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## **Subversive Mobilities**

### **Abstract**

There has been an inherent bias in studies of ‘mobility regimes’ toward the perspective of the authorities. This article suggests the concept of ‘subversive mobilities’ to offer a novel perspective on the construct of mobilities regimes, by stressing the ways such regimes are penetrated by adversaries through diverse routes and practices, despite the regimes’ various control and defense mechanisms. We investigate how ‘smugglers’ make use of weaknesses in existing mobility regimes to facilitate their subversion, using three case studies of subversive mobilities, smuggling of Rohingya migrants, of Colombian cocaine and of South African rhino horns, to substantiate the potential of our approach. The subversive mobilities of all three case studies reveal some common traits: a multiplicity of routes and means of travel, informal personal networks based on trust and retribution rather than formal organization, and interconnected series of assemblages of differently involved actors. We claim that the continued success of ‘smugglers’ to subvert the existing mobility regimes is their greater flexibility: they tend to be pro-active, initiating new routes and means of movement, and the cooperation of illicit and legitimate role-bearers, while the mobility regimes are mostly reactive, giving the former at least a temporary advantage over the latter. Our approach leads to a more inclusive and dynamic view of mobilities regimes, and enables a better understanding of why the ‘smuggling’ of goods and ‘trafficking’ in people is increasingly successful, despite the efforts of mobilities regimes to block these activities.

Keywords: mobility regimes, subversion, smuggling, Rohingya, cocaine, rhino horn

## **Introduction**

This article proposes the concept of ‘subversive mobilities’ (first used by Thelle [2013] on urban conflict in an historical context) to mark the diverse routes and practice deployed to subvert dominant national and international mobility regimes (Shamir 2005, Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) by their adversaries. Current studies tend to approach mobility regimes from the authorities’ perspective: they are concerned with the regulations and mechanisms, such as securitization (Cunningham 2007) and biometrics (Amoore 2006), by which prevailing mobility regimes ‘normalize the movements of some travelers while criminalizing and entrapping the ventures of others’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar’s 2013, p. 189). In contrast, we pay attention to the variety of mobilities by which such efforts are subverted. We choose to focus specifically on the subversive mobilities deployed by operators identified by the authorities as ‘smugglers’ or ‘traffickers’ (often interchangeably in the literature), because of their intractability: Despite the enormous efforts to block them, they continue to subvert even sophisticated control and surveillance measures of modern mobilities regimes. We hope to shed some light on this apparent paradox.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Our theoretical framework combines elements of four approaches:

1. We depart from Shamir’s (2005) macro-level and Glick Schiller and Salazar’s (2013) meso-level approach to mobilities regimes.

The mobilities paradigm initially represented the world in terms of global flows of resources, ‘peoples, objects, images, information, and wastes’ (Urry 2000, p. 185), intersected by nodes or moorings. But as it relentlessly opened up the world, globalization engendered new ‘principles of closure,’ in the form of restrictive mobility regimes, on the global (Shamir 2005), regional and local (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) levels, intended to

regulate the flows of people and goods and to block access to “undesirable” categories of outsiders.

The more affluent countries, fearing a triad of interrelated threats - crime, immigration and terrorism - from the less affluent ones, adopted various technologies of control, informed by what Shamir (2005, p. 199) calls a ‘paradigm of suspicion’. These range from fences and physical barriers (Kernaghan 2012), intensified visa controls, and other techniques of ‘securitization’ intended to prevent or detect ‘illicit’ activities, to biosocial profiling or biometrics intended to preempt them (Amoore 2006; Shamir 2005). The mobilities literature has consequently focused on the regulation of flows by mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Kloppenburg 2013).

However, the perspective of ‘mobility regimes’ is basically hegemonic (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, p. 189), as the term ‘regimes’ indicates. Ronen Shamir (2005) in his seminal article, poses several major questions on how mobilities regimes operate, but he does not ask how such regimes are subverted. This is the focal issue we deal with in this article, departing from Glick Schiller and Salazar’s (2013) notion of different intersecting regimes of mobility, rather than Shamir’s (2005) presumption of a single global mobilities regime.

## 2. Cresswell’s (2010) micro-sociological approach.

We deploy a slightly modified version of Cresswell’s (2010) approach to individual mobility, as an entanglement of movement, representations and practice, which we have slightly adopted in a previous work [Author Anonymous 2015]; particularly we view representations as an interpretation or meaning ascribed to movement, but assume that different parties might interpret a movement in contrasting terms. Representations are hence contestable: mobilities, considered as subversive by a given mobility regime, may be represented as legitimate in the culture of their perpetrators. ‘Smuggling’ or ‘trafficking’ are hence contested terms.

3. The emergent approaches to ‘illicit’ activities in the sub-field of ‘illegal anthropology’ (Thomas and Galemba 2013).

Recent anthropological research made some critical contributions to the study of subversion of mobilities regimes (e.g. Gomberg-Muñoz 2011, Sur 2013), by pointing out the fuzziness of the borderline between ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ (Nordstrom 2007), and especially by introducing the concept of ‘illegalization’ (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011, Thomas and Galemba 2013). These anthropological interventions indicate that apparently crisp, uncontested, formal or official concepts on which the mobilities regimes are built are actually fuzzy; a crucial factor enabling the subversion of those regimes.

4. Recent work on the role of brokerage in mobilities (Faist 2014, Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh, 2012).

Brokerage has been recently identified as a crucial ‘social mechanism’ in the cross-border mobility of migrants (Faist 201, p. 40-42), operating in what was termed the heretofore unexplored “black box” (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh, 2012) between the points of departure and destination of trans-national migration flows. The concept is similarly applicable to the intermediary stages on the routes of subversive mobilities.

