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Migration, Smuggling and the Illicit Global Economy



Introduction

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This special section of *Public Anthropologist* examines the alleged convergence of markets in the “illicit global economy” – the clandestine cross-border flows of people, goods, money, and information that are unauthorized by sending or receiving countries worldwide.¹

Several policy reports and academic publications on the illicit global economy show significant support for the claim that organized crime actors – from human smugglers to drug traffickers to weapons dealers – are converging into one another, creating in the process a global criminal network that is swiftly bypassing, corrupting, and subverting state controls and authorities. Apparently, this kind of virulent growth is only likely to continue since transnational organized crime groups’ skills and degrees of innovation have

1 Andreas, P. (2015). International Politics and the Illicit Global Economy. *Perspectives on Politics* 13(3): 782–88.

outpaced those of law enforcement, which finds itself incapable of keeping up with the so-called dark side of globalization.²

As original and cutting-edge as it may sound, the market convergence claim is not new. For almost two decades, innumerable articles, edited volumes and special issues have been published, demanding the attention of an allegedly naïve public to the dangers posed by transnational organized crime.³ We have witnessed this rhetoric deployed in the attempts to contain the spread of the drug trade through the annihilation of the livelihoods of farmers and their criminalization around the world. We have been bystanders in the consolidation of the human trafficking discourse that has reduced precarious forms of labor work to often fetishistic, sexualized representations of women and girls. We have watched the emergence of a long list of alleged collusions in the media – migrant smugglers partnering with terrorists, organ traffickers and the sex trade – which reproduce racial stereotypes of people of color and from the Global South as threats.

While successful at mobilizing public opinion and policy makers, the market convergence claim is seldom supported by empirical data. The evidence cited by those endorsing the idea of a growing, sophisticated criminal convergence leading the illicit global economy most often comes from the experiences and data sources of government or law enforcement entities, or from victims whose experiences are so heinous that can be easily turned into paradigmatic cases. The focus on sensational, yet infrequent cases further obscures the lives of the people at the center of long list of appellatives used by the advocates of the convergence claim: smugglers, traffickers, madams; cartel operatives and juvenile gang members; militias, pimps, and tribes whose combined forces are allegedly bringing down the world. Fewer have been the voices of those calling for grounded, empirically based analyses that do not merely amplify this sensationalistic claim.⁴

For this special section, our objective is to strengthen this critical body of work. With such a goal, the selected articles empirically document the points in which markets or practices deemed illicit by the state intersect, come together,

2 Mandel, R. (2011). *Dark Logic: Transnational Criminal Tactics and Global Security*. Stanford University Press; OECD (2016). *Illicit Trade: Converging Criminal Networks*. Reviews of Risk Management Policies.

3 See Miklaucic M. and Brewer, J. eds. (2013). *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization*. National Defense University Press; Naim, M. (2010). *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy*. Random House; Shelley, L. (2014). *Dirty Entanglements: Corruption, Crime, and Terrorism*. Cambridge University Press.

4 Vigh, H. and Sausdal, D. (2018). The Anthropology of Crime. In: H. Wydra and B. Thomassen, eds. *Handbook of Political Anthropology*. Elgar.

and even clash. We agree with those scholars who have called for improved ethnographic engagements as a corrective to the assumptions surrounding the dark side of globalization. The special section also sheds light on how the incessant reproduction of the convergence claim in policy and media circles has justified and legitimized restrictive migration policies, the tightening of border controls and other measures aimed at curbing migration flows. Indeed, an effective understanding of the purported convergence of illicit markets requires a theoretical and ethnographic engagement with its social and community dimensions; without them, any policy measure intended to tackle any form of market convergence in the illicit global economy may prove difficult if not impossible to implement. We need studies capable of mapping the emerging global interconnections as well as the way people and social institutions (academia included) understand, interpret and reproduce ideas concerning such interconnection.

We contend here that what strikes observers as instances of illicit market convergence can often be explained through the notion of “markets of dispossession” – socio-economic and cultural mechanisms that, while illicit, stigmatized or criminalized, allow for the mobility and survival of growing numbers of people around the world. In other words, we pose that contrary to the widely-held, business-centric claims of complexity and sophistication in organized crime, and in opposition to the forecasts that cite them as potential triggers of the state’s collapse, the transformation of organized criminality has moved towards individualization, fragmentation and the increased disposability of their actors. The characters at the center of this drama, rather than being men from the Global South at the helm of powerful criminal syndicates, are often poor people – including women and children – who act on their own behalf and for their own survival. Of course, this does not mean that illicit markets do not overlap, or that hierarchical criminal organizations are never involved. The web-like network of criminality is multi-tiered, often colluded with the state, the elite capitalists and the military, as a plethora of studies on drug trafficking and other transnational crimes have extensively shown.⁵ We are in no way neglecting the complexity of global crime but simply questioning, based on ethnographic data gathered from multiple locales around the world, the utility of the dominant discourse about crime convergence and its concomitant policy ramifications on the control regime.

We also recognize that enforcement and control play a heavy role in the adaptation or shape of criminalized practices and on the modus operandi of groups. Yet we argue that the claims that portray criminalized markets as

5 Thanks to Linda Green for emphasizing this aspect.

veering toward an ever-increasing complexity and sophistication reveal the lack of awareness and engagement with the lives of those who often rely on these markets for their survival. Despite the insistence of law enforcement and policy makers on the technological savviness of migrant smugglers or drug traffickers, evidence of these actors' engagement with hi-tech equipment or tools is scant at best. The same can be said regarding the common allegations of actors like migrant smugglers having moved all their business online. As the articles in this special section show, most of what nation states consider as criminal threats to their stability are the product of simple and straightforward activities. These, rather than depending on advanced technological tools, rely on the ordinary, scant resources their actors have access to. And while leadership does emerge and can be recognized as such, it should not be always interpreted as synonym of rigid hierarchical structures. When examined, most structures present in organized criminality are in fact horizontal, for structural complexity can pose more a risk for detection than an advantage.⁶ In short, we argue that the transformation of illicit markets often lies in the reduction of barriers to participation, the growing precarization of larger segments of people in the neoliberal economy, and the increasing efforts to systematically bring under the organized crime tag the practices of increasingly disenfranchised people. As a consequence, we see a proliferation of individual actors operating in hyper-fragmented markets. And contrary to the dominant narrative of transnational organized crime as off-limits, it is often the case criminal(ized) activities are quite visible in a terrain where barriers to participation are weak or altogether inexistent.

This special section particularly focuses on one of the most often cited forms of convergence: the kind involving migrant smuggling. Around the world, claims of drug traffickers, terrorists, mafias and gangs taking over the migrant smuggling market have been articulated by governments, which rely on doomsday predictions and isolated incidents of dissimilar groups coming together to seek legitimization of their anti-immigration policies. Through qualitative data and narrative analysis, the contributions to this issue of *Public Anthropologist* challenge the conventional view concerning migrant smuggling facilitators and their interactions with other actors. All the contributors of this special section critically engage with the often-problematic characterizations that prevail in the tragedy and doom common in organized crime scholarship and research, which are deeply intertwined with notions of race, class and gender. Their work problematizes the categories that define or classify specific

6 Campana, P. (2018). Out of Africa: The Organization of Migrant Smuggling Across the Mediterranean. *European Journal of Criminology* 15(4): 481–502.

practices as smuggling, and call to rethink them in the context of global law enforcement regimes.

For this purpose, most of the authors of this special section draw from fieldwork to examine convergence in migrant smuggling from the perspectives of its actors, who remain largely ignored by policy analyses unless portrayed under the dramatic, sensationalistic lens of racialized members of cartels, mafias, militias or ethnic gangs. A distinctive element of these contributions is therefore their reliance on primary data, collected through extensive in-depth interviews and field observations. The goal is also to articulate a much larger question about the reproduction and circulation of contemporary discursive regimes that rely on ahistorical approaches. For instance, the special section shows that what has come to be known as migrant smuggling does not constitute a new phenomenon. An in-depth analysis of market convergence benefits from the examination of the history of mobility concerning people, goods and services (and not of smuggling alone) within the regions/areas examined.

