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Ports and the politics of visibility: An interview with Laleh Khalili

María Vélez-Serna and Markus Stauff

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Abstract

In this interview with Laleh Khalili, her book Sinews of War and Trade (Verso, 2020) is the starting point to discuss how ports – through their material procedures and their media representations – contribute to the uneven visibility of the global economy and labor conditions. The book weaves a richly-detailed history of places along the Arabian peninsula that have been transformed by oil and finance, imperialism and nationalism, from the traditional dhow traders to the modern container ports and oil terminals. In the interview Khalili details how some ports have become a spectacle that enacts the technological sublime and caters to tourism, while also obscuring less attractive operations such as bulk cargo and scrap. Their managed visibility offers insights into the infrastructural power relationships they emerge from and reproduce. This was particularly salient in the context of supply chain crises during COVID, which also exacerbated problems of labour exploitation and the restriction of human movement. Ports can also be key nodes of

protest through tactical interruption of capitalist logistics. Next to critical analysis, Khalili suggests literary imagination as a procedure that allows for a more complex understanding of the layered realities of ports.

Keywords

containers, global economy, labor conflicts, ports, spectacle, visibility

Any discussion of ports from a media studies perspective needs to take into account their complex and layered reality: the location, the function, and the visibility of ports result from and produce conflicting layers of geopolitical, infrastructural, legal, and economic dynamics. To integrate at least some aspects that might go beyond the methodological competencies of media studies, we talked to Professor Laleh Khalili, whose interdisciplinary work on ports focuses on political and economic questions while offering countless intersections with media studies.

Laleh Khalili is the Al-Qasimi Professor of Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter. Until May 2023 she was Professor in International Politics at Queen Mary University of London, but resigned from this post in protest against the university administration's poor decision-making, lack of collegiality, and hostility

towards union activity, which tried to pit students against striking staff. Before working at QMUL, Prof. Khalili taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at University of London and was also a management consultant after earning an engineering degree in the US.

We were drawn to Prof Khalili's work through her fascinating account of the historical development of shipping and ports in the Arabian Peninsula, *Sinews of War and Trade* (Verso, 2020). The book weaves a richly detailed history of places that have been transformed by oil and finance, imperialism and nationalism, from the traditional dhow traders to the modern container ports and oil terminals. While paying close attention to the archival evidence of the diplomatic, banking, and insurance deals that shaped the world's trading routes, Khalili's book is remarkable in its immersive descriptions of seafaring and port cities. A stint travelling on cargo ships allows Khalili to bring the reader closer to the everyday lives of seafarers, and this is greatly enriched by reference to literary fiction, poetry, film, and visual arts, with an interdisciplinary sensibility that we hoped would inform our own approach to this section's theme.

The book's attention to labour conditions and worker solidarity brings to the fore some of the injustices that sustain the world's appetite for consumer goods. This connects to Khalili's previous work on confinement in counterinsurgency practices (*Time in the Shadows*, 2012), another site of asymmetry where the maintenance of liberal market capitalism is predicated on the violent restriction of population freedoms. Here too, the political ambivalences that emerge from the intersection between land and sea play a role, since islands, harbors, and ships ('floating prisons') get harnessed as zones of legal and moral indeterminacy. Before that, Khalili had applied this rich blend of archival, ethnographic, and critical methods to locate the memorialisation of Palestinian struggle in an international context (*Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, 2007). Khalili writes regularly for the *London Review of Books*, has published in multiple journals and edited collections, and has also written introductions to art books and exhibitions, most notably for two Allan Sekula publications (the 2018 edition of *Fish Story*, and the 2017 exhibition Okeanos).

Markus Stauff and María Vélez-Serna spoke to Prof Khalili in March 2023 over a video meeting spanning

Melbourne, Medellín, and London. The interview has been edited for legibility.

