Human Smugglers | Workshop Abstracts – Part 1

written by Allegra
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The workshop "Critical approaches to irregular migration facilitation: dismantling the human smuggler narrative" is fast approaching! Unique in its genre, the workshop aims to problematise the figure of the smugglers beyond overly simplistic generalisations and representations.

There is a growing corpus of empirical and critical work on the facilitation or brokerage of irregular migration within migration regimes, which deserves to be

fostered and strengthened. The workshop proposes critical and empirical engagements on the topic of the facilitation and brokerage of irregular migration as witnessed regionally and comparatively by its participants.

Only for its aficionados, Allegra will publish the full list of abstracts. Here's part one. Enjoy!

The War on Smuggling, at Sea and in the Public Sphere
Maurizio Albahari, Notre Dame University

The present contribution tackles the empirical and conceptual slippage between human smuggling and trafficking, from the vantage point of Mediterranean maritime migrations. In particular, it examines the development and changing practices of smuggling toward Italy, and the emergence of the national and European institutional approach to the war on smuggling. Analytically, it unpacks several conflations: between boat driver and smuggler; between smuggler and trafficker; between small smuggling groups and large, multinational smuggling groups. Such conflations fail to grapple also with the structured agency of the people using smuggler services, and feed citizens the simplistic idea of a "flow" of "slaves" that can be stopped by stopping its vectors.

Politically, such conflations result into (or at least seek to legitimize) a discursive and military war on smuggling that, while reproducing its very targets, fails to substantially liberate migrants from smugglers' discretion and from the inherent risk of crossing long stretches of sea. In other words, the paper argues that the war on smuggling fails to tackle/reproduces the humanitarian and geopolitical dimension of the Mediterranean as a lethal border and as a space of vulnerability. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of the establishment of the so-called Aegean and Balkan routes: to what degree do they displace the European sovereign emphasis on the war on smuggling (given for example refugees' pervasive use of GPS and social media), conceived largely as a response to the longer routes to Italy?

Defining Human Smuggling in Migration Research: An Appraisal and Critique

[Theodore Baird](#), VU University Amsterdam

The terms migrant smuggling and human trafficking are often used synonymously in public discussions and the media, but are distinct categories in international law. This article provides a critical discussion of the representation of human smuggling in academic research, by demonstrating that the current definition of human smuggling has been un-critically applied from international law in the formulation and implementation of research designs. It traces the development of the concept of human smuggling in academic research through an evaluation of three phases: 1) Pre-Palermo and early Palermo days: 1990s-2003, 2) post-Palermo: 2001-present, and 3) conceptual re-visions: 2007-present. It demonstrates that the definition of human smuggling has gone through shifting categorizations, but much of the research on human smuggling has been conducted within the legal and bureaucratic field of power and migration management, not about and of the legal and bureaucratic field of migration management. Based on this evaluation, the article argues for a critique of the category of human smuggling through innovative research designs and improved criticism of the causes, effects, and use of the term. The article concludes with notes towards a research agenda for critical human smuggling studies, for research beyond the legal categories in order to understand 'human smuggling' as a category of social control and repression in diverse contexts.

(Il)legitimate mobility managers: Migration brokers versus the EU

[Lisa Åkesson](#) (University of Gothenburg), and [Jill Alpes](#) (VU University Amsterdam)

This article juxtaposes two different kinds of mobility managers: a state-managed EU programme in Cape Verde and two Cameroonian development NGOs run by

businessmen. Through placing these actors side by side the article aims to critically explore constructions of legitimacy in relation to different actors in migration management. As discussions of migration management often simply assume that the state has a monopoly over the legitimate means of mobility control, we set out to question the perceived and the concrete differences between the two examples of this article. It is important to note that the purpose of the article is not to say that market or state actors are more or less legitimate and/or successful. Our position is rather to call for greater reflexivity about chosen perspectives and standpoints implicit in the terms used to describe and analyse different mobility managers. The article discusses the functioning of the two types of mobility managers, their relations with aspiring migrants and their respective discourses and modes of self-representation. In both our cases, the ideal of "the free migrant" who only relies on the state appears to be an illusion. We also demonstrate that despite apparent differences these mobility managers share a significant number of characteristics, among these the use of "development" as a trope for legitimizing their activities, although this trope take on different meanings in the different contexts.

Smuggled or trafficked North Korean refugees? Cross border mobility through smuggling Networks

Kyunghee Kook, University of Nottingham

North Koreans have escaped, and continue to escape, from their home country into China due to food shortages, economic disaster, and political persecution. The journey is extremely perilous, and escapees are not safe once across the border. In China, they are vulnerable to arrest and repatriation because of their illegal status. This vulnerability often leads them into conditions and relations that are associated with what is typically described as 'trafficking'. However, some of them manage to continue the journey through a third country such as Mongolia, Thailand, or Laos, and ultimately secure citizenship in South Korea. A few seek to travel to Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, hoping to be granted

refugee status. These onward journeys are generally facilitated by smuggling networks composed of actors with a very broad and divergent range of interests, including professional brokers, NGOs, missionaries, and family members.