We thus conceive of ‘subversive mobilities’ as a class of mobilities, with typically staged movements, deploying diverse practices to subvert the defenses of mobilities regimes, by which they are perceived to various degrees as illicit, illegal or criminal. Mobilities operated by ‘smugglers’ or ‘traffickers,’ the topic of the present paper, constitute a sub-class of subversive mobilities, marked by covert, stealthy movement across often fuzzy international borders, and are marked by stages at which smuggled goods or trafficked people are brokered from one group of operators to another. They are preferably non-confrontational, in contrast to other kinds of mobilities, which seek to defy mobilities regimes

openly, such as recent Middle Eastern refugees attempting to break through barriers on the borders of Eastern European states.

Like most migration studies, students of ‘illegal anthropology’ have also focused mainly on ‘smuggling’ or ‘trafficking’ activities on the points of departure and final destination, but their routes mostly remained a ‘black box’ (Lindquist and al 2012). We are unaware of any field study, which systematically followed a subversive venture through the stages between departure and destination. Indeed, such a study would be virtually impossible, since it might pose some unacceptable risks for the researchers. To follow the full trajectories of some subversive ventures for this article, we therefore took recourse to secondary sources. Depending on their availability, and the expertise of the authors, we have selected three case studies: the ‘smuggling’ (or ‘trafficking’) of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar/Burma to Malaysia, of cocaine from Columbia to the United States, and of rhino horn from South Africa to Vietnam. The diversity of world regions and ‘smuggled’ goods or persons represented in those case studies will enable us to identify some common features of subversive mobilities, thus rendering support to the introduction of the concept.

The secondary sources which we have used are necessarily varied in their richness and reliability: while cocaine smuggling has been widely studied, rhino horn smuggling enjoyed less attention by researchers, and Rohingya smuggling is a recent phenomenon, on which no studies are yet available. We had therefore to depend in some instances on media reports, particularly those of investigative journalists. Though not fully reliable, the considered use of such sources helps to provide a preliminary portrayal of some ongoing subversive mobilities in different parts of the world. We shall present the case studies in straightforward, factual terms and analyze them in the concluding sections of this article.

## **The Case Studies**

### **Case Study 1: Smuggling Rohingya Refugees: From Myanmar to Malaysia**

#### *Background*

The Rohingya, a Muslim people of mixed origins of about one million (Soe 2013) in Burma/Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) State, were denied recognition by Burmese/Myanmar governments as a 'racially pure' ethnic group, and, declared Bengali immigrants, denied citizen status (Ansel 2013a, p. 22; McDowell 2014) thus turning them into a stateless people (Lewa 2008). The Rohingyas were subjected to various restrictions by the government (Lewa 2008), and subjected to periodical persecutions by the Buddhist majority of the State (Ansel 2013a), leading in 1978-9 and 1991-2 to a mass exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh (Lewa 2008). During renewed attacks in 2011-14 many Rohingya were killed by Buddhist mobs. A fierce outbreak of violence in 2012, forced 75,000 Rohingya to flee (McDowell and Mason 2014). Persecution, economic insecurity, discrimination and bleak future prospects drove many Rohingyas to emigrate. The closure of earlier migration routes to Pakistan and Arab countries (Lewa 2008, p. 40) turned them towards Malaysia, a Muslim country, where they hoped to get employment or move on, via Indonesia, to Australia (Ansel 2013b). With other migration routes blocked, smuggling of Rohingya via Thailand to Malaysia has significantly increased in the 2000s (Lewa 2008).

For most Rohingyas, the smuggling route started 'in North Arakan with a brief transit in Bangladesh, passed through Thailand and continued overland to Malaysia (Lewa 2008, p. 41; see also Miller 2013). We shall highlight the particular manner of attempted subversion of the prevailing mobility regimes at each stage of the route, at which the Rohingya are brokered from one group of traffickers to another.

*Stage 1: Rakhine State to Bangladesh.* Myanmar's mobilities regime allowed the Rohingya to leave the country (Lewa 2008), but blocked their re-entry. Hence they sought entry to a country that will not expel them back to Myanmar. Rohingya recruiting agents, connected to smuggling networks, enticed prospective Rohingya migrants by images of the supposedly good life of Rohingya immigrants in Malaysia, and offered them an overseas passage at the price of about 700-1,000 USD (Lewa 2008). Malaysia became the 'promised land' in Rohingyas' imagination (Szep and Grudgings 2013), while they remained unaware of the deadly dangers of the journey (Anwar 2013).

Migrants, predominantly males, were dispatched to Malaysia through a 'complex network of smugglers and brokers,' mostly themselves Rohingyas (Lewa 2008, p. 41), from the porous borderlands between Myanmar and Bangladesh, such as the remote Bangladeshi island of St. Martin's (*Channel 4 News* 2013), over which the authorities exercised little control.

*Stage 2. From Bangladesh to the Cargo Ship.* Prospective migrants were embarked on fishing boats by 'smuggling syndicates' based in Bangladesh (Bhaumik 2011), and taken to a rendezvous with an ocean going cargo ship, 'crewed by smugglers' (Szep and Grudgings 2013, n.p.). The migrants were given 'colored wrist bands designating "ownership" by a particular group of traffickers' (*Channel 4 News* 2013). The dangerous and uncomfortable trip took 3-4-days. The small boats got occasionally lost at sea and its crew and passengers perished (Szep and Grudgings 2013; Sivasomboon 2013).

*Stage 3. From the Cargo Ship to Thailand.* The migrants were transferred at sea to an often inexperienced captain of a cargo ship (Szep and Grudgings 2013) for a trip, lasting about two weeks (ARNO 2013), under severe conditions: hundreds of people were tightly packed and

could hardly move (*Channel 4 News* 2013). Some reportedly died during the voyage (Szep and Grudgings 2013) or committed suicide (*Channel 4 News* 2013). However, often to their surprise (Szep and Grudgings 2013; *Channel 4 News* 2013), en route to Malaysia the migrants were debarked in Thailand, and received by the smugglers' Thai counterparts (Szep and Grudgings 2013, n.p.).