Markus Stauff: As media scholars we are interested in ports as places of intense mediation, but also in the visibility of ports in daily life and in media representations. In *Sinews of War and Trade* you very convincingly show how throughout the 20th century, big sea ports, especially along the Arabian peninsula, have become increasingly disconnected from cities through containerisation, securitisation, and automatisation. At the same time, there are cities like Hamburg, Amsterdam, or Rotterdam, where increasingly bigger container ships and cruise ships are highly visible and become part of the city experience, and even of the city branding. So even if the port-related work – the goods and the processes of extraction and pollution – often remains invisible, port cities often create sights that are very different from other cities. Based on your global research on ports, how would you describe this ambivalence between visibility and invisibility of the ports? How is the (in-)visibility of the port created in relation to the surrounding city space?

Laleh Khalili: That's a really interesting question. I think that in some ways a lot of the European ports do

feel visible. Often they provide a very controlled and managed view onto the port in order for us to feel that they're visible where they're really not. Rotterdam has these fantastic boat tours which, whenever I'm in the Netherlands, I make time for. The longer tour, which is only available in the summer, takes you all the way out to the sea to see the very largest and newest container terminals. Hamburg, Barcelona, Valencia – all the same thing. They all have similar boat tours which you can take to visit the port. In the case of Rotterdam, I think you can also cycle all the way out to land's end and look at it, which is something that you can't do in most of the other ports anywhere else in the world. This manages and constrains the ways in which we see the port from a distance. We tend to look at it. It's not the same as going onto and touching the boats in the way that the old ports have been turned into a sort of pleasure and leisure space.

Now in the Middle East it's slightly different. On the one hand because the new ports, the big, mechanised container ports are massively securitised, and they're really difficult to get to unless you get a permit to go in. So, for example, I've never had any success going on to the Jebel Ali port in Dubai from land, in part because they require two pieces of documents and an invitation

from a business located inside. But on the other hand, until very recently, these dhow ports[1] were right in the middle of the town in Dubai. They are still right in the middle of the town in Kuwait City, in Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), or in all these other Emirates, and there you can literally go up and chat with the people who work on these dhows. You can't do that as easily now in Dubai, where they've shifted the dhows away from the posh hotels. So there is an element in which the state wants to be able to control access to these ports and dictates the extent to which, and the proximity from which, you can see them.

However, port cities also have a self-perception which has developed through many, many years of being outward-looking. They have a perception of themselves as being very distinct sorts of places, of being very mixed, of being very open. You know, quite cosmopolitan sorts of places. I tend to think that this self-perception ebbs and flows over time, and I think it has a lot to do with how those ports choose to portray themselves in relation to their hinterlands. To give you one example from the US, which I think is quite relevant: the Savannah port in Georgia is one of the biggest and most significant ports on the East Coast of the US, although you would have never heard of it as a big container port. But it's also nowhere near as

cosmopolitan or outward-looking because the relationship that defines it is primarily with its hinterland. It's sort of an outlet for its hinterland. And I think that makes it also a slightly different kind of place.

So that question of visibility and invisibility appears out of this mishmash of a lot of things; the layers of history, the extent to which these particular layers of history have been securitised and also obviously the relationship across the seas, but also to the hinterland and the location that that particular port has in a set of social and political relations. In terms of the representation I think that's a slightly different kind of question, because what is really fascinating to me is that the representational politics around ports is very determined by the kinds of narratives that not only states want to tell about themselves, but also the ones that the port management companies and the shipping companies want to tell – and the people who work on the ports want to tell a story, too. Thus, representational politics tend to be much less hegemonic than the ways in which an actual access to the port is routed, managed, constrained by the lack of possibility of actually walking on or approaching the berths of where the ships are.

Stauff: So this managed visibility is just as layered as the port itself. What kind of stories are told with ports and their managed visibility?

Khalili: There are some stories that just immediately emerge. In what I've written, I often talk about the technological sublime story. Ports are harbingers of progress, of industrialisation, of connections to the world. There are particularly self-conscious ways in which container terminal operators in particular see themselves as being these symbols of modernity. The container itself, the box, has become this incredibly ubiquitous thing, which is used as artists' studios and, you know, box parks, which now emerge everywhere as collections of the coolest street food in metropolitan centres, as the bases of sustainable architecture, and things like that. And so there is a particular way in which the ubiquity of the container lives side by side with the extremely managed visibility of the port itself and the infrastructures there. Even in the case of the Middle East just as much as in the case of Europe and North America and other continents, the container port is talked about as this ultramodern symbol.