Though the plight of North Korean refugees is frequently mentioned in human rights reports and the academic literature, there has been very little empirical research on the actual migration experience of North Koreans. This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with thirty-five North Koreans and individuals involved in smuggling networks in South Korea and explores North Koreans' cross-border mobility to South Korea. It also addresses the complexities of 'smuggling', showing how the category spans a continuum of actions that might be described as 'saving' or 'rescue' at one pole, and the kind of exploitation generally termed 'trafficking' at the other. Through a focus on the multiple and varied interests and motivations of different actors who assist with North Koreans' migration process, the paper argues that differences between 'trafficking', 'smuggling' and 'migration' are constructed rather than essential, and reflect a continued tendency to imagine human mobility through the lens of a fictional opposition between actions that are forced and those that are voluntary.

Coyotaje and the Construction of 'el Camino' from Central America through Mexico
[Noelle K. Brigden](#), Marquette University

In narratives recounting the story of their unauthorized journeys across Mexico and into the United States, Central American migrants often frame their experience as a paradox of danger and opportunity, suffering and adventure, and a series of encounters with both good and evil. I pay particular attention to the equally ambivalent figure of the coyote (i.e. the human smuggler) in these narratives. The coyote alternates between hero and villain in the popular imaginary of Central American migration. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador, Mexico and the United States, I ask what role coyotes play in both the mythical and material route north. In so doing, I elucidate how these key

brokers contribute to the duality of the migration experience and shape the lived incongruities of a place known as el Camino (i.e. the road). Despite the indefinite ends, flexible mobility strategies, and often-illusive destinations of migrant journeys, el Camino is imagined as a definite place. Despite its clandestine and liminal character, el Camino represents a way of life; it is a series of everyday brokerage practices, known as coyotaje, which become the lifeblood of the communities through which migrants frequently transit. Thus, through the persona of the coyote, I explore the relationship between the material practice of migration brokerage and migrants' imagination of the transnational route as a bounded but accessible social space.

"He used to be a pollero": Smugglers and the Securitization of Migration at the Mexico-Guatemala Border

Rebecca Galemba, University of Denver

This paper ethnographically examines the impacts of Mexico's securitization of migration on border resident smugglers at the Mexico-Guatemala border. While many studies focus on the effects of border security policies on migrants, the fortification of the border and the criminalization of mobility also impact those who reside along the migrant trail and engage in smuggling. Mexico's implementation of the Southern Border Program in 2014 represents its most recent crackdown on unauthorized migration. The U.S.-Mexico border has witnessed a 50% decline in detentions since 2014 as responsibilities transferred to the Mexico-Guatemala border. In 2015, Mexico's apprehensions increased over 70% since 2014 alongside an escalation in human rights violations.

Residents who live along an unmonitored border crossing at the Mexico-Guatemala border play a critical role facilitating the flow of people, goods, and information across the border. They smuggle goods, provide information to migrants, impede the entrance of state authorities, and maintain relations with human and drug smugglers. Residents historically smuggled Central Americans across the border to nearby Mexican cities. However, in the past decade, most

residents stopped guiding migrants. Residents told me migration was now more "illicit." They even attempted to expel migrants living in their communities. As Mexico enhanced border security, human smuggling dynamics changed. What was once an entrepreneurial, small-scale endeavor became a riskier sophisticated business dominated by violent smugglers, cartels, and gangs. This paper details how border resident smugglers selectively participate in the smuggling of migrants, commodities, and drugs in the current security climate, They engage in, or facilitate, some forms of smuggling, limit certain flows, and silence others depending on changing security landscapes and local moral evaluations. While border smugglers are small players in the global arena of human smuggling, they are key to understanding how cross-border flows of people and goods are enabled, socially legitimized, or restricted.