Thailand portrayed itself 'as an accidental destination for Malaysia-bound Rohingya' (Szep and Grudgings 2013, n.p.). When apprehended, the Rohingyas sought asylum as refugees. But neither Thailand nor Malaysia were signatories of the UN's Refugee Convention; they represented the arriving Rohingyas as 'illegal immigrants' or 'economic migrants' rather than 'refugees' (Lewa 2008).

When the Thai Navy first discovered the arrival of the exhausted Rohingya migrants, it prohibited them to land and simply pushed their boats back to sea (Bhaumik 2011), where some of them perished. Following an international outrage, a change in conduct (but not in policy) took place: if the boats were found seaworthy, the Rohingya were given food and water and pushed back to sea; if not, they were deported to Myanmar (*Human Rights Watch* 2013). Since lacking formal repatriation procedures (Sidasathien and Morison 2014b), until 2007 the intercepted Rohingyas were deported "informally" into a border area in Burma; from there, the smugglers 'would release them for a fee of around \$700, and send them across Thailand to Malaysia' (Lewa 2008, p. 41).

However, as smuggling Rohingyas became big business (*ARNO* 2013), the smugglers and local Thai officials colluded in handling the migrants: Officials allegedly handed apprehended migrants directly to brokers, who detained them in brutal, protected jungle camps close to the Thai-Malaysian border (*ARNO* 2013; Szep and Marshall 2013), or on the Thai smugglers-controlled, southern end of Tarutao island in the Andaman Sea, close to the maritime border with Malaysia (*Channel 4 News* 2013; *Bangkok Post* 2013). There the



migrants were sometimes put to work on rubber plantations ‘run or hired by the [smuggling] agents’ (Bhaumik 2011, n.p.). The migrants were reportedly frequently beaten (Lewa 2008), to prompt them to ask their relatives in Myanmar or Malaysia to come up with ransom money, amounting to 1,500 English pounds (*Channel 4 News* 2013; *Bangkok Post* 2013). They were threatened, if unable to pay up, to be sold as slave laborers (*Channel 4 News* 2013) or bonded laborers (Lewa 2008) on Thai fishing boats. Those migrants whose families had put up the ransom, were taken overland into Malaysia, ‘but many also disappear[ed] on the way’ (Lewa 2008).

Foreign investigative journalists reported that various Thai officials collaborated with the smugglers in covering up the smuggling operations, for bribes or a share of profits (Szep and Grudgings 2013). The allegations were at first hotly denied (ibid), but then at least partially confirmed by the Thai authorities (Szep and Marshall 2013).

Thailand was consequently downgraded by the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report for 2013 (Chantavanich 2014). The Thai military junta, shortly after assuming power in 2014, cracked down on Rohingya smuggling and trafficking activities, even as hidden burying grounds for Rohingya migrants who have died or were killed (Chang 2015) were discovered in the jungle camps. The authorities arrested human traffickers (*Bangkok Post* 2015b), transferred police officers suspected of complicity in Rohingya trafficking (*Bangkok Post* 2015a), and even arrested and charged an army general for involvement in the racket (*BBC News* 2015a; *Guardian* 2015). The Rohingya smuggling operations through Thailand have thus been, at least temporarily, disturbed.

*Stage 4. From Thailand to Malaysia.* Prior to the new regime’s intervention, once the Rohingya migrants’ relatives had put up the ransom money, the smugglers, who allegedly ‘maintain[ed] “good contacts” with both Thai and Malaysian immigration officials, took the

migrants to Malaysia (Bhaumik 2011, n.p.), ‘in pickup trucks,...hidden under containers of fish or shrimp...through police checkpoints...Once close to Malaysia, the final crossing of the border [was] usually made by foot’ (Szep and Grudgings 2013, n.p.). In Malaysia the migrants were ‘dropped in safe house mosques’ and then released to fend for themselves (Bhaumik 2011, n.p.). Following Thailand’s military rulers’ crack-down on human trafficking, however, ‘trafficking gangs are shifting their operations into Malaysia’ where the brokers ‘hold them captive, while beating them, depriving them of food and demanding a ransom from their families’ (*Bangkok Post* 2014, p. 6), just as they did previously in the jungle camps in Thailand.

*Stage 5. From the Malaysian Border to Destination.* The desperate Rohingya might have imagined Malaysia as ‘the promised land’ (*Bangkok Post* 2014), but they were not welcome to Malaysia as refugee co-religionists, fleeing from a hostile regime. Rather, they were defined as illegal immigrants, and when apprehended, sometimes deported to Myanmar or tried for illegal entry and sentenced to imprisonment, and after serving their sentence, kept in detention centers (Szep and Grudgings 2013). Succeeding gradually to escape, they linked-up with their families or the Rohingya community, and eventually found illegal employment in low-paying jobs. Thereby the process of subversion of the mobility regimes on the Rohingya migrants’ route was completed, for those who were not trafficked into slavery, killed, or died on its course.

## **Case Study 2: Cocaine Smuggling From Colombia to the United States**

*Background.* Cocaine is a purified extract from the leaves of the coca shrub, endemic to the South American Andes. The indigenous Andean people were customarily chewing coca and drinking coca tea to reduce hunger and fatigue and used coca leaves in social and religious

activities (Fukumi 2008). In its natural form, coca leaf acts as a mild stimulant, but the substance extracted from coca leaves, cocaine, can cause powerful physical or mental effects. Popularized in the West as a ‘heroic medical commodity in the late nineteenth-century (1850-1910)’, cocaine suffered ‘depression and retreat in the early twentieth-century (1910-1945),’ but re-emerged ‘as a dynamic transnational *illicit* drug after World War II (1945-1975)’ (Gootenberg 2008, p. 2), and banned by the 1961 U.N. Convention on Narcotic Drugs.