But what that ignores is that container ports are not the only kind of maritime infrastructure that sits out there.

Bulk ports where ships transport coal, bauxite, ores of various sorts, but also grain, are important too. Numerically speaking, probably far more ports cater to that kind of bulk transport than to containers, and yet the bulk ports are not as visible in part because they are not as aesthetically pleasing. As, you know, that kind of symmetric, colorful container port appeals to our left-brained orderly organisation of everything in these angular ways. Bulk ports can have scrap sitting on the berths; Barcelona now has a major scrap metal processing plant and you see heaps of scrap metal sitting in a corner there. Rotterdam actually is the largest port for the arrival of fruit juice from Latin America. And you see these tankers that are carrying orange juice coming onto there. It's not very attractive. It doesn't have the symmetry and angularity and beauty and organisation of a container terminal. Again, Rotterdam is exceptional in the sense of them actually talking about their liquid and bulk processing facilities. I think it is because it is the biggest port In Europe, so rather than it being something fascinating or interesting or beautiful to look at, it is the biggest – so the superlative is what makes it visible in that instant.

In the Middle East you don't really hear about those bulk ports, unless of course something happens. So for

example, when the explosion happened almost three years ago in the port of Beirut, the bit of the ports that was completely destroyed was the bulk transport and grain transport with the silos and everything. The container port actually never stopped functioning. It was a moment in which the bulk bit became visible, but the container terminal, which is often the bit that everybody pays attention to, became invisible and its functioning was not commented upon in part because it didn't fit the narratives that were necessary to tell at that moment about the explosion at the port having really screwed the city in a million different ways.

Stauff: Concerning this global and urban visibility of containers, would you say it allows us a glimpse into global interconnection or is it a spectacle that more or less covers – or distracts – from what is actually happening in and between ports?

Khalili: I think it does both. I think it is a spectacle, but I think increasingly it is difficult for it to cloak what is happening. Part of the reason that it is increasingly difficult for it to cloak what is happening is because, particularly since the COVID pandemic, we have seen an enormous amount of public discussion around global transportation. The story of the supply chains,

the story of seafarers wandering around on their ships, not being able to come to shore; the fact that there were the frontline workers whose job was essentially to be the endpoint of logistics delivery, all those things actually brought attention to container ships and to container transportation in ways that had not been given before, so they moved from being a spectacle, from being symbolic to actually becoming objects – and objects of study. That was important.

The other thing about it is that up until the pandemic there was a particular type of attentiveness to those kinds of containers. The way that Allan Sekula has written about these kinds of mega forms of transport, the mega tankers and the mega container ships, actually hid the way that, for example, these ships still steam the seas at exactly the same speed as they did 100 years ago. Sekula's photographs themselves are really indicative of the fact that there is something about photographing these kinds of aesthetically and symmetrically beautiful things that subtracts the humans out of that story; or the fact that, for example, by focusing only on the container transport, we're not seeing all of the other forms – the ores, the primary materials, the coal that doesn't get transported in these nice-looking ships – all of that ends up getting forgotten. So I think this is still not fully

addressed. You know, how many serials and podcasts and shows are there about container terminals and how many are there about bulk terminals? The imbalance is kind of crazy and I think that that imbalance persists, although the pandemic has made some of that visible to us.

María Vélez-Serna: Does that renewed visibility and interest, both scholarly and in popular discourse, about ports and about what happens at ports, offer new critical opportunities or opportunities for public critique of systems of inequality and exploitation that have shaped those spaces?

Khalili: I think that there's definitely been something of that, because one of the things that has been obvious from reading both maritime newsletters and also the news is the number of strikes and the worker organisations bargaining that is happening in ports, that is happening in warehouses, that is happening in all sorts of supply chain nodes and locations. And I suspect that part of that is precisely because of the visibility that the pandemic has brought, but also because of the expectations that things would change after the pandemic – and when they didn't I think the incongruence of the expectation also really fed into all

of the different strikes that we're seeing. There are strikes going on in ports in the US, there's strikes going on in ports here [UK], there was one that just ended in Finland. It's like, everywhere that you look, there are strikes going on in the ports. And I think that there is something really exciting about that, and I suspect that it is in response to the ways in which the supply chain has become much more visible through the pandemic.

