during the independence struggles. In some cases outlaws have turned into official local governors, such as in twentieth-century Iran and nineteenth-century Morocco. In the case of piracy, Jatin Dua argues that rather than being an anachronism or aberration, modern maritime piracy in the Indian ocean, is deeply entangled with global capitalism and trade. Aligned with these works, Seeing Like a Smuggler puts forward the argument that outlaw practices, banditry, maritime piracy, and smuggling are immanent features of modern nation-states.
From below

Seeing Like a Smuggler follows a tradition of history-from-below approaches. This book applies the ideas of C.L.R. James, E.P. Thompson, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, and Hay et al., to the issues of borders and border transgression.\(^6\) This book is built on a from-below approach for several reasons. First, it counters the regimes of visibility imposed by the state. Put in other words, it addresses how subjects, subjectivities, and activities have been made visible from above. Much academic and policy research has studied and analysed smuggling from a state-centric perspective, as an economic, social or political ‘problem’ that needs to be diagnosed and solved. Smuggling is posed as a problem because it undermines the state’s authority over the mobility of people and commodities, and its assumed position as the sole organiser of social, economic and political life. By approaching the heterogeneous, complex, messy, decentralised, ad-hoc set of activities called smuggling, we aim to offer the perspective of those who are labelled – and criminalised – as smugglers. By refusing to follow the state’s legal definition of smuggling, ‘seeing like a smuggler’ repositions these complex activities within a wider context of increasing social, political and economic bordering practices across the world.

Second, in contrast to the seeing-from-above approach which is based on externalising irregularity, this book aims to identify contradictions and inconsistencies within the system of the nation-state. In conditions of sustained crisis, through which improvised modes of living emerge according to the local, geographical and material conditions, things no longer exist without parallel. Every piece of legislation is accompanied by techniques to circumvent it, which ultimately neutralises and inverts it.\(^7\) This parallel, subversive system comes with its own rules, rituals, ethics and protocols which, as Stuart Hall argues using his concept of decoding, is ‘a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements’.\(^8\) In his book Seeing Like a State, James Scott argues that the state needs to see individuals in order to control them. It uses identification, registration and promotion of the language of law in order to tax people and maintain a welfare state, and create legibility in relation to people.\(^9\) Visibility and legibility go hand in hand in order for the state to operate. Scott shows that movement and mobility had to be contained, regulated and constrained because they posed a challenge to the visibility-legibility framework and the authority
of state governance. He asks us to follow that way of seeing in order to analyse the monolithic nature of the state but also to develop sensitivities to see the everyday resistance to that hegemony.

Scott, however, neglects to address the fact that the state is not necessarily the origin of phenomena such as borders, citizenship and taxation. In other words, the state as one homogeneous entity does not impose control but is itself a product of contestations around the control over mobile bodies, things, practices and ideas. In this sense, smuggling is both a consequence, and constitutive, of borders and bordering practices. By disclosing the contradictions within the nation-state system that are concealed by the official narratives there is – in Walter Benjamin’s terms – a potential to opening up history to include narratives of the illegalised, the outcast, the undocumented, the bandit, and the smuggler.

Third, to see like a smuggler is a methodological standpoint, taken in order to avoid the risks of reproducing state-centric concepts of smuggling. Some scholars have already shown that the use of terms such as ‘smuggler’ can reproduce criminalisation, reinforced by states through using specific language in research and policy documents; such scholars have suggested the use of other terms, such as broker and facilitator. The change of terminology in order to decriminalise or criminalise is evident on the part of state organisations too. For instance, in one of its latest attempts to criminalise the facilitation of the movement of travellers without the ‘right’ papers, the European Union has moved towards the use of other terms, such as trafficking, which mobilises harsher legal and political actions.