Coca cultivation has spread from Peru (Gootenberg 2008, p.6) to other Andean countries— Colombia, Chile, and Bolivia (Gootenberg 2008). By the 1990s, Colombia became the world’s largest coca grower producing over 75% of the world’s cocaine base (DEA 2002). However, the Colombian government recently stepped up its eradication efforts, assisted by Plan Colombia, a massive U.S. anti-drug program (Fukumi 2008; *The Economist* 2013), that, among else, provides military aid for aerial fumigation of coca crops (Brodzinsky 2013). Colombia’s successes in drug suppression has pushed coca cultivation back to Peru (Pressly, 2015) and Bolivia.

*Organization and Key Players.* The Colombian cocaine trade is decentralized and fragmented, featuring ‘flat, loosely coupled inter-organizational networks’ (Kenney 2007a, p. 258) across several countries. Within these interlinking networks are smaller groups or individuals specializing in different aspects of the trade, from cocaine production, transportation, storage, distribution, pick-up and delivery, to money laundering.

Kenney (2007a; 2007b) suggests that the Colombian trafficking system was organized in two ways: (1) wheel networks, which involved a core group overseeing the entire enterprise, including the peripheral units performing specific tasks; and (2) chain networks, consisting of independent units performing specific tasks, interconnected by

commercial transactions, which recently increased in frequency. Key players in a network include a leader, investors, buyers (who purchase cocaine from processing labs), recruiters (who recruit human couriers), packers, enforcers (who enforce transactions and resolve disputes), trainers (who train human drug couriers), couriers ('mules'), and wholesale distributors (Kenney 2007a). The networks purposely keep a 'flat' structure (i.e. with few layers of management). The players are usually linked by social or inter-personal relations, built largely on trust, common objectives, and shared identities and experiences, rather than managerial hierarchies.

*Business Operation Characteristics.* Cocaine smuggling organizations in Colombia are fluid, dynamic, and adaptive (Kenney 2012). They emphasize risk management much more than legitimate business operators (Kenney 2007a). Because the flow of drugs is frequently interrupted or blocked by the authorities' suppression efforts, smugglers tend to introduce redundancy into their networks so that all units become replaceable. But by using multiple suppliers and distributors they compromise the economy of scales, while by introducing compartmentalization in the smuggling process they dilute the leaders' decision-making authority.

Drug trafficking ventures rely on trust, implicit rules, and social networking. To minimize risk, most transactions are conducted in a fairly simple, flexible manner. As Kenney (2007a, p. 244) commented, 'over time and repeat exchange, reciprocity and trust develops between interacting groups, distinguishing social relations in chain networks from pure markets.'

To circumvent, counter, or co-opt law enforcement authorities, Colombian smugglers have to constantly bribe and/or coerce local government officials or corrupt national-level

politicians; influential smugglers even interfered with public policy (Kenney 2007a), thereby putting a cloak of legitimacy on their practices.

*The Cocaine Smuggling Process.* This section describes the stages of ‘typical’ cocaine smuggling routes from Colombia to the United States, at which the cocaine is brokered from one group of smugglers to another. These routes have varied substantially over time (Kenney 2012), as cocaine smuggling ventures became increasingly sophisticated in response to the suppression efforts of various authorities.

*Stage 1. Production and purchase of cocaine.* A long standing practice, coca growing in the Andes was ‘illegalized’ only a few decades ago. However, coca is an easy but profitable crop, and Andean farmers continued coca cultivation as an effective way to alleviate their poverty (Pressly, 2015).

Cocaine production involves two laboratory conversion stages: from coca leaf to cocaine base, and from cocaine base to cocaine hydrochloride (HCl). Coca fields and base laboratories are commonly co-located, because producing one kilogram of cocaine base requires approximately one metric ton of fresh coca leaf, and storing or shipping large quantities of coca leaf is expensive and risky. Many coca farmers in Bolivia and Peru process their leaf into cocaine base and transport it to Colombia, where there are hundreds of HCl laboratories, processing and refining the cocaine base into cocaine (Fukumi 2008). Colombia is the source of about 95% of cocaine on the world’s largest market, the United States (White House/Office of National Drug Control Policy, n.d.).

Buyers of smuggling networks purchase the fully refined products from the Columbian labs (Kenney 2007a). Depending on the remoteness of those labs, *mochileros*

(back-packers) might be hired to manually transport cargos of cocaine to secret concentration points (Pressly 2015).

*Stage 2. Transport from Colombia to the U.S.* In the early 2000s, about 60% of all U.S.-bound cocaine departed South America to Central America or Mexico via eastern Pacific or western Caribbean routes (DEA 2002). The remaining 40% either transited various Caribbean islands or was sent directly from South America to the United States. The literature distinguishes at least six methods of transportation:

1. *Couriers.* For small cocaine shipments, smugglers sent couriers or ‘mules’ (Fleetwood 2014) to carry the drug on their body or in their luggage. The couriers mostly used commercial air transportation from Colombia to the United States via the Caribbean (Decker and Chapman 2008; DEA 2002). To improve the success rate, smugglers sometimes bribed airport staff to escort the couriers through customs, or paid airline baggage handlers to move their luggage from international to domestic flights in the U.S. To distract the law enforcement staff, some smuggling organizations even sent deliberately a couple of couriers to be caught, so that others could pass by undetected. Intensified airport security checks made sending cocaine via couriers an increasingly risky option (Decker and Chapman 2008).