Vélez-Serna: This highlights the point that this visibility perhaps emerges at particular kinds of crisis points. What in Europe was called the 'refugee crisis' also brought a different type of visibility to some of the ports of Europe. How do you locate the visibility or invisibility of migrants and refugees, considering also the kind of complicated status of seafarers, in relation to the public image of ports?

Khalili: One of the things that has been fascinating is the way that the formations of racialised capitalism have meant that we take it for granted that cargo is going to travel unfettered and without any kind of limitations, whereas the movement of people is always already constrained by passports, by papers, by requirements, by the imposition of forms of legality and criminality, et cetera. And of course, what that translates into is that

there are certain kinds of stoppages that people pay attention to, and certain kinds of stoppages that they don't pay attention to, and so, for example, the ship blocking the Suez Canal will get a lot more attention now than a ship going down in the Mediterranean with migrants on board, because the world's attention is mediated in particular ways, directed in particular directions. I think that's really quite significant. That's the first thing.

The second really interesting thing is that there is a particular way in which the border systems in Europe have tried to disaggregate movement across the sea for cargoes from the movement across the sea for humans. What I mean here is that in the early years of the big trans-Mediterranean migrations in 2011 and through 2015, what you ended up having was actually a lot of the container ships, a lot of the freighters sort of slowing down and picking up migrants and bringing them to the ports. This was a seafarers' code: you do not leave anyone stranded at sea. And then a whole series of legal processes were put into place. Sanctions for seafarers, Frontex interference and intervention, which has actually made it criminal for ships to pick up distressed migrants. And so you end up hearing, for example, about a Maersk ship that had picked up a bunch of

migrants near the coast of Libya because their dinghy was sinking, and the ship was prevented from landing at any port anywhere at all. This was in the last couple of years. And the excuse that was used in this instance was not legality or illegality – they used COVID as an excuse.

We know that historically speaking, quarantine measures have been at once public health measures, but also forms of the state instantiating its coercive power across various kinds of categories of people in order to control circulation. But the way that management of circulation in this instance of humans versus cargo is policed in order to facilitate one and stop the other I think are inseparable from one another. I had a discussion with somebody on Twitter, and they were saying that it is interesting that in the case of COVID, there has been so little discussion of the way that COVID measures were biopolitical. And for me, that biopolitics is at play exactly in this kind of a facilitation of circulation on the one hand, and creating a massive stoppage on the other hand. I mean, it's kind of interesting to go to Foucault in this instance, but in his *Security, Territory, Population* he specifically defines policing as precisely that, as management of circulation.[2] He specifically talks about it in the case of public hygiene, which is a really interesting thing given

that this is the moment in which a question of public hygiene, policing of borders, of movement et cetera, and circulation all come together in the Mediterranean, but also elsewhere in the world's seas.

Vélez-Serna: You were mentioning Allan Sekula earlier and you've pointed out how there's some silences in that work precisely around those kinds of political and biopolitical issues and around enslavement, carcerality, and colonialism.[3] Considering the kinds of visibility that work like Sekula's has created, what are the tensions then between those biopolitical questions, that romance of the Seas, and that kind of technological sublime? What sort of scholarly and artistic engagements are possible that go beyond that romance and that spectacle?

