Introduction

Capital cannot abide a limit.[1] The incessant drive for profit pushes businessmen and corporations to overcome all barriers to growth. Taxes are minimized, regulations are circumvented, and borders are turned into endless frontiers for expansion. According to this logic, smuggling is the ultimate form of free trade.[2] No less an authority than Adam Smith absolved smugglers of their crimes, stating: "The smuggler is a person who, though no doubt blamable for violating the laws of his country, is frequently incapable of violating those of natural justice."[3]

Smuggling in various forms occurs thousands of times each day at border crossings, train stations, container ports, and airports across the world. These crimes are so pervasive as to make them a rather mundane part of our existence. The global economy is riddled with the impacts of undocumented transactions, from neglecting to report your earnings from tips to your bank's neglecting to report that it was manipulating interest rates. Furthermore, it seems that every day we hear new revelations concerning the misdeeds of corporations, politicians, and ordinary individuals. Yet even as we are perfectly aware of these activities, we continue to assume that illicit trade occupies a shadowy and sinister world totally separate from our own.

If our global economy is rampant with illicit activity, should we conclude that trafficking is the perfection of free trade? Or does trafficking cross some fundamental limit, making trafficking the perversion of free trade? Or is it somehow both simultaneously? Despite Smith's endorsement of smuggling, some types of illicit trade do seem to violate natural justice. Certain traffics frighten and disgust us; they bring into question not merely the wisdom of certain laws but whole systems of morality. Traffics in children, biological weapons, or terrorist financing seem to be not so much a natural extension of free markets as something that undermines the existential bases of capitalism itself. Trafficking, then, is trade that transgresses the conceptual limits of capitalism. Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and many others have argued that concepts like free labor or private property rights are basic requirements of capitalist political economy. Trades that subvert these concepts of free labor or property rights violate the fundamental boundaries of free markets. However, while we can define these capitalist concepts in theory, it is far more difficult to enforce them in the real world. In practice, government bureaucrats are responsible for defining and policing these limits of capitalism. Moreover, traders are constantly engaged in traffics that bend and break these conceptual limits. In this sense, capitalism is not the same thing across space and time; it diverges from theory as traders and bureaucrats contest the boundaries of the free market. This book argues that this contestation over the boundaries of the market is constitutive of capitalism itself.

Scholars have traced how capital vanquishes the limits erected by political systems, human cultures, and the natural world. Yet if capital cannot abide these external limitations, it must constantly struggle with the boundaries that are integral to capitalist exchange. These conceptual boundaries are the framework of free markets: they turn slaves into labor, guns into property and coins into capital.[4] This book examines these transformations by tracing the entangled histories of trafficking and capitalism in the Arabian Sea. I explore how these practices were once the same and how they became different over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But to trace these limits and frameworks we must first abandon our conventional assumptions about space and time and try to see the world a little more like a trafficker.

SPACE AND TIME

The ocean seems largely insignificant to modern life. While an ever increasing number of commodities cross the oceans, ever fewer human beings are needed to move these massive cargoes from port to port. Previous generations knew the salt and spray, the waves and winds, the turbulence and monotony of maritime travel. The sea is all but vanished today, little more than something to look at from the window seat of your airplane. Maps paint the sea a homogeneous blue, a vacant space between continents. Yet this space looks rather different from the perspective of the trafficker or anyone looking to evade political authority. Traffickers pay close attention to the winds and waves. To them, the sea is not an empty space that must be crossed as quickly as possible but rather a space of overlapping connections and hidden opportunities. To understand the Arabian Sea from the perspective of the trafficker we must not look from the "God's eye view" of the latest satellite images but from the more constrained but mobile view of a sailor from the deck of a ship.[5] There is perhaps no better place to find this perspective than in the writings of the ancients.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is a pithy, unvarnished sailing manual written by an Alexandrine merchant around the first century of the Common Era. The *Periplus* is not a map. It does not provide a simple visual representation or precise measurements of distance. Nor does it give a synchronic image of a fixed space. Rather, we are given a tour through a dense and complex trading network: an immense diversity of languages, cultures, polities, and of course trading goods. The Erythraean (Red) Sea is not a clearly defined geographic entity; indeed, what we now think of as the Red Sea occupies only the first few paragraphs of the text. Most of the *Periplus* describes ports down the Swahili coast, across southern Arabia and India, and as far east as China. It describes a *littoral,* which refers to the stretches of coast that outline a body of water, rather than bounding a landmass.[6] The *Periplus* is not a dispassionate account; it does not abstract objective scientific truths about geography. Rather, the author teaches the reader how best to experience and engage a heterogeneous network that is tied together by the predictable alternation of the monsoon winds. The *Periplus* is an itinerary through a maritime world, replete with advice on when to travel, what to buy, and who to avoid.[7]

