

Crimes of
Solidarity in
Mobility:
Alternative
Views on
Migrant
Smuggling

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government practices the same response strategy—stepping up efforts to combat criminal smuggling organizations to reduce illegal entries by foreign nationals.⁵ Along the same lines, major international organizations such as the United Nations also advocate positions that aim at improving legislative development and cooperation among member states to combat what is considered a multi-billion-dollar global criminal enterprise.⁶

The underlying logic for all these response strategies in the Western world seems remarkably similar—combatting smuggling organizations is key to reducing the influx of illegal immigrants. Such a belief and its concomitant policies are easy to translate into legislation and allocation of resources, against the backdrop of tragic images of capsized boats floating in the Mediterranean Sea, dead children washed ashore, and women and children in tattered clothes cramped in refugee camps in hopes of reaching Western countries. One such recent example is the San Antonio, Texas, tragedy of July 23, 2017, where ten migrants out of an estimated one hundred died after having travelled on the back of a truck with no refrigeration under the scorching summer sun; the act was labelled “sickening” and “demonstrating [of] kingpin smugglers’ blatant disregard for human life” (Beavers 2017). The magnitude of these tragedies obscures the reasons behind migrants’ use of smuggling services. Further, it reinforces the binary predator-victim position that saturates the official discourse on illegal migration and that has remained largely unchallenged in the West for decades: that migrant smugglers are major enablers to illegal transnational migration activities and the main cause of the human misery witnessed along migration routes worldwide. But is this the case?

Questions That Demand Answers

Migrants seeking to enter countries without proper, official papers continue to

Researchers have found similar patterns in which smuggling merely presents an opportunity to sell or exchange one's resources (see Zhang 2007, 2008; Chin 1999; and Sanchez 2014). Even the roles of smugglers are often fluid, with migrants often taking the role of smuggling facilitators and vice versa, as Achilli, Gonzalez, Stone-Cadena, and Velasco describe in their contributions to this volume.

What then are the major considerations that influence migrants' decision to hire a smuggler? Since none of the transactions in this illicit market is legally enforceable, what insurance mechanism is available for migrants to ensure that the services will be delivered and for smugglers to get paid? As Kook, Sanchez, and Zhang argue in this volume, migrants are not passive actors in the process of transnational migration but active in vetting and procuring smuggling services, evaluating the reliability of smuggling facilitators, and learning through failed journeys which smugglers are worthy of trust and why. Based on their fieldwork, authors in this volume of *The ANNALS* present migrant smuggling as a complex and layered social process where kinship, friends and associates, overseas migrant communities, personal connections, money, and prior experiences coalesce to form the basis for protection, safety, and decision-making along the migration route (Maher, this volume).

Exploring Migrant Smuggling in the Field

At the onset of this project, authors were asked to explain why smugglers figure so prominently in transnational irregular migration narratives and draw so much attention from affected governments. Together these contributions set out to explore, in their respective corners of the world, not just the role and activities of smuggling facilitators, but their social lives. Our collective goal was to get as close as possible to the sources of the smuggling businesses and activities, and to collect data directly from the men and women who rely on smuggling as their livelihood. This goal emerged from our collective concern that existing literature on irregular migration has primarily drawn from the perspectives of government or law enforcement eager to contain migratory flows, or from migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who are the unfortunate target of threats, scams, or violence during their clandestine journeys. The graphic images of migrant smuggling in the global news media also prevent views that contextualize smuggling amid the increasingly punitive migration regimes and the criminalization of migration. Irregular migration and its facilitation have long been viewed as a process deeply tied to the identities and livelihoods of entire communities, as Brachet, Stone-Cadena, and Velasco describe in the cases of the Sahara and indigenous Ecuador in this volume. Current public discourse that focuses on violence and exploitation has systematically silenced the insights of the vast majority of irregular migrants who successfully completed their journeys and the voices of those who played a role in that success, as Ayalew, Sanchez, and Zhang describe in their research in

research on irregular migration and that its contributions serve as an example of what fieldwork can do to challenge the status quo and counter dominant narratives.

The Purpose of This Volume

This volume of *The ANNALS* comes at a critical time in migration studies, given the current crisis on refugee and migrant protection systems worldwide. Compared to the abundance of research on the lives of migrants and refugees, empirical work on their journeys remains scant. Academics, law enforcement, and policy-makers are sorely in need of empirically based work about this much-maligned aspect of transnational migration. Our collection seeks to address this gap.

Empirical work and edited volumes or special issues on smuggling have been difficult to compile and find in existing literature. Kyle and Koslowski edited *Global Human Smuggling* in 2001 and a revised edition in 2013, both volumes standing as fundamental texts in smuggling scholarship, yet their geographical focus was the U.S.-Mexico border, and on China. While the second edition expanded to other regions, the majority of the articles continued to draw from secondary sources, or relied on government reports and archival records. In 2016, *Geopolitics* dedicated a special issue to clandestine migration journeys, coordinated by Mainwaring and Brigden, which addressed the myriad ways in which migrants engage with the geographies they cover in the context of their journeys. Their special issue sought to analyze how “geopolitics shape and animate the everyday experiences of clandestine migration journeys” and the ways migrants “negotiate and manoeuvre” their journeys from their marginalized positions (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016, 244).

