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A Review of the Routledge Handbook on Smuggling

ALEXANDRE BISH 

REVIEW



ABSTRACT

The literature on smuggling is progressing steadily as the topic has received increasing attention in recent years. However, research has developed across several fields and in a disjointed fashion. This book review reflects upon a recent publication, which attempts to consolidate smuggling research: The Routledge Handbook on Smuggling (Gallien and Weigand, 2021). The book helps lay the foundations for the conceptualisation of smuggling and provides clear guidance for its study, establishing it as a key reference tool for both neophyte and veteran researchers alike.

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The current publication represents a unique and significant contribution to the literature on smuggling. It is the first book to focus on smuggling in most of its manifestations. Research on smuggling has mostly progressed in a fragmented manner given the variety of fields that have sought to study it, making a consolidation of findings difficult. While this interdisciplinary approach could be useful, its uncoordinated nature has slowed progress in the field. With this book, *Gallien and Weigand* collate these different approaches and offer the first real minting of the concept of ‘smuggling studies’. By doing so, they attempt to pave the way for a more organised and consolidated study of the subject. This review, structured in two parts, begins by presenting and critically engaging with the different chapters in this volume. It then discusses some of the more general strengths and limitations of the handbook.

The handbook comprises a collection of 32 essays, which have been organised around five sections, covering key thematic debates prevalent in smuggling literature to date. These sections explore the methodological obstacles of researching smuggling, its fundamental conceptual anchoring and debates around the topic. It zooms in on borderlands and gives an overview of how people and certain licit and illicit goods are smuggled globally, with empirical detail and comparative analysis. The book then proceeds with an analysis of the links between smuggling and conflict and concludes with an overview of current and potential responses to smuggling.

After an introduction to the handbook by the editors, the first section discusses methods and approaches to the study of smuggling. This section is one which resonates in the field of smuggling, but also beyond—to most fields researching hard-to-reach populations and activities, such as organized crime. *Hüsken’s* chapter on field research particularly stands out in this regard, cleverly unpacking what many researchers studying smuggling have bemoaned orally: that field research on smuggling is often subject to significant research biases and security dilemmas, affecting both the quality and ethicality of the research. *Bensassi and Siu’s* chapter aims to underline the value of quantitative methodologies in the study of smuggling. Their chapter is a useful overview of current attempts at estimating ‘missing’ and ‘hidden’ trade and at quantifying the behaviours of smuggling actors. *De la Rosa and Lara’s* chapter on qualitative approaches also forms a useful introductory toolkit for the neophyte researcher, describing the use of in-depth interviews, participant observation and newer forms of mapping and geo-tagging techniques. *Dobler’s* chapter highlights the limitations of much of the borderland’s research, which has concentrated much of the research on smuggling and occupies a whole section in the book. *Dobler* reminds us of the transnational nature of most smuggling activities: focussing on borderlands only gives us a small part of a larger puzzle. Finally, *Meagher’s* chapter analyses how the study of smuggling has been shaped by ideological perspectives. All in all, this first section is perhaps the most useful in the entire handbook, both due to its novelty and utility for researchers approaching the study of smuggling.

The second section focuses on the study of borderlands, which is probably one of the richest in literature within the broader interdisciplinary field of ‘smuggling studies’. *Nugent’s* chapter retraces the historical origins of borders. *Peña* discusses their conceptualisation, arguing that borders have become more blurred and are everchanging. *Goodhand, Koehler and Bhatia* discuss the importance of brokers in smuggling economies with an in-depth case study—and comparison—of two Afghan smugglers. Their chapter is a welcome foundation for future researchers to build on when analysing the role of brokers, so far under-researched actors in smuggling processes. *Raeymaekers* looks at the politics of smuggling, discussing the important part that smuggling activities play in offering links in the margins of global supply chains. *Titeca’s* chapter analyses the legitimacy of smugglers in local communities using northwestern Uganda as a case study. *Titeca* shows that in some communities, far from being regarded as ‘criminals’, smugglers are regarded as ‘Robin Hood’ characters due to the economic prosperity that they can bring. *Schomerus and de Vries* explore local narratives, memories, and histories in the context of smuggling. *Schuster* brings a gendered analysis to the study of smuggling and how it has affected the way we think about smuggling. *Schuster’s* chapter highlights the complex role that women play in smuggling, pushing us to rethink assumed stereotypes around the ‘smuggler’.