As each chapter of this book shows, there are many different forms of individual and collective knowledge, shared and negotiated between many actors during the process of a journey or the movement of goods, which depend on gender, class, ethnic background, and age, as well as the context of time and place. It is these collective and heterogeneous forms of sharing knowledge that explain why many travellers without the ‘right’ papers often do not see themselves as ‘smuggled’, with its implication of victimhood, but ‘as actively staking claims to reciprocity and obligation from people they knew to access passage.’ This is why different communities in this book use different words to refer to those who facilitate the illicit movement of things and people, such as intermediator, handler, friend, rahbalad (guide), dalal (middleman), lekami (picker) and sensar (broker).
Nonetheless in this book we have taken the approach of reclaiming the word ‘smuggler’, and showing its complex positions in order to counter its dominant usage. By deploying and developing ‘seeing like a smuggler’, this book provides a collection of chapters on everyday informal activities around borders as forms of tactical livelihood or ‘insurgent citizenship’, where such activities operate through partially licit and illicit practices simultaneously.12

Coloniality

Many chapters in this book point to the complex relationships between states and smuggling in today’s world. However the history of smuggling goes beyond the formation of the late modern states. This relationship is a continuation of smuggling’s long-standing uneasy and contingent position within the colonial formation of the world. Colonial powers were themselves involved in smuggling (see Nichola Khan, Chapter 2), for example British merchants smuggled opium into China from Hong Kong in the nineteenth century. In other cases, there have been contests between local merchants who developed smuggling enterprises in response to the strict mercantilist policies of England in the seventeenth century.13 Conflict between the Crown and the colonists in New England over the monopoly of trade and customs escalated in the eighteenth century. Illicit traders and smugglers were punished as pirates under the English law. The British anti-smuggling policies helped spark the spirit of revolt. Conflicts over smuggling played a crucial role in the development of the American Revolution, to the degree that Peter Andreas dubbed the United States as a Smuggler Nation.14 During this period smuggling came to be praised as well as condemned by liberal ideologies. For example, Adam Smith advocated for smugglers as ‘excellent citizens’ who, rather than violating natural justice, instead violate the ‘unnatural’ legislation that restricted free trade.15 At the same time, the prohibition of importation of slaves in 1807 in the United States, and the Slavery Abolition Act in 1883, led to increasing border surveillance in order to fight slave smuggling. These smuggling operations were organised by capital owners, and usually detached from local communities and class struggles. Although some were against the colonial domination of states, they were not socially subversive, as they did not aim to challenge the class structure of the time but rather exploit it and secure profits.
The chapters in this book depict different stories. Many of the smuggling practices discussed here belong to the tradition of proletarian struggle against the oppressive economic order. What’s more, smuggling as a social practice often evolves from the struggle between the central state and the people of the borderland. Smuggling is practised spatially ‘remotely’ from the centre and often by ethnic minorities who disregard the interference of central authority (see Amin Parsa, Chapter 5).

If we examine border transgression from below, then smuggling appears to be a response to the political and social precariousness people in the borderlands are exposed to through the internal colonisation carried out by the central power. In this context, local communities do not associate smuggling with crime but rather see it as necessary for survival. Smugglers remain part of the local society and their activities contribute to resilience of the communities, whether through financial smuggling in order to support local resistance against the central power, or through facilitating the movement of the persecuted and oppressed (see Aliyah Ataei, Chapter 3).

In the late Ottoman Empire, the Régie, a French company had a monopoly over tobacco production. Peasant cultivators started successful smuggling operations to resist both the French company’s monopoly and governmental taxes.16 Similarly, smugglers were key players in the formation of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement of Jacobitism in England.17 Other examples include Buddhist monks who facilitate the escape to India of Tibetans from China’s colonial oppression,18 the smugglers of the Gaza tunnels, and a former Kurdish freedom fighter who became a professional migration facilitator in the 1980s, who sees his work as an anti-colonial project:

The rich world steal from the poor world. When people have tried to make a change in politics and change the ruling regimes, the superpowers have intervened and stopped the democratic movements…. This is our situation. As long as there are plunderers the plundered ones [i.e. refugees and migrants] will want to come and see where their wealth has ended up. And I help them.19

If we understand the current border regime to be a colonial infrastructure, that guarantees the freedom of movement of certain people and things in a way that maintains and increases the hegemony, wealth and security of former colonial powers, then these local as well as transnational acts of
border transgression can be thought of as ways to challenge the current coloniality of the world order – as long as these transgressions work in the support of the survival and livelihood of the oppressed.