Khalili: I mean, Sekula was never romantic, and I think that's part of the reason that despite the silences, which are often glaring and sometimes very problematic in his work, his work is still so incredibly relevant and wonderful and inspiring. I think there are certain particular possibilities that he opened and questions that he posed about the way that you photograph worlds. You know these mega-structures and infrastructures as being driven by, defined by the

human hand, which I think are still quite relevant. I think the silences in Sekula, in particular in *Fish Story* (1995), I think perhaps less so in some of his other works, particularly the ones that he does in Los Angeles, like the works that he does with Noël Burch in Los Angeles[4] actually do tend to have that question of racialisation at their center, so that's important to note. But in *Fish Story*, as Christina Sharpe has pointed out, there is a glaring absence of any discussion of slavery in a chapter titled 'The Middle Passage'.[5] I think those silences also say something about the way that there has been a shift in who gets to speak about which kind of movements since the writing of *Fish Story*. Part of that opening of the space has been because of the major struggles that have gone on in the artistic world in order to include voices of the colonised and racialised. Part of it has been the result of structural changes; the 2014 and then the 2020 revolts around Black Lives Matter, which started in the US but in metropolitan fashion ended up spilling over to a lot of the rest of the world. Part of it also has to do with the fact that the very trans-Mediterranean migrations that began happening as a result of revolutionary movements in the Middle East and elsewhere in 2011 onwards have actually also created a space. Sadly, the dead bodies of migrants themselves have created a space for people to actually

bring into question the way that we only imagine the sea as a space of cargo transport rather than as a space of possible mobility. There is a tension between the kind of silences that existed before and the spaces that are being opened up now and I think that's productive in some ways.

What do I think about the possibilities and openings now? When I started doing my project, there were a lot of different artistic collectives that were really interested in mediating and representing and questioning and interrogating, but also bringing in this kind of a metallic, rusty, extremely material, dirty extractive process, that is the circulation of manufactured goods and everything from one location to another. There were loads of artistic collectives in lots of different places. In the mid-teens I was going to Croatia and Switzerland, you name it, different locations to talk to people, to talk to different groups about this process. I think there is a particular way that after that moment there has been a shift and I think that people are more wary, I certainly sense that artists are more wary about the immediacy of the beauty of the containership, perhaps because things have become more dire in some ways. And on the other hand, because there is actually a lot of unsettledness; the protests that I was talking about earlier, the strikes that I

was talking about earlier, there's a lot of unsettledness around supply chains around ports, around people's movements, around all of those things, and I think that combination of exhaustion and being worn down, being burnt out along with the opening up of all of these spaces, which also maps a little bit the kind of tension that I was talking about earlier, all of this is creating new and interesting ways of looking at the infrastructures for circulation and extraction. What is really interesting is that I'm seeing a lot of the people that used to want to talk about containers are now wanting to talk about energy. And I do think that some of that of course is the way that everybody – including me – shift from one place to another again along with the currents of transformation. But I also think that wanting to focus on the energy also comes out of the pandemic, because there was a moment in which our skies were clear. We breathed better – if we were not ill of course. Things were quieter, and then suddenly we go back to the same kind of fossil fuel economies, and you know, the rise in temperatures and ineffective international conferences and all of those kinds of things. And I think that this also probably explains why people have an urgency about talking about energy, fossil fuels, and all of that.

Stauff: The issue of energy and fossil fuels seems to pose similar questions with respect to visibility and invisibility as the container. Since it is partly the increasing securitisation that adds to this invisibility, I would like to discuss the methodological implications. Could you tell us how you encountered or 'discovered' the invisibility of ports in your work? And what decisions you took to cope with that? For your book, you travelled on a container ship, you occasionally use literary sources – were these steps part of your plan from the start? Did some of these things emerge as a strategy to deal with the invisibility of at least certain types of ports?

Khalili: Here I would like, as I always do, to invoke Trevor Paglen. He's a geographer, and he's got this fabulous book called *Blank Spots on the Map* (2010), this fabulous book of essays about all of the different ways that he chooses to look at spaces that are invisible and how to make those invisible spaces visible, and he does all sorts of really wonderful and crazy things because he's also an artist. For example, he does deep dives and looks for underground underwater cables that have been tapped by the NSA, or works with astronomers to track down spy satellites by mapping the passage of moving objects across the sky and distinguishing them

from commercial satellites. He does these really interesting extrapolations. He does the same sort of stuff with the US budget, which is, you know, thousands of pages long. He sits there and actually adds every single line item and through doing so discovers the holes between the overall budget and the line item additions for the Pentagon, for example, and discovers where the classified amounts are and who it goes to. So he does really interesting and creative ways of looking at silent and invisible things.