Historical and community dimensions of smuggling in Afghanistan and Somalia
Nassim Majidi, Sciences Po

Historical and community dimensions of smuggling in Afghanistan and Somalia "When you think of leaving, it becomes like a sickness, an obsession. If someone says tonight 'I need to go to Europe', that person has to go and will be helped by the community to go. Right in your neighborhood, introductions are made. The smuggler I had was a friend, I trusted him." These words from a Somali man recently returned from Norway to Mogadishu echo the voices of migrants interviewed in Afghanistan1. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the historical and community dimensions of human smuggling facilitation in Afghanistan and in Somalia. In both settings, the smuggler is from the community and introduced by the community. Through time, his role has evolved to using advanced technology, transnational networks and partnerships with international money transfer companies, like Dahabshiil. "They know well the smugglers, they know us, so the money can be transferred even a phone call away from Norway to Somalia". Local smugglers are facilitators of migration. Those that are feared by

the migrants are the 'other' smugglers, in Greece, Italy, and further in Europe, whom they do not know and do not trust. The social organization of smuggling has its strength in the community at the point of origin, but has its weakness in the diversity of actors, cultures and languages along the way. From trust and support, they – across countries and time – become a more distant migration actor. Data will be extracted from seven years of migration research in Afghanistan (2007--2014), two years of research among Afghan and Somali migrants and their smugglers in Calais in 2014--2015, as well as on-going research in Somalia for the Danish Refugee Council and the International Organization for Migration.

Brokerage economies: crisis, mediation, and contested subjectivities across the Beitbridge border of South Africa and Zimbabwe

Xolani Tshabalala, Linköping University

The concept of brokerage has again assumed significance in times of crisis and associated crossbordermovement in Southern Africa. Across Beitbridge, the border of Zimbabwe and South Africa, the participation of state and non-state actors in the border's clandestine economy does not merely problematize who the broker is, but also notions of subject formation and state-society relations. Seeking to read Rodríguez's (1996) notion of 'international autonomous migration' (cross-border movement outside state regulation) against Piper and von Lieres (2015) conception of mediation as a politics of negotiation and bargaining, this paper will discuss crisis, brokerage and subjectivity, within an overarching frame of '(labour) informalization', as both producing and produced by constantly shifting understandings of social action, legitimacy and configurations of meaning. The paper is based on more than a year of ethnographic research, comprising participant observations with omalayitsha – cross-border private transporters of people and goods, and on narrative interviews with Zimbabwean migrants who use the services of these transporters to travel on a circular basis to South Africa. These are complimented with key

interviews and archival material relating to specialized knowledge on various aspects of undocumented migration between Zimbabwe and South Africa. While adding to an already existing debate on the role of brokerage in transcending divergent, contradictory and competing frameworks, discourses and practices by utilizing insights from an important historical but relatively less studied ethnographic site, the paper will also pose questions on the role of state borders, undocumented movement, and cultural actors in the articulation of dispossession, state authority and subject formation in the post-colonial Scene.

Crossing the border, blurring the boundaries: ethnographic insights into human smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe

Milena Belloni, University of Trento

Thousands of migrants from the Horn of Africa have systematically crossed international borders across Africa to Europe in the last 20 years (e.g. UNDOC, 2010). However, the system, which enables them to do so, has remained relatively under-investigated and known mostly through second-hand accounts and narratives. Based on an ethnography of Eritrean refugees' everyday life in Ethiopia and Sudan and the participant observation into the daily lives of a group of facilitators in Khartoum (2013-2014), this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the practical and social organisation of the smuggling business, its representation among refugees and facilitators, and the moralities underpinning it. First, I show that the universe of human smuggling includes a complex variety of roles and responsibilities enacted not only by the professionals of irregular migration, but also by smuggled refugees and their diasporic families. This analysis is informed by an historical perspective on how this universe of Eritrean border-crossing practices has developed in over 60 years of forced migration. Second, I argue that the human smuggling business can only be comprehended if considered "embedded" (Polanyi, 1968) in refugees' social, historical and moral milieu. Here, the distinction between smugglers and traffickers will be drawn based on an emic understanding of these categories.

Third, I describe the ambivalence of representations and moral attitudes concerning border-crossings among smuggled refugees and facilitators.

Friends and Handlers: Facilitating Passage Out of West Africa

Stephanie Maher, University of Washington

In 2006, EUROPOL reported that eighty percent of irregular migration from Africa to Europe was facilitated. Similar figures have informed policy discourses that aim to militarize and externalize border controls, often under the guise of humanitarian intervention. Today, news reports of smugglers extorting money, and abusing or abandoning their human cargo in the Mediterranean have become commonplace. Moreover, contemporary narratives tend to paint smugglers as part of regional mafia-like criminal organizations. And yet, contrary to alarmist reports of internationally syndicated human smuggling networks operating in Africa, most smuggling practices are small-scale and oriented around personal and communal connections. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic research in Senegal, this paper redirects our attention the sociality of migrant facilitation. Although it has become relatively common in media and policy reports to suggest that irregular migrants the world over are manipulated into departure by greedy and unscrupulous human smugglers who do not fully disclose the dangers of passage, and who take advantage of passive or gullible migrants, the majority of repatriated migrants in Senegal knew their handlers personally and relied on them to facilitate transit through unknown and dangerous spaces. As this paper argues, journeys were frequently negotiated within close-knit communities among people who already knew each other. Migrants were often familiar with their handlers and were more likely to call them a friend (ami) rather than a criminal. Also, most migrants would not see themselves as "smuggled," which implies victimhood. Rather, they saw themselves as making calculated choices to migrate based on a host of social factors. By exploring the relationships between handlers and migrants, this paper reveals the social worlds of negotiation, assistance, and protection that feature prominently in West African

migrant narratives and practices.