**Visuality and materiality**

To see like a smuggler also provides insights into the materialities and visuality of smuggling practices. While the dominant focus in smuggling studies tends to be on policy and discourse analysis, or on providing ethnographies of people who use smugglers’ services (such as in the studies of human smuggling), this collection will provide a lens to examine the vehicles, infrastructures and objects involved in the processes of smuggling, not simply as supporting instruments but as productive agents which determine the scale, speed and forms that smuggling practices take. Kennedy Chikerema (Chapter 8) specifically focuses on this aspect of smuggling. Moreover, as we read in the chapters of Javier Guerrero-C (Chapter 6), Debda Chowdhury (Chapter 7) and Craig Martin (Chapter 9), the materialities of smuggled commodities determine the form of the smuggling. Sometimes, materiality can manifest alternatives to state authority. As Rebecca B. Galemba (Chapter 4) explains in her study of the Mexico-Guatemala border, by placing a cadena (chain) somewhere other than the legal location of the border, a new border is declared, giving rise to new rituals of taxation organised by the surrounding communities. This in turn generates an identification effect by uniting the communities that depend on this ‘new’ border, regardless of their nationality.

Smuggling both reveals and appropriates the materialities involved in states’ bordering practices. In this sense, smuggling goes beyond the representative or utilitarian capacities of materialities that are so crucial in state policy, such as the use of imagery and technologies in bordering. Smuggling instead realises the potential of materials for creating numerous new possibilities of reassembling, for example by turning everyday objects that may pass through borders unnoticed into containers of illicit things, or making unauthorised bodies look like normative, legalised bodies on the move.

This is also a matter of visuality and sensory awareness. Smuggling often works through the manipulation and reconfiguration of the senses of what is an accepted, legal and authorised moving person or object. However, it is the border that establishes this in the first place. Borders govern the senses as a way to regulate social processes and relationships. Borders do
not have any essential qualities, but rather are shape-shifting and create fluid relations that can be reassembled to produce different perceptions for different bodies. In this sense borders work more like magic than protocols. Magic changes our perception of the real: something turns into something else. Like magic, borders engender new perceptions. Borders turn neighbours into enemies. A short distance suddenly becomes farther. The skin of people on the other side becomes darker. Nomadic tribes become illegal border crossers. Cousins from the next village become illegal transgressors. Traders become smugglers. The value of commodities increases and decreases at the moment they cross the border. In this sense, borders try to control what a spectator sees. If borders function like magic, then smuggling works as counter-magic. Smugglers, for instance, work by changing the perceptions of border guards: they make an Iranian be seen as Greek; an Afghan as Korean. Smuggling consists of a range of techniques, from creating and forging specific papers, passports and supporting documents, to using and repurposing vehicles, and infrastructures of travel. Smugglers teach us that the magic of the border is actually a series of techniques and tactics that can be countered through the same means. To see like a smuggler is to shift the attention from the spectacle of walls and fences to the details, techniques, and operations of borders. As a counter-magic, smuggling both affirms the normative imagery of border crossing by identifying what is seen as licit and legal and adhering to it, but also unsettles assumptions about authenticity linked to legalised bodies and commodities. Smuggling shows that authenticity is only meaningful in relation to a specific border, body, or commodity, time and geography, and is always subjective and contingent on different materialities.