This book engages with the Arabian Sea in a similar manner. You will not find in the following pages a sweeping grand narrative of the Arabian Sea as a geological, environmental, and social entity. Many historians of the Indian Ocean world have tried to find the structural contours of the ocean and to trace the shared cultures that unified this maritime world.[8] However, this is not a history *of* the Arabian Sea as a coherent unit of space but multiple entangled histories of trafficking and capitalism *in* the Arabian Sea.[9] The Arabian Sea depicted here is consequently a network of traffics: it was an uneven, crowded, and dynamic environment full of dangers and opportunities. While there are (hopefully useful) maps in the following pages, the accompanying text should unsettle the synchronic and simplified representations they produce. Merchants crossed the Arabian Sea in complex and shifting itineraries that cannot be reduced to lines on a map. It was precisely by being unpredictable, flexible, and antisystemic that traffics could flourish in a world of increasingly powerful states.

While there were shared customs around the coasts of the Arabian Sea, the trade that really connected these populations was premised on difference. Only with different goods and diverse skills can we barter, truck, and exchange. The littoral was incredibly diverse, and travels across the sea were as generative of differences as they were of unities.[10] Three major world regions meet in this body of water, and while this led to intermixing and cosmopolitanism it also led to xenophobia and violence. The Arabian Sea is such a unique space to study because it was shaped both by enormous heterogeneity and by dense connectivity. As a result, the Arabian Sea brings into relief those exchanges that have been occluded by narratives of capitalism and empire. European capital and empires appear to have severed these waters into separate territories. Yet these empires were ill equipped to monitor, much less control, the traffics that rode these waves. The space of the Arabian Sea is easy on travelers, profitable for traders, and exasperating for bureaucracies, and as a result it is particularly conducive to a study of trafficking. We will follow these traffickers to stitch together a picture of the networks that subverted and connected colonial markets.

The heterogeneity of the Arabian Sea also leaves us with another problem: the dimension of time. A homogeneous space makes it possible to tell a linear narrative, whereas the Arabian Sea confounds any attempt to find a linear or progressive history. The chronology of events in each port is divergent, as is the history of each commodity or diaspora. They are interdependent but do not march to the same tune. Trafficking, in particular, confounds the desire for a smooth narrative. The opportunistic quality of traffics lends a simultaneously erratic and repetitive rhythm to the events recounted here. New laws were met with new methods of evasion, which elicited even stronger laws and more ingenious evasions. The cycle then repeated itself ad nauseum. The reader may experience a little seasickness as the ensuing narrative jumps from one port to another or back and forth in time. However, discontinuities and reversals are reflective of the rhythms of trafficking. This syncopated tempo was one of the mechanisms by which traffickers subverted the seamless narrative of a transition to capitalism.[11] Ultimately, there was a slow but perceptible change over time in which empires and capitalism entrenched themselves in the Arabian Sea, but this transformation was iterative, sporadic, and deeply contingent.

