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Analytical Book Essay

The ambitious new study of Eric Tagliazcozzo, “Secret trades, porous borders: smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian frontier, 1865-1915”is a brilliant attempt to meticulously document and highlight the nature and essence of smuggling (Tagliacozzo). At the same time, it associates the smuggling activities with important phenomena such as growth and imposition of colonial rule and the challenges this process offered. The archival materials of British, Singaporean, Dutch and Indonesian history were probed into and the mentions of different marine and legal records, administrative correspondence are also found at various points in the book. This book is considered as a model study and has successfully contributed to the extant literature which revolved around the dimensions of state formation and imperialism. One of the major areas which have been scrutinized by the contents of the book is the conventional definition, nature, and the contemporary spatial construction of frontiers. Broadening its horizon from a simple account of smuggling narrated for the sole purpose of providing information, this book surpasses the limits of anthropological history and imperialistic studies. Imperial authority and the control of colonial forces have been given an extension so that the narrative of smuggling can also be set in a wider context. The history of almost a half-century as presented in the book, there are detailed descriptions of British assuming control of Brunei, Malaya and Singapore, and the extension of rule by the Dutch over contemporary Indonesia. The extension of colonial rule and power over the afore-mentioned countries rendered the local rulers under the principality of the colonial lords. As a result of significantly increased state power, a wide variety of commodities and goods were proclaimed as contraband and their handling, transporting and trade was either marked forbidden or was subject to state monopolies and custom duties imposed by the government. Smuggling proved to be a greater problem for the Dutch than the British, therefore the book also focuses chiefly on the territories under the Dutch control. The knowledge of the Europeans increased manifold after 1865 when they put extensive efforts in the study of anthropological surveys and mapping.

This essay is an endeavor to highlight and analyze strategies put into service by the state authorities of The Netherlands and the United Kingdom to suppress illegal activities of smuggling, human trafficking, firearms trades and illegal trade of narcotics in the Malay world of the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya, Brunei, Singapore, and Sarawak. Smuggling appeared to be an enterprise of multinational character and had the massive potential of profitability soon after the creation of frontiers in the 19th century. Apart from this, the authorities were also hugely susceptible to indulge with the smugglers and shared the fruits of their collective illegal activities. The book also sheds light on the emergence of secret, vast economies which were largely based on the trade and commerce of forbidden consignments and freightage across the porous borders.

Some of the significantly important strategies mentioned in the book are construction and peace-keeping of frontiers and borders, constant policing of the borders and signing of an extradition treaty between the two governments which was later transformed into legislation. The development of these borders and their constant surveillance appeared victorious in the pursuit of suppressing the illegal activities of human traffickers, opium traders and currency runners. The narrative of the strategies also indicates the potential construction of contemporary political borders and the unsanctioned crossing of humans, commodities and abstractions through them.

The meteoric and rapid growth of smuggling contraband including human slaves, narcotics, and firearms was intrinsically tied to the surging abilities of the British and Dutch state authorities in their process of construction and enforcement of borders. In the middle of 1860s and 1870s, the colonial expansionary activities by Dutch and British were intensified and this smoothed grounds for them to examine the problems arising from smuggling across the borders which were constructed only a while ago. The formation of borders was steadily accomplished through sustained efforts and complex projects of cartography and exploration. Staunch European programs organized and administered by police, naval army and infantry patrols also played a pivotal role in this achievement. New laws, rules and regulations, and treaties fortified the legitimacy of these new colonial demarcations.

The state authorities of Netherlands and the United Kingdom imposed changes which shook the centuries-old networks formed based on religious, social and trading networks. Calibrating the emerging boundary between the evolving British and Dutch area in the South-east Asian region was a collective effort spanning across decades. The achievements in exploration and mapping were achieved by a lot of people as a direct proceeding of the prevailing colonial knowledge, including professional surveyors and explorers of the land. Batavia is note-worthy in this scenario as it took great care in reporting and tabulating the results of various expeditions and energy with agility. Acquiring related knowledge for expansion of the states and for the pursuit of moving forward in the frontier was mandatory for setting up borders and controlling them. Every principality or sultanate that was encountered or captured by the forces of Dutch and British state governments were immediately categorized under specific criteria of guidance and understand which they had developed for their ease.

To control and suppress human trafficking, counterfeiting, firearms and narcotics trade, the most significant strategy deployed by the Dutch and British authorities was the enforcement of corporeal restrictions and barriers by naval and military forces on both the sides of imperial colonies. The police forces belonging to both Netherlands and the United Kingdom also contributed chiefly to round the clock surveillance of the frontiers. In the area which constituted the Dutch East Indies, the institution of police did not have its distinct administration because, at that time, it was divided between the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice. The reason for this reliance on other ministries was because the police received funding from the Ministry of Interior and the rules and regulations which the police executed and administered were descended upon it from the Ministry of Justice. There were also special sub-branches of the police department which were deployed on forests, salt mines, and the areas where coffee beans were cultivated. These sub-branches were garrisoned because of the prevalent threats of smuggling across both the colonies. In the Dutch sphere, the police units were established and maintained security on the coasts to deal primarily with the Chinese societies who were apprehended as major threats and their presence repeatedly challenged the authority of the colonial governments. In the British sphere, rulers and princes at the local level also maintained the deployment of police forces which led to disparities in the power of policing across the vast territories. Although these factors greatly shook the policing networks and their particular hierarchies, they proved to be chiefly vital for suppressing the illegal smuggling activities.

One of the strategies used by Dutch and British authorities received bilateral incitement and was also regarded as the most formidable yet legal tool was extradition. This was a strategy which was loathed by people on both sides of the border because this process returned the fugitive smuggler to his state whereby he could not flee from justice anymore. London and The Hague, the state capitals of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands at that time respectively, signed an extradition treaty in the last decades of the 19th century, whereby the specific terms and conditions of the agreement were lawfully not imposed on the colonies of the two authorities in the region of Asia. The administrators and proprietors of the straits and associated areas completely depended on each other’s easement and assistance in the smooth operationalization in these matters and this treaty proved to be extremely helpful on many occasions. This strategy was successful only up to a certain level but after that many government servants, especially in the state departments on the Dutch region. Many of the civil servants perceived these procedures to be completely inadequate given the rising numbers of the cases related to smuggling. Resultantly, focused attempts were put into motion to convert these agreements into laws and further harbingers were also executed in the Australian colonies of the United Kingdom.

The narrative of this book illuminates those aspects and facets of smuggling which posed as challenges and recurrent problems to the authorities of the colonial powers instead of simple statistical figures appearing as a barrier of the colonial capacity to raise revenues by indulging in legal trade instead of illegal smuggling activities. The colonial authorities were themselves affirmative of the fact that the smuggling of narcotics was largely lucrative but the historical account spanning over 50 years in the book reflects that smuggling of currency, firearms, and drugs was brought into control by the strategies and tactics used by the British and Dutch authorities.

# Works Cited

Tagliacozzo, Eric. *Secret trades, porous borders: smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915.* NUS Press, 2007.