The mainstream regime of visibility and media aims to depict smuggling through externalising it. For instance, this is done by presenting the images of masculine – and in many cases racialised – bodies of smugglers, confiscated goods and the vehicles used to smuggle, as a threat to ethical and aesthetic norms, as well as to the well-being of the society. Externalisation – that is, hiding contradictions and gaps – also takes place in the form of regular public shows in many countries, in which confiscated smuggled goods are destroyed. The shows are often spectacular. Goods are burnt or smashed by military vehicles. The more expensive the goods that are destroyed (such as luxury cars), the more spectacular the shows become. The public show is a ‘message’, targeting consumers more than the smugglers. These rituals visualise smuggled goods as external phenomena penetrating the social body, and therefore in need of annihilation.
This externalisation however is not new. In the nineteenth century, smuggling was a recurrent theme in European literature and visual art. From the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet from 1875, to G.P.R. James’s *The Smuggler: A Tale* from 1845 and also in the painting of *The Smugglers Return*, by Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg from 1801. The smuggler appears as a lonely figure who heroically stands up against the rulers. In G.P.R. James’s novel smugglers are presented as ‘men who break boldly through an unjust and barbarous system, which denies to our land the goods of another, and who … insist at the peril of their lives, on man’s inherent right to trade with his neighbors’. The figure of smuggler appeared as much in the literature of political economy as in tales and fictions. Perhaps it has its explanation in the Janus face of smugglers, who either were condemned as anti-social profit seekers and a threat to the national interest, or as heroes who ensured the survival of so-called free trade.

Today the defenders of ‘free trade’ are large-scale corporations which are often closely related to states. Accordingly, smugglers are included and excluded simultaneously, but always represented as external actors who unsettle, blur, transgress and breach the nationalised boundary between legal and illegal commodities and residents. Smuggling puts a mirror in front of this externalisation by engaging with bordering practices materially, visually, socially and economically. In doing so, as many chapters in this book demonstrate, smuggling emerges from the internal contradictions and gaps within the nation-state system and, as such, provides other imageries and imaginations about the position of smuggling and its relation to the everyday life of many communities and individuals.

*Ethics*

This collection focuses on smuggling as a productive endeavour, which is not merely an economic service but demands that we engage with the question of borders ethically and politically. One way in which smuggling is externalised is through overexposing smugglers’ violence, while simultaneously hiding state violence towards the people in need of the services of smugglers, such as migrants or borderland communities. In contrast to the from-above practice of externalisation, this collection shows that the ethics of smuggling reside precisely in its relationship to individuals and communities as a form of negotiable protection from below when states fail to provide, or ignore or actively restrict the rights of certain groups to mobility, wealth and safety.
As Dawood Amiri – who has been convicted for human smuggling, and at the time of writing in May 2021, is currently serving his seven-year prison sentence in Indonesia – puts it:

the people-smugglers were the real saviours of [the] asylum-seekers. We offered them survival and peace of mind for only $4,000 … on the other hand, if they were patient and prepared to work through the long-term legal processes of the UNHCR and IOM [International Organization for Migration] there was a chance of peace and survival for about 5 per cent of the people of their fourth generation – after 200 years. In the minds and hearts of the asylum-seekers, this slim chance never looked fair against the prospect of riding boats to Australia.23

Many borderland communities involved in informal cross-border trade have argued for the ‘right to smuggling’ to survive, as shown in Galemba’s and Guerrero-C’s chapters. In such a context, smuggling can be seen as an ethical endeavour. For example, Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste in this volume shows succinctly how the existing legal channels for the domestic workers programme between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia take a long time, and are costly and selective, as only Muslim women are desired by employers. Moreover, these legal channels are controlled by the state and legal private agents, which leaves no space for negotiating the choice of employer or wage rates. In contrast, smuggling can provide workers with a higher degree of negotiating power. While the negotiations which result from smuggling can be temporary, fragile and vulnerable, nonetheless there is some level of control given to those who choose smuggling services. As Harvey (Chapter 10) argues, while ‘seeing like a smuggler’ identifies something affirmative in the strategies of circumvention and improvisation, and a reimagined kind of ethics through its creation of loosely bound communities, smuggling simultaneously teaches us about the partiality of any ethical framework.