I wasn't doing anything quite as creative as he was. I have to confess that part of me going on a container ship was because I just thought that that would be really cool, and then the fact that it ended up actually being the only way that, for example, I could get into Jeddah, or the only way that I could land on the port itself at Jebel Ali was an added bonus. But the question of invisibility starts with the fact that when I started doing this research project, there were maybe a handful of critical works on logistics and modern transport infrastructures. I mean there were reams of materials, if you wanted, in management or transport, economics and things like that, and reams of information about historical maritime transportation. But there was so little critical thinking other than people like Deb Cowen

and a handful of other people (Charmaine Chua, Katy Fox-Hodess, Marc Levinson, Dara Orenstein, now joined by people like Rafeef Ziadah, Alessandro Mezzadra, and Bret Nielson) that actually dealt with modern logistics, with these modern forms of transport. Sekula's essays were some of the very early ones that dealt with this in a very direct and immediate sort of way. So it was first starting with the scholarly literature, and the gaps there. And then of course, as I said, when I first went to Dubai and tried to get into Jebel Ali, I just couldn't because the security requirements were just too high, which then makes you think, okay, so how do I do it? And it just happened, serendipitously, that I could in fact get off the ship in Jebel Ali. I think if they had changed the rules so passengers could not leave the port at Jebel Ali, like for example as they do in Jeddah, I would have never been able to actually get onto the port. I may have had to disembark from the ship at another location, not in Jebel Ali, as I did in both cases. And so I think that these kinds of things are a little bit of serendipity.

On the question of using literature, I grew up reading literary sources. My mother wanted me to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, which obviously is never going to happen, but it has always made me love and

value literary works in ways that far surpassed my love for most scholarly works. I think there is a particular kind of texture and immediacy and – an old-fashioned word – truth to literary works that I don't think scholarly work can cover. Maria, you're in Colombia. I think that I could read all I want about United Fruit, but then you go and read that one chapter in Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) about the United Fruit massacre in Colombia and that gives you more of a sort of the sense of the importance of that moment, the affective world of that moment, than anything else. In the case of ports, oil, and all of that in in the Middle East, *Cities of Salt* (Abdelrahman Munif, 1984), which I relied on extensively for my work, provides much more of a portrait of the anxieties of the dislocations and the displacements, the social ruptures that oil and the discovery of oil and these oil ports brought to eastern Saudi Arabia, than any of the scholarly work by some of the people that I really adore. So I think that that usage of literary works came out of that already overwhelming respect that I had developed for literary works as windows into understanding things. Another thing that emerged out of these years and which I'm hoping to stick to for the rest of my scholarly career is that there was something incredibly liberating about writing something that aimed to explain complex

and often quite tedious material to a very large public in a way that was attractive and interesting. It was a challenge that in academia we often don't have to face because we don't care if we bore our readers, right, because it is doing something completely different. It's intended to engage in a debate or whatever. To write for a bigger audience and to try to make things that could potentially be incredibly dull and technical to be interesting and relevant was something that I felt was a skill that I began to learn as I wrote *Sinews* and which I really hope to continue learning to do in subsequent books. Because it was so incredibly satisfying and I think part of the appeal – if the book has any appeal at all – is that it is intended to be lucid and approachable rather than dense and academic.

Vélez-Serna: Following on that question about literary sources, I was curious about your interest and engagement with audiovisual sources, films and television shows, whether fiction or documentary, that you think are interesting or valuable in terms of their representations of ports and seafaring.

Khalili: Obviously since I started doing this project, I've been visiting any ports, watching any film, anything that has to do with ships or ports or whatever, you know.