This special issue focuses on the actual organization of the irregular journeys, and on the persona of the facilitator—not as members of transnational organized crime—but as guides, drivers, brokers, cooks, recruiters, and lookouts, the men and women behind migrants’ journeys. We seek to establish smuggling first as a grounded social and cultural practice, while critically reframing its importance amid global border and immigration enforcement and controls. We hope our readers will find the articles in this volume different from much of the existing literature to date on political science or border criminology, which has focused on the experiences of migrants and their criminalization by the state. We are in no way minimizing the impact of border controls on migrants’ lives nor condoning exploitative smuggling practices. Rather, we use this platform rich in ethnographic data from multiple locales around the world to question the utility of the dominant discourse on migrant smuggling, to challenge its concomitant policy ramifications, and to identify its intersections with criminal justice and migration controls. We present a series of empirically supported perspectives that portray human smuggling as a social process engaged in by irregular migrants who seek to mitigate the uncertainty and hazards inherent in their illicit journey and, in the

process, build mechanisms of security from below (Ayalew, this volume). As our concluding piece from Triandafyllidou states, there is a need to dig deeper into realities on the ground, not least through qualitative empirical research and through comparative analysis, to understand the relationship between migrant smuggling and migration control policies. For policy-makers, we offer, unapologetically, a reality check against the rationale underlying the control regimes, and point out the culpability of current antitrafficking strategies in giving rise to criminal networks while causing human miseries along the smuggling routes. We seek to promote humanitarianism in our understanding of migrants aspiring to reach the global North, and to argue for the decriminalization of irregular migration and adoption of a harm-reduction approach toward undocumented migrants.

Diverse Voices from around the World

In this volume of *The ANNALS*, we have included eleven articles documenting smuggling practices in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific. These articles were first presented at an international workshop on smuggling facilitation held at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, in April 2016 and organized by the Migration Policy Centre (EUI) and the University of Texas at El Paso. The contributions come from both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, and involve smuggling practices in Afghanistan, Senegal, Ecuador, Syria, Niger, Turkey, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Korea, the Sahara, Central America, and Mexico, in addition to the more commonly analyzed U.S. and European contexts. These articles fall into three specific areas: (1) the political and moral economy of irregular migration facilitation, (2) the community understandings of and interactions with smuggling facilitators, and (3) the role and agency of migrants and refugees along their smuggling journeys.

While a complex and multilayered topic such as smuggling lends itself to quali-

Conclusion

In this volume of *The ANNALS*, we explore how human smuggling has evolved at the macro-level, amid the militarization, criminalization, and immigration controls of late modernity, as a practice historically grounded in solidarity and reciprocity among diasporas. At the same time, we also explore how smugglers and their clients adapt and develop specific strategies at the micro-level that are reflective of migrant communities and their collective traditions. The rich qualitative data in this special volume bring forth, to the broader society and nonacademic audiences, a perspective on smuggling's enterprising agents and their so-called criminal networks that is far more nuanced and easily accessible than the status quo offered by government reports and the news media. This special volume offers a rare but evidence-based portrayal of smuggling facilitators as otherwise ordinary citizens whose underground travel services are actively courted by people like themselves as an insurance policy or a protection scheme to reduce the uncertainty and hazards inherent in clandestine border crossings.

All authors of this volume identify the increased difficulties of border crossing as the primary force that is pushing migrants into the arms of enterprising agents. As border control regimes strain to erect migration barriers, people aspiring for mobility will continue to rely on their communities and kinship networks to find ways to migrate. It is therefore imperative to have a baseline from which to begin mapping the likely transformations of the smuggling industry, as recent geopolitical developments indicate the legal access to desired destinations will remain the purview of a privileged few (Gallagher 2015).

The empirical findings presented here run counter to the dominant narrative permeated in public discourse, which begs the question of why such a wide gap in conclusions exists between field research and the official position held by Western governments and their supported international organizations. We fully acknowledge the extensive evidence of abusive and exploitative smuggling practices, but identify their root causes in border and migration enforcement and control practices. We denounce the human cost of clandestine journeys, as reflected by the thousands of migrants who go missing or perish during their journeys.

Most authors in this volume come from or have resided in communities impacted by smuggling-related violence and witnessed its effect on migrants and ordinary citizens alike. It is in fact this awareness that has led us to problematize the simplistic predator-victim binary and to offer different views from the ground. We find the accounts of organized crime, mafias, and unlimited profits to be ineffective portrayals of the lived experiences of migrants and those behind their transits. We further consider the predator-victim binary used to designate the smuggler-migrant relationship a narrow portrayal of complex cooperation and mutually beneficial interactions. Because both smuggling facilitators and migrants are often members of the same social networks (e.g., relatives, friends, associates, or social acquaintances), they are subjected to the same informal control processes and therefore tend to engage in exchanges in ways similar to other social

enterprises. Smuggling facilitators may break away from commonly accepted

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