Hobsbawm’s thesis of social banditry, which has inspired this book to some degree, has been criticised as being Eurocentric, because of the absence of non-European concepts, ethics, techniques, and histories. We should therefore pay attention to how experiences of smuggling are formed by relations, religions, and moral economies other than Western ones. Studies of smuggling in the Middle East and Africa show, for instance, that local moral perceptions and religious conceptions, and not criminal law, regulate smuggling practices. Local communities engaged in smuggling in
North Africa make a distinction between licit and illicit goods based on the Islamic concepts of ‘halal’ (permitted) and ‘haram’ (forbidden). By approaching smuggling through ethical frameworks other than Western ones, we may overcome some of the ethical and political challenges posed by the from-below position that this book takes.

Engaging with smuggling from below has its own methodological challenges too. Studying smuggling usually means encounters with archival materials which are produced through the lens of the states. Seeing smuggling from above is built upon judicial records or police reports. Similarly archives, and a large part of the available knowledge about smuggling are mainly produced by the official authorities or the organisations which represent the nation-state system. Therefore, in studies of smuggling discrepancies between theoretical claims of a critical approach on the one hand, and empirical data which are uncritically collected from official sources on the other, become difficult to avoid. Faced with such contested knowledge, which is tied to the state violence, the question is how should we study smuggling? Repositioning in order to look from below aims to build up new relations to knowledges and concepts that are not otherwise articulated in the processes of knowledge production. It is an attempt to liberate the field of smuggling studies from its state-centric structure.

However, the question of what specific epistemologies are revealed and ignored by ‘seeing like a smuggler’ is indirectly addressed but remains unanswered in this book. How much should one reveal about the activities that sustain the lives of precarious and vulnerable populations, whether on the move or residing at borderlands? How much of the knowledge about activities such as smuggling should be kept within the communities who need these strategies in a time of harsher border controls, and how much can we share in order to decriminalise and politicise smuggling practices? While these are complex questions, we have tried to show sensitivity towards smugglers’ fundamental right to opacity, that is, not everything should be seen, explained, understood and documented.

Furthermore, to see like a smuggler runs the risk of romanticising a practice that can involve exploitation, violence and coercion. Hobsbawm has been criticised for having a romanticised image of bandits, for instance by feminist scholars who believe that it reproduces a romantic view of masculine violence. To write about smuggling is challenging, politically as well as ethically. How can we see like a smuggler and at the same time write in an academically honest and ethically responsible way about smuggling? How should we write about the gendered and racialised oppression
which is embedded in some forms of smuggling, without reproducing the dominant, criminalised image of smugglers? How much do we risk romanticising the survival strategies specific to a location, time and community as generalised political acts?

The structure

The chapters of this book are selected and edited so as to present our understanding of smuggling as open-ended. Following traces of fragmented archives and histories, this volume is an attempt to show connection between bodies, geographies, materialities, images and economies. Different chapters provide nuanced accounts of the nuts and bolts of smuggling practices and together they offer a constellation of how fragmented parts intersect and how smuggling is constituted. We will see through the texts and images that smuggling is by no means exclusively a liberating practice and may produce new, or reproduce existing, structures of patriarchy, race and class. The chapters present a wide spectrum in terms of content, geography, style and empirical material, and offer dialogues across many fields including anthropology, geography, design studies, science and technology studies, law, and literary theory.

By tracing the illegalised movement of people and goods across borders, this volume shows smuggling as an immanent contradiction within the totality of social relations generated by the nation-state system. In this volume, we bring together a range of approaches, from personal reflections and ethnographies to historical accounts and visual representations of smuggling. The chapters span the globe from Colombia to Ethiopia, from Singapore to Guatemala, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, from Kurdistan to Bangladesh. The chapters collected in this book contribute to creating a more multifaceted picture of smuggling. They also add novel theoretical and empirical approaches to the field of border studies and studies of smuggling. The empirically based chapters create a space for discussing smuggling in relation to other social and political processes. They raise questions on ethics, materialities, histories, colonial power relations, and visual representations of the practice of smuggling, and together offer a distinct contribution to the public debate, as well as to the body of knowledge about borders and smuggling.

Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste (Chapter 1) offers a thick description of the emerging human smuggling route and migration facilitation between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork.