

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*,
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If a critical geography of logistics emerges as a distinct literature within the next decade, as has happened with finance, Deborah Cowen's *The Deadly Life of Logistics* will certainly be a cornerstone. As a project, this book begins with the conceptual shifts that occurred during the business management logistics revolution. It then moves to interrogate distinct moments where the actualization of logistical concepts are both attempted and interrupted by a diverse array of actors and institutions, including labor, pirates, and cities. In the process, this book is an ambitious and self-reflexively partial exploration of a logic and form of calculation that increasingly shapes the practices of the military, the economy, and their various interactions.

Cowen's account of logistics complicates the story of globalization. There are easy ways of classifying the technological and conceptual shifts during the logistics revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s, which saw the integration of a military and imperial art of logistics within business management. Two of these classifications are the globalization of production and the militarization of the economy. The temptation of these explanations is that they demonstrate how the organization of already existing spheres of production and the military expand into other realms such as distribution and economy. However, these explanations miss the qualitative shift that affects and changes to varying degrees all the spheres, practices, and functions involved. The logistics revolution did not simply move the same rationalization of production under Fordism into the sphere of distribution, or extend unchanging military mechanisms to civilian economic spheres. What Cowen elucidates in her genealogy of the concept, is that the logistics revolution

Antipode

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was a qualitative conceptual shift that changed both production and distribution, military and economy, by encompassing all spheres within the idea of the supply chain.

The rationalization of production represented by the term Fordism worked by dividing the economy into distinct economic spheres of production/distribution/consumption that each found their lowest cost of operation independent of each other. In contrast, logistical reasoning works through the idea of a single supply chain, where production/distribution/consumption do not function independently but all affect each other and realize value by operating at the level of the supply chain as a whole. What is most cost-effective in production may actually decrease the value produced by the supply chain if it disproportionately raises transportation and storage costs. Cowen argues that this conceptual shift to a systems way of thinking develops into a conception of supply chains as having a life of their own. This argument effectively complicates our understandings of globalization, borders, and security by insisting that the increasing speed of commodity circulation is not reducible to an intensification or extension of the same. Instead, these processes work through creating qualitative shifts and differences in the concepts, calculations, and infrastructures by which the economy and military operate. In this sense, *The Deadly Life of Logistics* can be read as a demonstration that the continuation of capitalism and empire requires its own differentiation.

While the supply chain's ability to add value requires a seamless flow that is theoretically possible, chapters 3, 4 and 5 of *The Deadly Life of Logistics* point to various threats of this flow and the need to establish new techniques for securing its seamless operation. Cowen first looks at labor within the supply chain, which is both a threat of interruption through labor actions and a component that management wants to make more productive. In terms of productivity, Taylorism was primarily concerned with the precise movements of the body within the design of the factory. Cowen argues that logistical calculation rescales Taylorism's concern with efficiency

Antipode

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from the level of the body to the level of the transnational system. That is, the efficiency and life of the supply chain as a whole rather than the minute details of a worker's bodily movement. Bodies themselves are transformed from a productive capacity that can produce more through rationalized movement, to a number, or data point, that must be calibrated to work efficiently within the body of a supply chain. To the extent that this is a biopolitical practice, Cowen's argument demonstrates that the management of life shifts its focus depending on where life is thought to be located. Concern with the efficiency of the supply chain is about managing and securing the life of the supply chain as its own entity and not simply about the populations it supplies.

Given the liveliness of supply chains, all threats to their continued circulation have increasingly become security concerns that blur the lines of jurisdiction for territorial nation-states. These threats can include bad weather, labor actions, chassis shortages, and piracy, which all become equivalent in their threat to commodity movement. The case of piracy is a particularly interesting—and at first sight odd—selection for this book that does an especially good job at bringing out the link between logistics and the formation, re-shaping, and continuing violence of national borders. As Cowen argues, the rise of the international system of nation-states created the ocean as a problem. The ocean had to be traversed but could not be governed due to its size and fluidity. In this context, piracy became an international legal technology that created the ocean, and those who ostensibly lived there, as a constitutive outside for the territorial nation-state system. As political members of no state, pirates could legally be prosecuted by all states. Pirates themselves were therefore stripped of the right to make political claims and were only recognizable as interruptions to ship movement between nation-states. It is in this sense that Cowen categorizes piracy as an anti-political legal technology.

Antipode

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This theme of anti-politics runs throughout the book and refers to the foreclosures of political claims and ruptures through technologies of efficiency and standardization. In the case of piracy, this legal technology is used against Somali fishermen's volunteer coastguard that organized to protect Somalia's coastal waters from illegal dumping and fishing. In the case of cities, the focus on optimizing transportation activities by private companies in urban areas and creating new urban formations for maximizing logistical efficiency, both operate through the primary principle of efficient cargo flow in the production of space. Through the conjunction of this logistical principle with the impetus to securitize flows, Cowen argues that the logistical production of space undermines the political rights of citizens and the collective bargaining rights of workers by creating something like exceptional spaces of distribution. The political project for Cowen then becomes how to occupy these logistical relations differently, in a way that is not oriented towards the efficient operations of capital accumulation or empire.

In addition to complicating this variety of common concepts in human geography, like globalization and borders, Cowen opens up many new lines of thought and inquiry. While the critical body of literature on logistics almost exclusively focuses its political energy on the potential of disruption, Cowen suggests a political project of queering logistics, of which the potential is "transforming relations of rule through the desire and occupation of those relations differently" (p.223). This project requires overcoming the anti-politics of desiring efficiency. Desiring efficiency does not question the value of capital accumulation and imperial organization, but works for their continuation. By approaching supply chains through a question of desire, Cowen argues that we become able to utilize the resources of queer theory and pose different kinds of questions about supply chains. No longer are questions exclusively "is the supply chain working efficiently?" or "how do we interrupt the efficient working of supply chains?", but become "what is the supply chain producing?" and "how can we produce

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

something different?”. This move to the level of desire therefore points towards another kind of intervention around creating radically different economies and futures, though their possibility will certainly require the disruption of supply chains as they currently exist. Done differently, Cowen argues that supply chains do not have to be oriented towards the efficient circulation and accumulation of capital, but can actually provide a networked ground for a commons.

However, this line of thought opens new questions on the conception of logistics as an anti-political desire for efficiency. If desiring efficiency is about the continuation and making more productive of a particular kind of process, like capital accumulation, rather than questioning the qualities and values of the process itself, then what distinguishes the anti-political from a conservative politics? If we follow Cowen to the level of desire, is there anything at stake in the distinction between the conservative and anti-political? It seems to me one of the stakes in this distinction would be the understanding of the active desire at work in logistical processes. The idea of anti-politics focuses on the desire to foreclose political ruptures and the idea of conservative politics focuses on the desire to continue social relations as they currently exist. Certainly this doesn't have to be an either/or consideration, and Cowen does not set it up this way, but it seems this tension is an opening for productive elaboration.

In these ways, *The Deadly Life of Logistics* is both an important contribution to understandings of globalization, security, and economy, and an opening to further inquiry on the political and economic geographies of the material movement of goods. It provides a critical account of the political and geographical implications of the logistics revolution and pushes forward the emerging critical literature on logistics by bringing in queer theory and pushing towards questions of desire within the supply chain. I eagerly anticipate how Cowen's openings will be taken up and developed, particularly working towards “desiring and occupying” these relations differently.

Antipode

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