Everything from *The Wire*, the second season of which takes place in the port of Baltimore, to – and I shouldn't admit this, given that Elia Kazan ratted to the House Un-American Activities Committee – but you know, *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954). You've got to see that if you're going to be looking at labour organisation. And then Arthur Miller's response to that, in *The View from the Bridge* (1955). So I've gone to all of these plays, I've tried to watch these films, I've tried to watch the documentaries. Obviously the feature films, the more fictional treatments of the ports tend to actually be the more exciting ones. So whether *On the Waterfront* or Arthur Miller's response to it, the various versions of *Moby Dick* that you can access, because they have a free hand in how to creatively imagine a world, they tend to actually make the reality of what we're saying much more vivid, much more color-saturated in a way. That said, I do have to say that having seen *Fish Story* for the first time was a huge and enormous kind of moment because suddenly you become extremely aware of the fact that these places are made to seem commonsensical, are made to seem completely and totally ordinary. And they are absolutely extraordinary, and that invisibilisation if you will is what lies at the heart of capitalist production and capitalist accumulation. I think Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's

Cartographies of the Absolute (2015) has a chapter about Allan Sekula that touches on the difficulties, the impossibilities of portraying capital on film in particular ways. And for me, Sekula actually does that in a way that very few documentary or fact-based rather than fictive works actually managed to do, perhaps because he was such an amazing poet, photographer, and essayist already.

Vélez-Serna: Perhaps on the same line of thinking, what about the mobilisation of the visibility of ports as an activist tactic? And I'm thinking, for instance, of banner drops from the terminals or blockades of port entrances and so on.

Khalili: I think that's also really fascinating. I mean obviously dockers have always been incredibly militant, but not always on the 'right side' of history, because they sometimes took right-wing or xenophobic views. As we know in the case of London, for example, in the 1960s, some of the dockers marched for Enoch Powell. But more generally and internationally the radicalism and militancy of dockers means that they can, if they choose to, make these spaces visible. One of the things that started in 2014-15, I think, in Oakland, was that when ships were coming from Israel to deliver used arms for

police departments there, the Black Lives Matter activists, Palestinian activists, and dockers actually organised the Stop the Boats Movements in Oakland and then in a couple of other ports down the Pacific Coast of the US. I think that that was one of these moments in which community organisation taken to the port to connect to dockers' unions and boycotting the unloading of these ships was actually this incredibly successful moment where the port was made the center stage of these forms of protest.

I have a brilliant PhD student who is working on Italian ports and dockers who are organising again in solidarity with Palestine, and of course in South Africa you have long had docker mobilisation against apartheid, and also global solidarity with South African dockers around apartheid where, when apartheid regimes were in power in South Africa, dockers in various ports refused to unload South African ships. So there are lots of these really fascinating elements of docker solidarity which, because of their militancy and because of the fact that they do have access to the ports, they do have this ability to disrupt, they can do something really quite interesting with that. They can have creative forms of protest. But again, two caveats: one, the politics behind this really matters, as I point out in my book, but also, as

I just mentioned with Enoch Powell, you have to have a kind of a left-wing radical imagination in order for those forms of militancy to be rooted on the side of good; and the second factor is that increasingly, they also need to be in sync with the communities surrounding them, with their neighbours, with other activist groups in order for those kinds of transversal forms of solidarity to actually work across labor spaces and into communities.

Vélez-Serna: It's interesting that so many of the most visual types of actions in recent years have been more related to climate change movements, such as Insulate Britain, Code Red in the Netherlands, that have done things at coal terminals and so on. So that point about where those solidarities lie and whether those groups are as connected to their communities as they need to be is important.

Khalili: I think that's really important. I think with the question of climate also, what is really interesting is that of course ports are major leverage points, because on the one hand coal is really easy to intercept. Oil is not as easy to intercept because most of the oil loading and unloading buoys are about a mile out to sea and they're floating oil terminals, which are impossible to get to

because obviously they're massively secured, but they're also out to sea. And so in this instance, what you end up really hoping for is something like the Greenpeace 1980s sort of mobilisation. There was a documentary on the BBC called *Murder in the Pacific* about the blowing up of the Greenpeace boat in New Zealand that was trying to go and protest French nuclear testing in the South Pacific Islands. And I think we do need creative forms of protest that bring in, you know, refurbished old ships, to get mobilisation going in those particular ways. The ITF (International Transport Workers Federation) did some of that also in the 1980s, they refurbished an old ship around questions of flags of convenience. So I do think that we need to start thinking about creative ways that those forms of leverage can take and how the kind of visual prominence and pleasurability of ports and maritime infrastructure can be harnessed for those kinds of protests.