2. *Commercial vessels.* Freighter or containerized cargo vessels are a frequently used means for smuggling big amounts of cocaine into the U.S. Since hundreds of freighters with numerous containers arrive daily in major American ports, yet only a very small percentage is inspected (Dorfman 2015), the chances of detecting one container carrying illicit drugs — usually hidden among legitimate products or in its walls — are slim.

3. *Overland transportation.* As Mexico became a leading mid-shipment point for cocaine, transporting it by truck into the United States has become common, facilitated by the

corruptibility of Mexican officials. Local poverty made people willing to take the risk of transporting drugs over the border at a fairly low cost (Decker and Chapman 2008). Once this route became increasingly blocked by tightened border controls and fences, a new option emerged: building sophisticated cross-border tunnels to move drugs to the U.S. (*Associated Press* 2014; *BBC News* 2015b). Nearly 170 tunnels had been found within the U.S. since 1990, mostly along Mexico's border with Arizona and California (*Associated Press* 2014).

4. *Private vessels.* Depending on the location of a mid-shipment point, the vessels follow one of two routes: (1) Colombia→Central America/Mexico→ the U.S., or (2) Colombia→Caribbean→ the U.S. (DEA 2002). The destination is usually Florida, particularly the Florida Keys, Miami, or Fort Lauderdale.

5. Airplanes and private vessels. Airplanes used to be the most frequent method for cocaine smuggling (Decker and Chapman 2008). However, since the U.S. government deployed the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) it became virtually impossible to fly a plane undetected from Colombia directly into the U.S. Smugglers therefore switched to small or medium-sized, single or twin-engine aircraft, to fly drugs from Columbia to secret landing strips at mid-reshipment points in Mexico, Panama or the Bahamas, or drop them over the sea to vessels waiting on the shore (Decker and Chapman 2008). To avoid radar detection, the planes would fly very low. To avoid suspicion, the smugglers would sometimes obtain a legitimate flight plan. Ground observers watched whether the planes are followed; if so the pilots would return to Colombia.

Smuggling a load of cocaine into the U.S was the toughest part of the route (Decker and Chapman 2008). One common solution was the use of private vessels, which range from speed boats, fishing/lobster/shrimp trawlers, to yachts and sailboats.

Numerous tactics to avoid detection of drugs have been used by smugglers: secret compartment on fishing boats or yachts, deployment of a decoy boat with no drugs on board, to facilitate the transport of the drug by another vessel; the timing of transports to periods of busy activity, such as weekends or American national holidays; or the stealthy blending of smuggling boats with normal traffic on commercial routes.

The smugglers have also deployed various devices such as GPS, scanners or radar to track the planes or boats of law enforcement authorities or tried to identify the schedules and routes of patrols. They even attempted to bribe U.S. Customs or Coast Guard officials for information on interdiction activities (Decker and Chapman 2008).

6. Narco-submarines. Self-propelled semi-submersibles (SPSSs), made of marine grade plywood/fiber glass with commercial engines have been in use for some years (Ramirez and Bunker eds. 2013). More recently, increasingly sophisticated, specially designed and fabricated submarines were developed by the cocaine trafficking cartels for smuggling purposes. Starting with small, simple models, the cartels in recent years attained the technical capabilities to develop up to 30-meter long submarines able to transport eight tons of cocaine from Columbia to the coast of Mexico (ibid), to be smuggled to the U.S.

*Stage 3. Off-loading to warehouses, parking lots and shopping centers.* Once a boat with a cocaine load reached Florida, the drug was off-loaded in port; if it had a hidden compartment, it would be brought to a warehouse, where it was taken apart to remove the load (Decker and Chapman 2008).

Drug transfers also took place in parking lots of shopping centers, where they would pass unnoticed. This practice ‘made the operation quick and less personal [than at the port or



warehouse] and allowed [checking for] the presence of law enforcement [agents]' (ibid, p. 67).

*Stage 4. Delivery.* In the U.S., Colombian cocaine traffickers were normally organized in 'cells' consisting of 10-25 employees, which operated independently in different geographic regions (DEA 2012). Their heads, many of whom were family members or long-time confidants of Colombian drug lords, reported to a regional director, who in turn informed the drug lord in Colombia.

*Stage 5. Distribution to final users.* In the U.S., Colombian smugglers have usually engaged only in cocaine wholesale, and left drug distribution at the retail level to other groups (DEA 2002). Illegal drug markets tended to be spatially concentrated, with several 'hot spots' accounting for a large portion of sales (Weisburd and Green 1995). Markets serving locals were usually indoors (Rengert et al. 2000). Demand came primarily from young, uneducated and unemployed drug addicts (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1993), who not only served as targets for drug consumption, but also as potential drug sellers (Rengert et al. 2000). Sales to nonresidents took place at open-air markets, located near major thoroughfares, such as exits from a highway (Eck 1994; Rengert et al. 2000). Once the cocaine reached its end users, the process of subversion of the mobility regimes on the illegal drugs route was completed.

### **Case Study 3: Rhino Horn: From South Africa to Vietnam**

*Background.* The killing of rhino for their horn, termed 'poaching' by the authorities, is part of a wider transnational illegal wildlife trade, and is considered a transnational crime, or theft of a natural resource (Warchol 2004). South Africa is the primary custodian of Africa's rhino, being home to more than 90% of the world's white rhino and 40% of the remaining black

rhino populations (Biggs et al. 2013). White rhino are listed as ‘near threatened’, black rhino as ‘critically endangered’; the latter’s population declined by 97% since 1960, primarily due to poaching (Conrad 2012). Poaching of African rhino is in a steep upward trend: in South Africa poaching rates have doubled year on year since 2008 (from ten in 2004, to 668 in 2012) (Biggs et al. 2013). At that rate, rhinos in the wild may become extinct within the next 20 years.