The third section explores the smuggling of goods (both illicit and later licit) with a focus on modus operandi and routes. *Durán-Martínez’s* chapter explores power reconfigurations in

cocaine smuggling with the expansion and diversification of cocaine supply chains in the 21st century. *Mansfield's* chapter is an empirical account of how the illicit opioid trade in Afghanistan has benefitted local communities who have few economic opportunities to choose from. *Mansfield* breaks down the value chain of a trade in which many actors are involved and finds that its profitability only stems from economies of scale. *Marsh* and *Pinson's* chapter on arms trafficking describes how the uncoordinated nature of laws, regulations and their failed enforcement globally has created loopholes that arms traffickers readily profit from. The authors present several useful typologies for thinking about the forms of arms trade and where weapons originate from. *Felbab-Brown's* chapter showcases the wide-ranging negative externalities of the illegal wildlife trade, which far exceed other forms of illicit trade, yet receives comparatively less attention from policy makers. *Felbab-Brown* then gives a useful overview of the main approaches to addressing the illegal wildlife trade and compares their effectiveness, while drawing insightful parallels with the illegal drug trade. *Gallien's* chapter on illicit tobacco trade explores the two-faced impact of increasing cigarette taxation, which has both reduced consumption and further fuelled cigarette smuggling. *Gallien* provides an important analysis of the direct and indirect involvement of big tobacco companies in the illegal trade, as well as their influence on academic research and discourse on the topic. *Eaton* gives a deep dive into the value chain of the smuggling of petroleum products, with a case study on Libya, offering a good illustration of how value chain analysis can reveal much about high-level stakeholder involvement in illicit economies. *Quitoriano's* chapter is an empirical analysis of persistent rice smuggling dynamics between the Philippines and Malaysia. The chapter highlights how protection from local communities, traders, local authorities, and armed groups has enabled the survival of the trade. The section concludes with *Idler's* exploration of how smuggling flows of different goods intersect, calling for a greater focus on the strategic hubs where illicit flows converge with the aim of understanding the socio-economic and political contexts which underpin them.

The fourth section focusses on human smuggling and its relationship with mobility. *Van Liempt* begins by introducing the concept of the 'humanitarian smuggler', who is motivated by humanitarian rather than economic or political goals. *Van Liempt* discusses the implications of how lumping humanitarian smugglers with other smugglers in responses to smuggling has negatively affected human rights. *Raineri's* chapter on smuggling introduces the networked structure and the social organisation of migrant smuggling. *Raineri's* chapter reminds how anti-smuggling policies can counterproductively increase rather than decrease criminal syndicate penetration into migrant smuggling networks. *Deshingkar* highlights the ambiguous relationship that smugglers hold with migrants, both as actors that directly or indirectly participate in affecting their exploitation but who can also provide them with the opportunity to access mobility and employment. *Deshingkar's* chapter also highlights the gendered effects and characteristics of these smuggling networks. The section concludes with *Bird's* chapter on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mobility and human smuggling. *Bird's* chapter highlights that restrictions on mobility have both increased the demand for human smuggling and the vulnerability of migrants, highlighting the counterproductiveness of current responses aimed at interdicting human smuggling and mobility.