The short century from the 1860s to the 1950s is often associated with the transition to capitalism in Asia and Africa. So it is a particularly appropriate period to study how capitalism was manifested through the progressive elision of trafficking. These decades also marked the only period in the history of the Arabian Sea that one political entity was clearly dominant. From the sixteenth century onward, the Portuguese, Ottoman, Mughal, Safavid, and Omani Empires struggled for dominance. Only in the 1860s did the British Empire break up Omani power and comfortably dominate these waters. Britain did have to accommodate German and French colonies, Qajar and Ethiopian imperial influence, and the autonomy of various petty sheikhs and nawabs around the littoral. Nevertheless, only the British Navy sought to patrol the high seas and could exercise its influence along the entire littoral. Whereas other polities tended to turn a blind eye to trafficking, the British Empire consistently worked to monitor, identify, and suppress trafficking. This lasted until the 1960s, when Cold War competition provided massive incentives to smuggling on both sides and little interest in regulation.

Moreover, the British Empire brought with it a political economy that started to transform the common usage of the word *trafficking*. While *trafficking* has been used in English from the sixteenth century, it had the wider meaning of any exchange of goods or movement of people through a particular space. Only by the late nineteenth century did trafficking start to signify a trade that exceeded the moral bounds of the market.[12] While states have probably suppressed smuggling from time immemorial, trafficking is tied to the ideology of free trade. It became essential to prevent traffics in slaves, weapons, and currency, precisely when free trade was most comprehensively embraced. I use the term *trafficking* in this sense, referring not simply to smuggling but to trades that undermined the foundations of capitalism. Britain's "empire of free trade" was thus the prime mover in defining and segregating trafficking from free trade. The imperial apogee of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries heralded the "first wave" of modern globalization and supposedly completed the integration of Asia and Africa into the Europe-centered world system.[13] Yet by straddling different empires, trafficking networks were well placed to exploit the gaps and contradictions between imperial regulation and economic life. The period from the 1860s to the 1950s was when trafficking in the Arabian Sea became an existential threat to free trade, and consequently it is the ideal period to examine their entangled histories.

FRAMING THE FREE MARKET

During the early nineteenth century, trade in the Arabian Sea was diverse and disparate. It involved monopolistic trading companies, empires, diasporas, pirates, and slaves. It was a world in which various different groups exercised power but no single state was sovereign. This was trade that operated without regulation, at least in our contemporary understanding of the term. Of course violence, monopolies, and customs all presented obstacles and constraints on exchange.[14] Merchant networks overcame these difficulties by organizing their exchange through family ties, personal networks, and religious law.[15] The British East India Company imposed monopolies and violence as a powerful state in South Asia and as a trading company operating through different diasporic agents.[16] But by 1858 the last vestiges of the East India Company were disbanded and the mercantilist policies with which it was associated were sloughed off.

If the East India Company of the mid-nineteenth century maintained only the veneer of a trading enterprise, the British Raj had no truck with trading. Rather, the British Empire was the protector and police of trade. In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was infamous for enforcing free trade policies through gunboat diplomacy. There were plenty of British gunboats in the Arabian Sea, but they were not forcing rulers to open their borders to trade or reduce tariff barriers. In fact, rulers along the Arabian Sea littoral were generally open to foreign trade and had relatively low tariffs. British gunboats were in the Arabian Sea to find contraband and regulate traders. Thus in the Arabian Sea free trade ideology was actually implemented through intervention in markets and the abolition of certain trades.

British officials justified this hypocrisy by insisting that certain trades were beyond the pale. The liberal dilemma was how to limit freedom when it impinged on the freedoms of other market participants and free trade where it breached the boundaries of the market itself. What particularly elicited the repression of British authorities was trading in arms, slaves, and gold. These three trades corresponded to three key concepts in political economy. For Adam Smith, land, labor and capital were the basic factors of production.[17] For Karl Marx, land, labor, and capital were the trinity of secrets that undergirded social production under capitalism.[18] For Karl Polanyi, land, labor, and capital were the fictitious commodities through which the market was disembedded from society.[19] In the trading world of the Arabian Sea, I would like to suggest that these three commodities are again central, though they appear in a different form.