Stauff: With these examples we are already discussing the characteristics of the port as a mediating space. You already mentioned that the port is a place where coal is loaded from ship to train, and that it is more visible than the same kind of transport interface at an airport. To

what extent is this connectedness of the port part of its politics of visibility?

Khalili: Not only does it have to do with port infrastructures, but also with energy infrastructures, because you can think of the harbour as just one node in a massive network of different kinds of connections. So you arrive in the port of Rotterdam and you've got the trains, you've got the barges that go up the river, you've got trucks coming in and picking stuff up for you. You have the stuff that is transported to the Rotterdam airport and put on freight aeroplanes and flown out, for example tulips or tulip bulbs, so you have all of these different forms of connection that are emanating from the port in all different directions, multimodally. And the port, because that is the place at which they all converge, is much more visible and therefore a place where you can intercept or use counter-logistical forms of protest much more straightforwardly. It is also the place that you can probably imagine or visualise much more easily, because it is grounded. It's not like a moving train, which goes on for miles and miles, and it doesn't have the same kind of visual impact, those miles and miles of connection or those miles and miles of road, as the port does with its solidity, with its groundedness, right? And

in some ways that is similar to the energy system. So if we think about it, the oil field is incredibly visible. The refinery is incredibly visible, the energy-producing power plants are incredibly visible – particularly if they have those hourglass shaped cooling towers, they look kind of dystopian. But the energy grid itself, it's completely invisible. Yes, you can look at those really incredibly beautiful power lines and the big metal transformers and transformer stations. But as a totality, much the same way that the totality of the connections around the port are difficult to map, the totality of the energy grid is also difficult to map against the point of production. I think that the ability to visualise the spaces of circulation, of cargo or of energy, beyond the point of production – oh my God, I'm beginning to sound like *Capital*, Volume 2! – I think that ability is going to be really, really important.

Vélez-Serna: So on that note, how do you see the current state of the infrastructural turn in the humanities?

Khalili: I love it. Obviously it's fantastic, and in part I think I love it also because I think that it comes out of a moment where we're turning back and looking at the ways in which capital is operating and destroying the

world. And I think that looking at infrastructure is such a crucial part of that. So the fact that everybody wants to look at it is, yay! The more the better, the more the merrier.

Vélez-Serna: We would love to know a bit more about what you're working on now, and anything else that you wanted to add to the conversation.

Khalili: I have to apply for funding for this because there's a lot of research that needs to be done, but I have a hunch that a lot of what we associate with the fossil fuel-driven, -destroyed, -decimated lives of today emerges as a response to the nationalisation of oil in the 1970s. The increase in plastic production, the offshore explorations, fracking, oil sands, all of these incredibly, terribly devastating ways that have been invented came as a response to that. So what I want to do is some research to trace those connections between the moment of decolonised sovereign control over resources in the global South and the emergence of all of these destructive industries in the global North in order to recuperate losses from the transfer of wealth because of nationalisation. I have a hunch that a lot of that can be very directly connected, but I need to do

some research. So that's what I'm going to work on next. Lots of infrastructures, but all oil-related.

Vélez-Serna: In an interview that I listened to recently[6] you mentioned thinking about infrastructures from the global South perspective as well.

Khalili: I'm hoping to write a book about logistics, a history of logistics, but not from New York, London, or Rotterdam, but rather from the global South. So we'll see.

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Notes

[1] Dhows are a type of sailing ship that has been used in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean for several centuries.

[2] Foucault 1978.

[3] Khlili 2018.

[4] *The Forgotten Space* (2010) [documentary feature film].

[5] Sharpe 2016.

[6] Novara FM, 'Infrastructure for the End of the World with Laleh Khalili', March 2023: https://soundcloud.com/novaramedia/novara

-fm-infrastructure-for-the-end-of-the-world-w-laleh-khalili