By looking ethnographically, narratively and historically at the ways in which criminalized practices come together, the aim of this special section is to unveil the flows and formations that connect actors of migrant smuggling with other illicit markets across time and space in order to understand how these connections are imagined and reproduced.

Summary of Contents

In their chapter on irregular migration facilitation into Malaysia and Indonesia, Missbach and Hoffstaedter examine how the state – rather than mafias or crime syndicates – is deeply involved in the facilitation of irregular, cross-border migration. The essay challenges the orthodoxy of a state-versus-criminal network dyad and looks at the circumstances under which legal prosecution occurs. In so doing, the authors demonstrate how the purely symbolic punishment of low-ranking officials reinforces networks of control, power hierarchies and cooperation and ultimately allows the state to continue being involved in illicit markets.

In their ethnographic examination into migrant smuggling from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia, Adugna, Deshingkar and Atnafu examine how smuggling networks are developed through personalized relationships, based on co-ethnic bonds rather than extended and complex criminal networks. They investigate the particular surveillance and enforcement contexts of smuggling in Ethiopia, recognizing the complexity of the motives of smugglers to enter the market and challenging the simplistic characterizations that often reduce them

to criminals or mafia members. They further show how smuggling earnings have the capacity to improve livelihoods in communities along the migration pathway.

While the role of the feared *maras* (an androcentric, often sexist term used to collectively designate Central American gangs) in the facilitation of migrant smuggling in Central America is often alleged, it has hardly been examined empirically. Building on her research on Central American migration through Mexico, Yates argues that the claims concerning the alleged participation of *maras* in smuggling grossly overstate the nature of the interactions between them and Central American migrants. Central American migrants interact with a vast range of actors to facilitate their transits (including *maras*), most encounters being uneventful and brief. Simultaneously, and aware of the stereotypes that construct young Central American male bodies as *maras*, young Central American men regardless of their affiliation often act upon these stereotypes as protection mechanisms to advance their journeys and reach their destinations.

Narratives of drug cartels progressively smuggling migrants and Islamic terrorists across borders is a claim not only common in policy and academic accounts and international organizations' reports. It is also a frequent trope in popular culture. Massari shows how the myth of criminal convergence can be (re)produced and conveyed to the public through crime-action cinema. Relying on a visual-social semiotic analysis of the film *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*, Massari argues that the rhetoric of criminal convergence fuels a simplistic account of a Manichean battle between good and evil – represented respectively by the white, American law enforcement agents versus the Mexican, brown men involved in interconnected cross-border crimes. This rhetoric, the author argues, diverts attention from the role of states both in creating the demand for activities that are eventually criminalized and, concomitantly, legitimizes more intrusive and authoritarian forms of border security and migration policy.

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork with young people seeking to migrate irregularly from the Gaza Strip in occupied Palestine, Procter's contribution also confronts the assumption that, when irregular migration takes place in a context deemed to be a bastion of terrorism, the two inevitably converge. By analyzing how young people coordinate their movement out of Gaza, and their primary motivations for doing so, the article disrupts the idea of an incumbent criminal convergence of terrorism, irregular migration and human smuggling, demonstrating that the facilitation of irregular migration draws on improvised community praxis and ties. In the case of Gaza, smuggling is also undertaken by youth to protest the status quo of over twelve years of Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the strip and the rule of the Hamas authority. By

attending to the experiences of youth, Procter unpacks the layers of economic and political agency that enable mobility in what is typically considered to be a highly immobile context.

To close the special section, Andreas identifies three particular narratives concerning convergence – converge of criminal organizations; the coming together of criminal, insurgent and terrorist networks; and the entanglement of criminal organizations and the state. He unearths the way in which the organized crime discourse has oversimplified and glossed-over nuance, in turn justifying security responses that further obscure the every-day lives of those who make a living out of the fiction that we have gotten used to call the *illicit global economy*.