Beyond common-sense notions about the smuggling of migrants: local findings from clandestine transit experiences from Ecuador to the U.S.
[Soledad Alvarez Velasco](#) (King's College) and Martha Cecilia Ruiz (FLACSO-Ecuador)

Uneven development and the global proliferation of "walled states" (Brown 2010) have determined the augmentation of irregularized migration and illegalized activities like smuggling.   Studies about these two issues have, to a large extent, come from the U.S. and Europe, while in countries of origin and transit critical analyses about these current events are scarce.The Ecuadorean case is relevant for it bears a history of clandestine transits and smuggling of migrants towards the U.S. of more than 50 years (Kyle 2001). By way of analysing the dynamics of such a process, this article will contribute in a debate that casts doubt on public common sense arguments. Our purpose is to use local findings from migration experiences taking place in Ecuador (1- clandestine family reunification and 2- clandestine transits from Asia, Africa to the U.S. via Ecuador) to dismantle the above mentioned common notions. We will analyse states' roles in creating and sustaining human smuggling, while arguing that in the midst of the securitization turn, coyotes end up doing state tasks such as enabling process of family reunification, or being the channels through which life projects are fulfilled. We will specifically refer to the the dynamics around undocumented migration of unaccompanied Ecuadorian children and adolescents towards the U.S. or clandestine family reunification with parents who have previously migrated with coyotes. Second, the dynamics around clandestine transits of international migrants (people from Cuba, Africa and Asia) who arrive into Ecuador with the aim of transiting towards the United States. These data has not been analysed through this critical lenses. Accordingly, we believe these information about current Ecuadorean dynamics contributes to cast doubt upon a simplistic and criminalizing perspective about smugglers.

Problem or solution? Migrants, states, and the duality of the human smuggler

[Jørgen Carling](#), Peace Research Institute, Oslo

The human smuggler has become a pivotal yet elusive character in the dynamics of migration and migration regulation. With respect to recent irregular migration to Europe, this paper argues that for migrants and states alike, the human smuggler embodies a duality of threat and relief. A large share of migrants depends on the services of smugglers to realize their migration projects. For people who migrate out of a well-founded fear of persecution, the human smuggler connects the risk of persecution to the promise of protection. But smugglers also represent the dangers of the journey and the vulnerability that is invoked by being smuggled. For European states, the connective role of smugglers represents a threat. Since the 1980s, the de facto cornerstone of European asylum policy has been to restrict access to the system, thereby upholding the principle of granting asylum without providing protection to more than a tiny fraction of the individuals who would qualify. Human smugglers undermine this regime. But human smugglers represent a resource in the sphere of political discourse. European leaders are under pressure to 'do something' in the face of crisis, but have few feasible options. In this situation, human smugglers are a convenient target of assertive action. Moreover, when smugglers are represented as a threat to migrants, policies that effectively block access to protection can be promoted as being protective. The paper makes connections between political rhetoric, lived experiences, and the dynamics of irregular Migration.

Manufacturing smugglers: from irregular to clandestine mobility in the Sahara

[Julien Brachet](#), University of Oxford

The Sahara has long been an area marked by mobility. Travellers' journeys were enabled by nomads and traders, who took passengers respectively on their camels and, since the mid-twentieth century, on their trucks. Trans-border mobility between the Sahel and northern Africa was mostly irregular, but not clandestine, and transport was thus mixed. Even if immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa were generally kept in an irregular situation in Algeria and Libya, as their entry in the national territories were hardly formalized by the authorities, most of the border crossings were supervised and (illegally) taxed by policemen or soldiers working in the border area. This habit of bribing went along with a kind of social control of those trans-Saharan movements, of who did what with who. Up to the late 1990s, nobody ever thought about traders and drivers as smugglers of people, although they might have been recognized as smugglers of good. Then, from the early 2000s, the EU and European countries stepped in, considering all trans-Saharan movements as a first step towards Europe, and thus encouraging national authorities to stop them. This led to the hardening of migration policies everywhere in northwest Africa, and illegal border crossings were not anymore allowed by local agents of the North African states. This communication aims to show how the resulting need to travel led to the development of specialised passenger transport as a clandestine activity, leading to an increase of the human and financial cost of those journeys.

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