



**Laleh Khalili**, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*, London: Verso, 2020. ISBN: 9781786634818 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786634849 (ebook)

Laleh Khalili's most recent book, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*, discusses the way in which the globalization of capital and the transformation of oil into the primary fuel of the world has transformed logistics infrastructure – with special attention to the Arabian Peninsula. The book continues the discussion taking place in the new interdisciplinary subfield of critical logistics studies – a transdisciplinary field interested in the spatial and temporal articulations of global capitalism through the study of the transportation, warehousing, and the calculations needed for just-in-time production and the seamless flow of commodity circulation – by such scholars as Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness (2018), Charmaine Chua (2018), Deborah Cowen (2014), Juan De Lara (2018), and many others. In this brief review, I first give a summary of the book. Next, I discuss the necessity of extending Khalili's framework to different case studies in terms of place and commodity selection.

There are three main components to the book. The first looks into port functioning, both in terms of the history of port construction as well as the connection ports have to the hinterlands where extraction takes place. Next, the book looks into the people that make logistics in the Arabian Peninsula work. Khalili discusses merchants and technocrats, landside labor, as well as workers on the ships themselves. Finally, Khalili looks into the relationship between military and civilian logistics, extending the analysis of many recent works in critical logistics studies such as Deborah Cowen's (2014) *Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*. In all, the book looks to give a history of logistics in connection to colonialism, imperialism, and the shifting contours of commodity circulation. Though Khalili's text is firmly rooted in the growing field of critical logistics studies, she also touches on interconnected larger fields of inquiry such as financialization, racialization, labor studies, and geopolitics more broadly.

The book begins with two chapters on the maritime history of the Arabian Peninsula. Chapter 1, “Route-Making”, discusses the changing nature of maritime routes around the Peninsula. Khalili goes over successive logistics revolutions that changed the nature of routes in the region. The change from sail ships, to steam ships, and ultimately to gas-powered ships changed shipping routes around the world, which in turn necessitated the dredging of new ports and canals. According to Khalili, “Steamships changed the face of navigation and the pathways of trade. Ships were no longer bound to the seasons and winds. Even more important, the provision of fuel for oceangoing ships ... spread the tentacles of empire to numerous ports around the world” (p.22). Khalili also pays close attention to the colonial relations in the Gulf region that shaped these changes, taking into account communication networks and supply lines, expansions and contractions in global trade, and in recent times the financialization of trade. While covering these factors she is careful to connect everything to the shifting geopolitics of the region. According to Khalili, “Sea routes are constantly reimaged to accommodate geopolitical realignments, corporate alliances, and shifting calculations about ship sizes, route expediencies, and maritime power plays” (p.40).

The second chapter, “Harbour-Making”, asks two questions. First, why were such great expenditures taken on to create deep water ports in shallow seas? Next, Khalili asks why there has been an upsurge in seaports in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? To answer these questions, she uses three main case studies: Dammam, Dubai, and Aden. In Dammam, oil companies played a major role in the investment of port infrastructure. Because oil was becoming the primary fuel of the world these companies needed a way to get the extracted natural resource to the rest of the world. This meant these companies needed deep water ports and rail infrastructure to connect ports to extraction sites. A full discussion of the landside infrastructure is provided in Chapter 4, “Roads and Rails Leading Away”. Dubai has a different story when it comes to port construction. The close relations of political elites in Dubai to the colonial powers made Dubai a perfect fit for the export of oil. Aden on the other hand has the

opposite story. Aden was an important coaling station in the age of the steam ship. However, in the era of gas the political instability of Yemen has made Aden less important. In fact, since the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war, the port of Aden has been destroyed by United States backed Saudi Arabian bombing. This is an example of how states use chokepoints in order to stop the flow of goods for geopolitical strategy. These case studies illustrate the need to dredge deep water seaports for the export of oil and the fueling of ships.

Chapter 3, “Palimpsests of Law and Corporate Sovereigns”, dives into a discussion of the inequities in power relations around the world. Khalili is interested in the way in which colonial law remained hegemonic to the functioning of logistics in the region. This is one way in which imperialist hierarchies are maintained in our current historical conjuncture. In order to show how this works Khalili looks at the use of arbitral tribunals in maritime law. According to Khalili,

What becomes clear in the reading the case materials about jurisdiction over the seas is that the sovereignty of the states in the global South is defined and fundamentally circumscribed by the encounter with powerful corporate bodies engaged in capital accumulation according to geopolitical hierarchies defined in and since the colonial era. (p.106)

