REVIEW: LALEH KHALILI, *SINEWS OF WAR AND TRADE: SHIPPING AND CAPITALISM IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA.* LONDON: VERSO, 2020.

Joseph McQuade
University of Toronto

In late March 2021, a container ship called the *Ever Given* captured the global imagination when it became stuck in the Suez Canal on its way from China to Rotterdam, blocking global trade and providing endless grist for meme culture. For almost a week, the inability to dislodge the ship and the impact this had on the flow of commodities and oil between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean brought public attention to the vulnerability of other maritime 'choke points,' like the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. Discussions of logistics and supply chains have taken on new personal meaning for many around the world following the sudden scarcity of personal protective equipment, food stocks, and toiletries during the early days of the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. The highly uneven rollout of vaccines, shaped in large part by international power disparities and the asymmetrical nature of existing supply chains, keeps this issue front and centre for a significant portion of the world's population.

As such, Laleh Khalili's new book, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*, written before the pandemic but providing important insight into the maritime 'sinews' that knit our global economy together, is a highly relevant intervention. In a departure from earlier work on confinement, counterinsurgency, and commemoration, Khalili shows an impressive mastery over her subject matter – ranging comfortably from the intricacies of derivatives to the ecological impacts of dredging and the securitization of migrant labour. In this sense, the book is rigorously analytical and conceptually rich while also retaining an engaging and lively prose that makes otherwise heavy material accessible and exciting for the general reader. The chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically, with each sketching out the historical context and current dynamics of an interconnected range of issues shaping maritime shipping in the western Indian Ocean and beyond.

Chapter one sketches out the tangible and intangible routes and channels through which global trade flows. Khalili shows that although oceans do not retain the physical imprints of commerce in the same way as land-based roads and railways, maritime trade is nonetheless embedded in an underlying infrastructure that ranges from the conceptual routes sketched onto old admiralty maps to the laying of telegraph, telephone, and now fibre-optic cables along the seabed. In a theme that returns throughout the book, we learn how considerations of natural geography and weather patterns are often less important in the process of route-making than political factors and strategic calculations.

In her discussion of harbour-making in chapter two, Khalili provides a detailed account of Aden's history as a colonial trade hub, a bunkering station for coal and oil, and a strategic node in Britain's oceanic empire. Due to its centrality within the global web of imperial commerce, authorities in Aden had no incentive to develop domestic industries within the city-state, which was also buffered from local politics by the presence of British Indian soldiers. Ironically, increased labour demands as the port continued to expand throughout the Cold War leant fuel to the anticolonial movement, resulting in the withdrawal of the British by 1967, which in turn precipitated what Khalili describes as a "catastrophic economic collapse" as port traffic dropped by eighty percent. The story of Aden is only one of several histories that Khalili explicates through this chapter, with similar yet distinct processes playing out in the harbours of Abu Dhabi and Dubai to show "how the modalities of capital accumulation and colonialism sideline some places of trade while valorising others" (74-5).

Beginning with the case of the Greek entrepreneur Aristotle Onassis and his attempt to secure shipping rights for the export of Saudi Arabian oil, chapter three makes an important intervention within the historiographies of capitalism, sovereignty, and international law. Khalili convincingly argues that it is no coincidence that in precisely the period where former colonies were beginning to come into their own as sovereign states that international law effectively subordinated state sovereignty to the property rights of – primarily Euro-American – multinational corporations like Standard Oil and Aramco. Khalili argues that the establishment of legal precedents for corporations to sue states over the latter's attempts to implement environmental and labour restrictions continue to influence international arbitration today. However, she also shows how often existing power relations shape the outcome of these disputes – as the example of Dubai Ports World demonstrates, it is far easier for investors to impose their will on Djibouti than on the United States.

In chapter four, we move inland through the arteries of roads and railways that connect commercial ports to their hinterlands. As Khalili points out, it is well-established within the literature on empire that the roads and railroads so lauded by imperial apologists operated exclusively in the interests of the political economy of colonialism. Just as the railroads of British India and colonial Africa facilitated the export of raw materials, the import of European goods, and the mobilization of imperial troops, Khalili shows how the territorial infrastructure of the Arabian Peninsula evolved to suit the needs of first the colonial state and then its postcolonial inheritors. From the road plans laid down by Aramco to facilitate the export of Saudi through the port of Dammam, to the counterinsurgency operations carried out in Oman in the 1960s and 1970s, the chapter contributes to larger conversations surrounding the relationship between infrastructure and violence.