Rising demand for horn in Asia, mainly in China and Vietnam (Prins and Okita-Ouma 2013), has led to the emergence of sophisticated poaching networks or ‘gangs’, which operate through covert routes across international borders to move the horn to its end-markets (Milledge 2007). Vietnam emerged recently as the primary global destination for horn (Montesh 2013), following its ban in China and in some other Asian countries. Vietnam’s fast-paced economic growth, combined with a resurgence of belief in its curative properties, has increased demand for the horn (Rademeyer 2012). The horn serves as an ingredient in potions battling some life-threatening diseases, such as cancer, and in remedies for fever, arthritis, impotence and hangovers (Rademeyer 2012; Still 2003). Since rhino horn is believed to be an irreplaceable ingredient of potions, the demand for it is not price sensitive and the demand curve inelastic (Conrad 2012).

Rhino horn is regulated by the United Nations Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which has been deployed since 1975 to prevent rhino extinction. African governments have introduced regulations and created enforcement agencies to prevent rhino poaching. Non-governmental organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund and the Sierra Club, and private sector activists, also became involved in rhino conservation (Warchol 2004). Despite those efforts, rhino killing continues unabated.

## *The Smuggling Process*

*Stage 1. The killing.* Rhino horn on the illegal international market originates primarily from ‘poaching’, the miss-use of trophy-hunted rhino, and the illegal laundering of private stockpiles (Milledge 2007). Some horn is also acquired legally on private property (e.g. from natural rhino mortalities), but sold illegally at the international level.

Rhino hunters in South Africa come mostly from local communities living in close proximity to protected areas, who are familiar with the terrain. Some have engaged in hunting rhinos before it became illegalized and marked as ‘poaching’ (Montesh 2013, von Essen et al. 2014). Hunters often cross porous international borders, such as that between Mozambique and South Africa’s Kruger National Park in search of rhinos (Milliken, Emslie and Talukdar 2009), notwithstanding the ‘long-term warfare between anti-poaching paramilitary units and local hunters’ (von Essen et al. 2014, p. 632).

Many poor villagers are willing to risk up to ten years in prison, or being shot by rangers (who often shoot to kill when apprehending poachers), for the comparatively modest sum paid for horns by middlemen (\$14,500 per kg, according to Rademeyer 2012), compared to the end-market price of the horn (up to USD \$65,000 per kilo). Most of the profit from rhino horns goes to individuals high up in the hierarchy of smuggling networks.

While AK47 assault rifles and 303 caliber rifles have been commonly used weapons for poaching rhinos, quieter methods are increasingly employed, such as immobilization darts, cross-bows and poisons, to avoid detection by the South African authorities (Milliken et al. 2009, Montesh 2013). However, rhino poaching recently got a ‘completely “new face”’, in a transition from local hunters to hunting by ‘sophisticated criminal networks, using helicopters, night-vision equipment, veterinary tranquilizers and silencers to kill rhinos at night’ (Montesh 2013, p.2).

Rangers became ‘increasingly militarized’ in the face of ever more sophisticated hunting techniques (Biggs et al. 2013). In Kruger National Park, drones are currently tested as a support technology in anti-poaching operations (Coetzee 2015). Forensic DNA profiling from recovered horn is used to pin smugglers to specific poaching incidents (Rademeyer 2012).

Rhino horn is also illegally obtained by ‘pseudo hunting’. In South Africa legal hunting of white rhino is regulated by a permit system, which allows the export of a limited number of rhino horn trophies. There is evidence that the permits are abused, as horns of rhinos hunted for trophy are sold commercially (Milledge 2007). Vietnamese syndicates pay Vietnamese or Thai women, often dancers or prostitutes trafficked from Asia to Africa (Gettleman 2013), to engage on ‘safaris,’ where the women stand by as local hunting guides illegally shoot the rhinos, sometimes supervised by low-paid game rangers, who receive a ‘gift’ from the syndicate. The front woman is then photographed with her ‘kill’, and the horn mounted on a crude wooden shield as a ‘trophy,’ and passed to a middleman in the syndicate, who arranges its exportation to the black market in Southeast Asia. When the authorities began to catch on to these hunting anomalies, the syndicates have stayed a step ahead, recruiting instead Czechs or Poles as fronts for their pseudo-hunts (Rademeyer 2012).

*Stage 2. Intra-regional movements to an international exit point.* South Africa’s good roads and international airports serve for transit of much of the rhino horn that has been poached in nearby countries. It reaches South Africa through porous borders or on remote airfields, its movement aided by corrupt, poorly paid law enforcement officers (Warchol 2004). To cover its traces, the horn is often moved through several countries before it reaches South Africa (Rademeyer 2012). Since horns are increasingly moved by ‘using far more efficient and clandestine modi operandi’ than before (Milledge 2007, p. 103), horn recovery by the

authorities has been declining in South Africa. Hence, much of the poached horn reaches the exit points: 90% of rhino horns make it from Africa to end-markets in Asia without interference by the authorities (Milliken et al. 2009).

*Stage 3. The long haul exit and trans-shipment points.* Poachers, or gangs who had hired them, typically transfer the horn to Thai or Vietnamese intermediaries, who arrange its transportation from South Africa to the Asian market. As the horn moves from one broker to another, its value increases, growing by approximately 20%, each time it changes hands (Rademeyer 2012).

The poached horn travels from Africa to Asia predominantly by air transport, albeit sometimes by cargo ships (Warchol 2004). But some horn leaves South Africa for Asia by diplomatic pouches, which are exempt from searches by customs officials (ibid, Montesh 2013, p. 9). High level Vietnamese embassy staff have reportedly been implicated in such transactions (Rademeyer 2012). Some horn is also leaving Africa by commercial airlines, hidden in the luggage of ‘paid mules’ or ‘runners’, acting as couriers between the gangs who had hired the poachers and the wholesaler or kingpin of the operation (Rademeyer 2012; Schneider 2008).