Khalili shows this with a look at the use of tribunals by Dubai Ports World. This corporation used the tribunals against states in the global South – Yemen and Djibouti – but did not do so in a similar situation against the United States. According to Khalili, paymentss of \$35 million and \$530 million were levied against Yemen and Djibouti respectively for canceling their concessions to Dubai Ports World for port operation. The justification for renegeing on the concession was that the contracts were acquired through bribery. The international tribunal ruled in favor of Dubai Ports World. In 2006 Dubai Ports World acquired six US ports. After the transaction occurred, then-President “George W. Bush signed the Foreign Investment and

National Security Act, which gave Congress the power to scrutinise corporate takeovers of US assets by foreign owners” (p.96). A bipartisan group of congresspersons lead by Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer headed up an attack on Dubai Ports World’s operation of US ports, and they were commanded to sell their stake in those ports. According to Khalili, “Throughout the whole debacle, neither DP World nor UAE officials ever considered using the investor-state dispute-settlement mechanism. The US was far too powerful a patron ... to be challenged” (p.96).

After the discussion of law and logistics infrastructure, Khalili’s next three chapters are on the people who make the sinews of global trade work in the region. Khalili starts with an analysis of political elites and merchants in the region in Chapter 5, “Mechanic, Merchant, King”. This chapter goes over some of the tensions between transnational capital and Gulf capital, how financing works in the construction of port infrastructure, as well as the role technocrats and bureaucrats play in the construction and management of transport infrastructure. The next two chapters cover labor. Chapter 6, “Landside Labor”, is about workers at the ports in the Arabian Peninsula. Khalili pays close attention to labor unrest in the region. Topics such as racialization, suppression, and tactics are explored. Khalili dedicates an entire section in the chapter to racialization and migrant labor regimes, paying particular attention to the connection migration patterns have to oil discovery and port construction. She also discusses how worker protests were often about more than just the workplace and were connected to larger political factors in opposition to colonialism, monarchies, and racialization. In this chapter Khalili engages with the concept of chokepoints in logistics – the action of disrupting the smooth flow of commodities by blockading nodes in the circulation network such as ports or railways – and de-romanticizes them by acknowledging that chokepoints are not always used in the name of justice. While Khalili does discuss social justice actions such as the 2011 Occupy activists’ port blockade in the San Francisco Bay Area and the 2014 blockade against Israel’s Zim shipping line in solidarity with the struggle for freedom in Palestine, she also discusses how at times “the ostensibly radical, cohesive, and militant dockers’ union in the US would stand on the side of US

security interests” (p.217) by using chokepoints and boycotts of certain ships. One example she gives is the boycott of “a Swedish ship because Sweden had sent supplies to North Vietnam during the war” (p.217).

In Chapter 7, “Shipboard Workers”, Khalili discusses labor onboard ships. She discusses how national territory is re-inscribed on these ships through open registries – also known as the flag of convenience. Through this practice global hierarchies having to do with the bounding of nation-states are used outside of the national territory on ships in international waters. In other words, a ship can register with the flag of another country in order to have the environmental and labor standards of that country. However, neither workers nor management need to come from this country, but rather agree to work under those conditions. According to Khalili, “To sail under a flag of a country is to transform the ship into a quantum of sovereignty of that country” (p.236).

The final chapter, entitled “The Bounties of War”, is about the blurring of civilian and military logistics in the region. For Khalili, imperialist wars in the Gulf have changed the logistical role of the United States in the region. Khalili uses Operation Desert Storm as an illustrative example of how the US has changed its logistical role in the region. She discusses the way in which private military companies have become a primary source of supply chain security in the region. For example, one company, Agility, “has a logistics-security division that provides armed protection for land and maritime transport. Agility has relayed its logistical expertise, warehousing, and retail trade into the military-logistics business and back into civilian logistics” (p.263). Because logistics is originally a military science that was transformed into a civilian or business expertise, these companies that operate on both sides of that blurred line between civilian and military have been able to make immense profits in securing supply lines.

Khalili’s central argument is on the transformation of oil into the primary fuel of the world and the changes that it has brought to logistics infrastructure and working conditions along the supply chains of the Arabian Peninsula. This type of work is of the utmost importance to our

understanding of global capitalism, critical logistics studies, and labor studies. To extend this type of analysis more cases need to be researched in order to have a fuller understanding of historical capitalism and its spatial articulations through transport and trade. The framework of focusing on commodities and raw materials important to the functioning of global capitalism could be extended to other geographic regions. There are countless commodities and localities that could follow Khalili's model, and it is up to scholars in the burgeoning subfield of critical logistics studies to extend the analysis in *Sinews of War and Trade* to have a better understanding of the history of trade and the spatial and temporal organization of global capitalism.

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