The next three chapters each focus on a different cluster of workers; the bureaucrats, merchants, and managers whose decisions shape the technopolitics of maritime infrastructure; the labourers and dockhands who load and unload landside cargo or fill tankers; and the *lascars* and mobile crew members who work on board the ships under strict regimes of surveillance. The discussion of firms, corporations, and transnational merchant families contributes to an emerging literature on 'vernacular capitalisms' pioneered by scholars like Ritu Birla in her influential book on Marwari kinship networks in India under colonial rule.[1] Khalili contributes to these discussions by connecting global flows of capital and expertise to the dynamics and hierarchies of local peninsular elites. We learn more about these dynamics in the two subsequent chapters on migrant labour regimes, both terrestrial and ship-bound, that show how complex interregional dynamics and asymmetries of power have created highly racialized divisions of labour, ranging from the *lascars* of the nineteenth century British Empire to the Filipino deckhands of the modern shipping industry. These chapters compellingly alternate between the macropolitical trends of oceanic trade and the micropolitical stories of strikes and protests, joy and drudgery, that have shaped the lives of workers throughout the period. Khalili's own experience of traveling on board these ships and speaking to workers firsthand helps to deromanticize popular notions of shipboard adventure and excitement by painting a truer, human portrait of the hard, monotonous, and profoundly alienating labour endured at sea.

[1] Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capitalism: Law, culture, and market governance in late colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

In the final chapter, Khalili explores the maritime infrastructure of conflict through which major geopolitical events like the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq were facilitated through a complex network of bases, fuel depots, and supply chains. Military bases and the projection of force have long gone hand in hand with commerce in the Indian Ocean, from the coastal forts of the Portuguese and the militarized factories of the British East India Company in earlier times to the presence of US fleets and leased harbours in more recent decades. Khalili shows how, much like the securitization of commercial ports, ships, and labour forces, the logistical needs of British and American military activities in Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq have led to the concentration of high numbers of naval bases in the region, especially around the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. While China's Belt and Road Initiative has caused consternation among defence planners and think tanks from New Delhi to Washington, Khalili points out that it is overly simplistic to assume that each new Chinese project unfolding along the littorals of the Indian Ocean fits within a deliberate strategy of encirclement headquartered out of Beijing, given the reliance of many Chinese firms on private contractors and mercenaries for their security, including former Blackwater CEO, Erik Prince. In other words, the stories of investment, infrastructure, and capital explored in this book show that the future of shipping and capitalism in the Indian Ocean is inevitably more complex than a geopolitical tug of war between China and the US.

The book provides valuable insight into contemporary discussions on the topic of the Anthropocene, or human epoch, by showing how political decision-making shapes geography and the environment at least as often as it is shaped by it. In the chapter on harbour-making, we learn that in many cases the choice of where to construct a harbour is grounded in the assumption that local topography and ecology are, at best, inconveniences to be overcome through massive projects of dredging, reclamation, and construction. In this sense, the book is also making a valuable contribution to recent environmental histories that examine how weather patterns, rivers, and coastlines have shaped and been shaped by human activity during this period through attempts by colonial and postcolonial administrators and scientists to harness and master them. While discussions around climate change tend to focus on global environmental trends and international protocols, many of the most tangible transformations in the Indian Ocean world are happening at local scales. Khalili explains this well through her attention to the ecologies of low-lying shores, mangroves, and salt flats being devastated by the incursions of human infrastructure and capital.

One area that could have been developed further is a discussion of how or to what extent these sinews of war and trade are co-opted or subverted by insurgents, pirates, and smugglers. Khalili is understandably reluctant to replicate the securitized language of imperial capitalism through which the lines between licit and illicit transactions are defined, but it would have been interesting to see where these 'illicit' networks of trade and violence fit alongside or in juxtaposition with the more formalized 'licit' pathways and channels discussed in the book. There are some tantalizing glimpses of this, such as the brief discussion of piracy in chapter seven, where Khalili describes the affective dimensions of solidarity and sympathy that can sometimes emerge between neglected hostages claimed by piracy, and the starved and exploited captors who abduct them. As Khalili notes, "[p]iracy is, ultimately, a business and the people who ran the racket were likely dressed in suits and drove shiny big SUVs in Nairobi or Singapore or another cyber-connected and well-to-do regional capital" (233). The book lends itself well to a productive engagement with research on black markets, bribery, and the political economy of *jihad* described in the work of scholars like Aisha Ahmad, and it is unfortunate that we don't see this line of inquiry developed further in the text.[2]

The fact that the reader is left wanting more is, however, not a bad thing. *Sinews of War and Trade* opens new and important lines of inquiry and situates the history and politics of the Arabian Peninsula in its rightful place within wider global webs of commerce, conquest, and migration. From the economies of scale that produced the oil tankers of today, to the mobile factories of the early whaling industry, Khalili captures the enormity of the transformations unfolding across the modern Indian Ocean world without losing sight of the individual lives and local environments impacted by these transformations. The book is at once rigorous and readable, technical, and humane in a way that is difficult to overstate.

[2] Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.: Black markets and Islamist power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).