The smugglers go to considerable length to hide the horn, sometimes grinding it into powder to avoid recognition of its shape by baggage screening (Warchol 2004), or smear toothpaste in the suitcase to mask the stench of the horn’s decay, so sniffer dogs would not discover it (Rademeyer 2012).

The route of the horn between South Africa and Vietnam sometimes passes through Yemen (where the horn had in the past been in high demand for making traditional dagger handles [Milledge 2007]), or Hong Kong, and Singapore, which became major way stations for the horn (Amin et al. 2006, Milliken et al. 2009).

*Stage 4. Distribution in the end-market.* The Vietnamese authorities do not forcefully implement the legal ban on the horn. Arrests or seizures at Vietnam's ports are extremely rare (Rademeyer 2012). The horn hence easily reaches wholesalers or crime kingpins and moves undisturbed to the Vietnamese black market.

Though illegally imported, rhino horn is in Vietnam openly marketed as a cure for cancer or as an aphrodisiac, advertized online on websites and discussion forums, and sold in traditional medicine shops and hospitals. It is often cut into small slabs, or ground into powder, mixed with water, and drunk (Milliken et al. 2009; Rademeyer 2012). The social stigma of using rhino horn remains low (Biggs et al. 2013), as a pervasive view of 'animals... as commodities that exist to be exploited' persists in Vietnamese society (Rademeyer 2012, p. 285). The high end-market price of rhino horn helped to elevate it to a luxury good, enhancing its allure as a status symbol among the newly wealthy Vietnamese (Amin et al. 2006; Conrad 2012, Truong, Dang and Hall 2015).

While millions are spent to prevent poaching in South Africa, in Vietnam little has been done to apprehend the drivers of the illicit trade. Those caught belonged primarily to the lower or middle levels of the smuggling hierarchy, but the kingpins behind the rhino horn trade have been rarely apprehended (Rademeyer 2012).

## **Discussion**

Our case studies help to identify some basic traits of smuggling or trafficking ventures, which account for their success in penetrating modern mobility regimes, notwithstanding their sophisticated arsenal of control and surveillance measures. As a general background to the following discussion, it should be noted that current representations of 'smuggling' or 'trafficking' suffer from an inherently Eurocentric or Occidentalcentric bias, like much of

the terminology in the domain of travel (Cohen and Cohen 2015). Modern states, particularly in the West, but increasingly also in Asia, have established mobility regimes, which criminalized as ‘smuggling’ the movements of certain goods (cocaine, rhino horn), or the transportation of disempowered people, as ‘trafficking’, though such activities could have been legally permissible even in the West in the not too distant past. However, as studies of ‘illegal’ activities in less developed countries have shown (e.g. Galemba 2008; Nordstrom 2007), many people involved in so-called ‘smuggling’ or ‘trafficking’ operations did not see themselves as criminals, seeking to subvert some mobility regime, but became de facto subverters once their activities were ‘illegalized’ by the authorities, often under Western pressure, as shown in the case of coca production in Colombia or native rhino hunting in South Africa; while the tragic ir-resolvability of the Rohingya issue hinges to a considerable extent on the contrast between the representation of these people as ‘labor migrants’ by state authorities while they themselves, and international organizations, represent them as [political] ‘refugees.’ This exposes a major ethical dilemma inherent in the attempts, led mostly by the more affluent Western countries, to fight the ‘illegal’ production and ‘smuggling’ or ‘trafficking’ of goods, which constitute the basis of the livelihood of poor people in some countries in the emerging regions of the world.

The differences between international legal and local representations of ‘smuggling’ activities help to explain their acceptance by the locals, particularly at the early stages of their routes, or even the readiness of miserly paid, lower ranks of the local bureaucracy or military, nominally representing the state’s mobilities regime, to be ‘corrupted’ by the smugglers. But it can be inferred from the cases of Rohingya ‘trafficking’ and Colombian drug ‘smuggling,’ that ‘corruption’ often reaches more obscurely into the higher ranks of the official hierarchies. The collusion between ‘smugglers’ and representatives of the regimes thus constitutes a major factor in the success of smuggling ventures.

This analysis has an important implication: our findings indicate that the prevalent image of a dichotomous distinction between subverters and representatives of the regimes should be ameliorated, in that the border between them is fuzzy: in fact, subversive activities are often assisted or concealed by representatives of the regimes, while the mobilities labeled ‘subversive’ are, at least in parts of the ‘smuggling’ routes often perceived as legitimate. These complexities appear to be an attractive (though dangerous) topic for further, detailed field studies.

Another significant factor in the success of ‘smugglers’ ventures is their adroitness in the discovery and exploitation of differences within or between intersecting mobilities regimes. The successes of subversive mobilities are to a large extent due to their exploitation of often ambiguously deployed, negotiable or neglected rules and regulations stipulated by mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Shamir 2005). This is particularly so in what the case studies termed ‘porous borders’ in outlying areas or localities of countries in the emerging world regions, such as southern Africa or Southeast Asia. The boundary between ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ in those and many other areas is vague, enabling ‘smugglers’ or ‘traffickers’ not so much to ‘subvert’ the controls of the mobilities regimes, as to bypass them.

To conclude: although ‘smuggling’ ventures might be, as Medel, Lu and Chow (2015, p. 246) pointed out, a ‘rational business,’ intent to select ‘routes...to maximize profits and minimize risks,’ the actual criminalization of such activities, and the degree of strictness of its application by mobilities regimes, constitute crucial considerations in the choice of their routes. As our case studies show, ‘smugglers’ tend to route their ventures across points of minimal surveillance on part of the regimes, and the greatest acceptability of their ventures by the local populations. Their resilience, indeed, is partly due to their ability to switch routes according to changing securitization measures, as instantiated in our case studies: the transfer



of trafficked Rohingya camps from Thailand to Malaysia, frequent changes in routing drug transactions from Columbia to the U.S. in response to intensified controls, and changes in the destinations of rhino horn from China (which intensified controls) to Vietnam (where controls are lax).