The fifth section engages with the paradoxical relationship between smuggling and conflict: smuggling economies have both been shown to fuel and reduce conflict, while conflict can both facilitate and impede smuggling. *Andreas* gives a useful historical account of the important role that smuggling has played in shaping the development of the American War of Independence, the War of 1812 and the American Civil War. *Ahmad* reminds how colonial borders distorted pre-existing economies and explains how the Cold War helped criminalise borderland economies and predisposed some states to crisis, using Afghanistan, Somalia and Mali as case studies. *Thakur's* chapter looks at the role of armed groups in smuggling economies, with a case study of Moreh on the Indo-Myanmar border, arguing that the role of non-state armed groups in shaping smuggling economies is often interwoven with that of state actors. The section concludes with *Brenner's* analysis of how anti-smuggling policies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Myanmar. *Brenner* argues that measures of economic pacification aimed at ending conflict and rebellion counterintuitively increased rather than decreased violence because they failed to address the underlying political drivers of the conflict.

The final section on addressing smuggling is arguably the most important yet the shortest, although an entirely new handbook could (and should) be dedicated to the topic. One should note that several chapters in other sections already explore responses to smuggling (such as *Felbab-Brown*, *Gallien and Brenner*). *Bruwer* presents a useful overview of laws regulating maritime spaces and analyses the complex dynamics of responding to smuggling at sea. *Herbert*, *Reitano* and *Gastelum Felix* highlight how the non-securitised approach of building community resilience can help combat organised crime, offering a practical list of implementable approaches for community resilience building. *Gazzotti* concludes the handbook with a critical analysis of policing responses to smuggling and how ‘demonising’ smugglers has fuelled increasingly securitised approaches that endanger migrants.

The handbook is a seminal contribution to the literature on smuggling. However, in its attempt to be so wide ranging, it does present several limitations. The handbook claims to ‘provide the first systematic introduction and comprehensive mapping of research on smuggling in a variety of disciplines, with a view to aiding the formation of a more well-connected field of smuggling studies. The various chapters in the handbook have made very strong attempts at doing so. However, the handbook could have benefitted from more systematic reviews of the existing research to ensure that the coverage of the literature is as wide-ranging as the handbook claims. This is especially true for the overview of quantitative approaches to the study of smuggling. Network analysis was only mentioned in passing, despite being the quantitative method with which the field of smuggling research has arguably made the most progress in recent years.¹ Including more of the leading contributors in smuggling literature who did not feature in this handbook could have helped in this regard.

Further, much of the literature on smuggling has been produced within the realm of journalism and grey literature. However, there was little attempt to integrate such work within this handbook. This is notable, since NGOs and think tanks have captured a large portion of the research budgets that governments have been willing to dedicate to study smuggling. Yet, as it has been argued elsewhere, the study of the complex intricacies that exist between loosely tied networks of smuggling entrepreneurs, organized criminal syndicates, armed actors and the political elite necessitates an approach that merges both journalistic investigative approaches and more rigorous academic research.²

The handbook also presented many important recommendations. For instance, it called for an increased focus on smuggling in higher-income countries, given that the literature has mostly been focussed on low to middle income countries. While no attempt to include a case study of smuggling in rich countries was made in this handbook, this is a topic worthwhile covering in future research due to the variation in dynamics involved in such distinct settings.

Finally, the length, organisation, empiricism and focus of each section are varied, which is the result of choosing to publish a multi-authored, edited handbook. The book could have benefitted from better copyediting and more robust structures in some places. That said, the benefits of reading about a rich number of smuggling types and interactions largely outweigh these discrepancies in format. *Gallien* and *Weigand*’s idea behind this book remains a great one and an important contribution to the literature on smuggling despite the slight limitations outlined above. Their book is a great resource for all students, researchers and practitioners seeking to develop their understanding and research practices around this topic. Even knowledgeable readers on the literature of smuggling will find this volume to be a valuable addition to their bookshelves.

¹ See for example: *Campana P.* Out of Africa: The organization of migrant smuggling across the Mediterranean. *European Journal of Criminology*. 2018;15(4):481–502; and *Meneghini, C., Aziani, A. & Dugato, M.* Modeling the structure and dynamics of transnational illicit networks: an application to cigarette trafficking. *Appl Netw Sci* 5, 21 (2020).

² *Watts M.* Book Review: The illicit global economy and state power. *Progress in Human Geography*. 2001; 25(3): 492–493. doi:10.1177/030913250102500314

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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