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Making Routes on the Sea

A Review of *Sinews of War and Trade*

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Reviewed: Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*, London, Verso, 2020

Natasha N. Iskander reviews Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula *by Laleh Kalili, which elucidates the labor, power, and politics of international trade routes from the vantage point of the sea.*

Ninety percent of the world's goods travel by ship. This is the statistic with which Laleh Khalili opens her magisterial foray into the making of the trade routes that crisscross our oceans and seas. We depend on these routes, and on the tankers and ships that travel them, for oil and gas, for coal, iron ore and steel, for cement, for grain, for computers, for clothes and furniture, for chemicals of all kinds, for fruit and other luxuries—for all the commodities we need for the land-based lives and societies we have created. We use these routes to make nations, to wage war, to establish economic dominance, to impose social orders, and to spin the political rhetoric needed to legitimate them. These routes are, as Khalili conveys in her evocative title, our *Sinews of War and Trade*.

Khalili's project is to show us how these sinews are made. She focuses in on the ports of the Arabian Peninsula and details how the maritime infrastructures in that region—the largest, most developed, and most active in the world today—are produced. She shows us how they are constructed and contested through the unending work of migrants, capital, new financial instruments, management regimes, legal categories, geopolitical alliances, loading cranes, earthmovers, railroads, and matrices of freight rates. And she shows us how that work has tunneled through time, detailing the fraught histories involved in the region's maritime routes and the ways they turned the Arabian Peninsula's ports into most important nodes of global trade ever seen.

She writes, as she states, from the vantage point of the sea. This is clearly a deliberate and powerful choice: with it, she calls on us to revisit our emphasis on land-based places as the site of politics, struggles over sovereignty, and deployment of power. She reveals instead how much of the world we have created on land is the product of efforts to dominate the sea and to lay claim to the routes, canals, and ports that remain our main point of access and contact with the seas and oceans that connect us all.

Khalili traces layer upon layer of labor, power, and politics, showing us with great detail how effortful the ambition of making routes on the sea has always been. This recounting is told in three parts. The first section of the book describes how ports are made. With each of the four chapters in this section, detailing the making of routes, harbors, legal codes and free zones, and land transport, she makes clear that a port is only a synecdoche, a physical outpost that stands in for the many infrastructures and many exchanges that are required to make it functional. In the second section, she chronicles the experience of the people who operate ports and steer the ships and tankers along

the maritime trade routes slung between them. In Chapter 5, the first chapter in this section, she introduces us to the merchants and capitalists who built tanker and cargo shipping companies, using oil to fuel their ambitions; she acquaints us with the insurance and banking company staff that assessed financial wagers on cargo and routes; and she tells us about the advisers, bureaucrats, and experts who have made the management of moving through the sea their careers.

The following two chapters focus on the workers, those on land and those at sea, without whom the elaborate infrastructure of maritime trade would simply collapse. Khalili shows us the working conditions they experience, the racialization they endure, and the strategies of resistance and solidarity they have developed. The final section of book turns to war. Here, in a swift account, Khalili shows us how tightly maritime routes bind up the movement of goods with the exercise of military power. She demonstrates that the destruction of trade routes and the closure of ports have been as important to the design of maritime infrastructure as the efforts to link far-flung places through the sea, and she shows the militarization of shipping routes and the construction of imposing naval bases have projected the military security apparatus inland, defining the shape of commerce and the architecture of tentative peace.

Sinews of War and Trade, as Khalili herself admits, is an unruly, untidy, and dizzying account. In her rich narrative, Khalili traverses scales, disciplines, historical moments, land, and sea. She juxtaposes the pencil lines drawn on a navigation chart with the grueling excavation work imposed on Egyptian peasants to dredge out the Suez Canal. We move from her account of metal chips raining down on the heads of workers jackhammering rust off the sides of tankers, to a description of the financial systems that guarantee the ships and their routes, to a portrait of the oil fields where the petroleum pumped into the tankers' hulls first originates. She even draws in fantasy and storytelling about the sea, from elegiac poetry to the "nightmares of terror" conjured up by global security experts to sell their expertise to port managers and governments around the world.

The layering of Khlaili's writing is wondrously seductive and sometimes pulls the reader away from the throughline of her argument, but her argument is a powerful one about the myths we tell ourselves about our world and the ways it is interconnected.

With enormous evidentiary power, Khalili demolishes two myths that have defined the way scholars and policy makers have thought about the 21st century and undercuts a third myth that is currently struggling to take shape. The first, which emerged when the west was celebrating the end of history at the turn of the new millennium, was about globalization and featured the belief that new information technologies, new transport systems, and the global hegemony of capitalism would collapse time and space. Exchange would be frictionless. But Khalili's account is all about the frictions—political and material—that segment the world. In showing us the herculean and quotidian efforts required to connect each place on the globe to every other place, she shows us that neoliberal globalists were also fabulists.

The second myth, which had been long-simmering but which roared to life in earnest in the midst of the Covid pandemic, was that spaces could be sealed off. With enough policing and enough political drive, the myth went, places could be partitioned with *cordons sanitaires*, borders could be closed, and seas could be rendered unpassable. But as Khalili makes powerfully clear, even the closure of borders and the partitioning off of spaces depends on global trade, specifically maritime trade, and on the massive, interconnected, global material, technological, and informational infrastructure on which that trade depends.

The third myth, still somewhat inchoate, is that transport along maritime routes can happen without leaving a carbon trace, or perhaps leaving one that is one minimal. Today, there are numerous efforts to reduce the three percent of global carbon emissions produced by global shipping down to zero. The efforts have focused on shifting to cleaner fuel and designing tankers and ships that can run on renewable energy. But shipping itself—the transport of goods and fuel—is only part of the energy and emission cost. As Khalili shows, the routes those ships travel can only exist if the work to create them happens, and the production of that infrastructure is energy-

intensive and emissions-producing as well. Transforming the impact of shipping on the climate would require a complete restructuring of the global labor, politics, and institutions on which exchange depends. Ports, railways, trucking, satellite navigation systems, tanker building and ship maintenance, custom forms and transborder bureaucracies, financial analysis and risk assessment, the lodging and travel of seafarers, and so much more—all would have to become carbon neutral. All would have to be restructured to rely on different and renewable energy systems.

Khalili's masterful and complex portrait of the world of shipping makes clear that addressing the climate impacts of our economic and political systems cannot be a project made of half-measures. Instead, Khalili exhorts us to fully consider the "invisible infrastructures, forgotten histories of struggle, and hidden and recognizable relations of power" in these systems in order to unmake and remake them (p. 8).

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