However, the success of the smugglers' subversive ventures is often achieved at a high price in lives and assets, due to successful interventions of the arms of the regimes. We suggest that the resilience of the 'smugglers' or 'traffickers', and the 'sustainability' of their activities, despite such losses, depends on several inter-related factors: their willingness to take high risks to achieve their aims (Kenney 2007a) and to sacrifice dispensable lower-level operators, who are the main victims of the authorities' interventions; their readiness to take considerable material losses due to the huge rewards of successful ventures; and their considerable financial reserves, accumulated from previous ventures, which not only make them able to bear huge losses, but also to invest into novel means of subversion of the mobility regimes (such as submarines).

Turning now to some more specific points emerging from our study:

Our data suggest a distinction between two types of 'smuggling' or 'trafficking' routes: independent and parasitic ones. Independent routes are plotted by the smugglers or traffickers themselves, often across little traveled areas, on which surveillance is weak or non-existent; while parasitic routes involve the grafting of subversive activities upon extant legal traveling routes. The two types of routes are exposed to different kinds of frictions and dealing with them involves different kinds of practices and related skills. Smuggling on independent routes is exposed to the threat of confrontation, possibly involving violence, with the forces of the authorities or competing smuggling gangs. Success on such routes hence depends on the navigational skills of guides to avoid or circumvent blockages and the

defensive capabilities of the members of smuggling gangs. Smuggling on parasitic routes is exposed to the threat of denouement. Success on these routes hence hinges on such practices as ability to perform a part, misrepresentation, pretension, concealment and camouflage.

The case studies show that the organizational patterns of smuggling or trafficking ventures are generally simple and elastic. Their organization is flat but complex: it typically involves chains of brokerage stages, though in some instances ‘bosses,’ or ‘kingpins’ exercise over-all control of particular operations.

None of the case studies indicates the existence of a monolithic hierarchic organization, resembling a ‘corporation,’ dominating the subversive processes in a comprehensive manner. Rather, our case studies indicate the existence of a multiplicity of loosely structured, frequently competing, organizations, based on interlocking ‘assemblages’ (Söderström and Crot 2010), created for particular operations at the moorings of the route. The goods and people moving along the routes are mostly brokered from one link in the chain to another, by arrangements between trusting individuals, supported by radical sanctions against those who abuse the trust, rather than by some formal organizational rules or market-like procedures. The actors in the assemblage on a particular stage might not be aware of the identity of the participants in the assemblages on other stages, or of the entire route of the smuggled goods or people. The smuggling processes are thus deliberately decentralized. Though in some instances ‘smuggling’ bosses exercise over-all control, while in others communication is maintained between accomplices at different nodes of the route.

Our cases studies indicate that ‘smugglers’ and ‘traffickers’ deploy distinctive strategies to counter risks as they pass through different mobility regimes. The routes typically begin in remote localities, where the goods are produced, or from which the smuggled individuals stem, that are not under effective regulation of the prevailing mobility regimes, while the operators mostly enjoy the support or connivance of the locals. As they

move out towards their destinations through more robust mobility regimes, the smugglers or traffickers deploy diverse strategies, particularly redundancy, to minimize the risks of apprehension or blockage. They prepare alternative ‘smuggling’ routes, switch from one type of route or one means of travel to another, according to changing assessments of risk, or distribute the movement of goods or people along several routes (and means of movement) so that the operation is sustained even when one of the links on a route is broken, or some personnel apprehended or killed.

## **Conclusions**

We argued in this paper that there is an inherent bias in discussions of mobility regimes toward the perspective of the authorities. The concept of ‘subversive mobilities’ offers a novel perspective on the construct of ‘mobilities regimes’, by stressing the ways such regimes are penetrated, despite their various control and defense mechanisms. This leads to a more inclusive and dynamic view of mobilities regimes, in that it opens up for discussion their interactions with their environment and the changes they are forced to undergo in reaction to new ways or means of their subversion.

Our approach thus enables us to offer an at least partial answer to the question posed above, regarding the increase in successful ‘smuggling’ of goods and ‘trafficking’ in people, despite efforts to block these activities. We suggest that the dynamics of the interplay between the mobility regimes and their subverters, as exemplified by our case studies, can be illuminated by the use of the metaphor of a tug-of-war: as the authorities impose ever stricter and more effective controls to prevent smuggling activities, their opponents devise new ways to outplay them. Importantly, in that tug-of-war the mobility regimes are generally less flexible than micro-level ‘smuggling’ operators; initiative seems to be mostly taken by the latter, who are the pro-active side in the process, in that they invent and deploy new ways of

subverting the current mobilities regimes. In contrast, the regimes are mostly re-active, seeking ways to countervail the new ways of subversion. However, since in the contemporary world the means of control of the movement of people or goods are becoming increasingly deterritorialized, and hence detached from the geographical points of control, such as checks on border crossings (Amoore 2006) or monitors on smuggling or trafficking routes, ‘smugglers’ face ever more complex challenges to subvert those increasingly sophisticated controls.

### **Limitations**

The research on which this article is based has limitations. Our case studies were based on secondary sources available in the literature to demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of subversive mobilities. These sources were insufficient for a detailed presentation and analysis of particular subversive events, or the estimation of the rate of success of different strategies of subversion. Therefore our arguments have to be further examined in future field studies. Despite these limitations, we hope that this study will sensitize readers to an inherent bias in the current mobilities literature that has prioritized the perspective of the authorities in mobilities regimes, over the perspectives of the various kinds of mobilities which seek to penetrate these regimes.

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