On terra firma, the history of capitalism has been traced as the incorporation of land, labor, and capital into the market, but a maritime perspective inverts this history. What we witness in the Arabian Sea is less an effort to produce free labor, private property, and interest-bearing capital, and more an effort to decommodify human beings, violence, and money. This was a maritime world in which landed property did not exist, factories could not function, and governments could not assert territorial sovereignty. The sheer immensity of the sea, the fierce power of its waves, and the opacity of its waters made the sea impossible to control. Bureaucratic techniques could not organize this space, and the market could not bring order to those who crossed it.[20] The Arabian Sea was a space of trade and exchange but not a space of production and consumption. The work of framing the market on land was consequently inverted in the Arabian Sea.

It is most obvious that abolishing the slave trade was the inverse of producing wage labor as a commodity. Somewhat more confusing is the necessity of decommodifying money. In the Arabian Sea, different monies competed with each other and fluctuated wildly. Yet in classical political economy money needed a stable value so that it could function as a standard of price for other commodities. The international gold standard was consequently an effort to decommodify monies by affixing their values to the price of gold. Only when money itself was a stable standard of value could capital become a commodity to be priced by the market. Most obscure perhaps is the relationship between weapons and property. Landed property is absent from the sea, but there were vast quantities of private property in the form of commodities moving across the waves. The key concern for property owners was to secure possession of this property against the private violence wielded by pirates. The elimination of piracy was the basic requirement for security of private property. Firearms, though, were simultaneously property and violence. So it was through the regulation of firearms that officials had to complete the process of securing property rights by decommodifying violence.

Following the work of Michel Callon, we might then call these problematic commodities *intermediaries*. Callon describes intermediaries as those objects, people, or ideas that both frame and overflow a market. He persuasively argues that the act of framing always implies an overflowing: a wider context that is being pushed out of view. With a little reflection, it becomes obvious that a picture frame is an intermediary because it simultaneously closes off and connects the picture inside the frame to the world outside the frame.[21] This book argues that human bodies, firearms, and coins are the key intermediaries that both frame and overflow the free market. Wage labor, private property, and capital are within the market, while slavery, violence, and counterfeits are outside the market.

For many social theorists, markets are constantly expanding and the imperative of capitalists (and neoclassical economists) is to bring ever more of the social world into the calculative domain of the market. What the trading world of the Arabian Sea reveals to us is something quite different: here the *expulsion* of certain trades was the foundational work of free market capitalism. I'd like to refer to this process as *framing out*. *Framing out* suggests that the process of expulsion was just as integral to the emergence of the free market as processes of enframing. *Framing out* is not quite the same as *overflowing*, which connotes an unintentional excess or the inevitable slippages in economists' efforts to enframe the market. Instead, it connotes a concerted effort on the part of bureaucracies to push certain practices outside the calculations of markets.

As it occurred in the Arabian Sea, framing out involved three intertwined processes: division, elision, and suppression. Those commodities, transactions, and practices that undermined the foundational assumptions of capitalism had to be identified and divided off from those that could be incorporated within the free market. This was not a simple or straightforward process. As you will see in the following chapters, it was exceedingly difficult to distinguish between a slave and an adopted child, a sporting rifle and a military rifle, or a genuine and a counterfeit coin. Customs authorities were constantly struggling to discern who was following the regulations and who was subverting them. The division of the licit from the illicit was thus imprecise and arbitrary.

Once these illicit trades were identified, they needed to be elided from the marketplace. Contraband frequently flowed through exactly the same physical spaces as licit commodities. Indeed, the same object might be licit in some hands and illicit in others. Nevertheless, illicit transactions had to become invisible to the operation of the market. Colonial authorities were obviously aware of illicit activities, but this knowledge was siphoned into the domain of crime and policing. The market could appear free and self-regulating precisely because bureaucracies concerned with the economy were walled off from bureaucracies concerned with law and order. Finally, colonial bureaucracies recorded, calculated, and published statistics as if licit and illicit trade occupied distinct worlds. In this way, illicit transactions were elided from free markets.

Last, but not least, empires and navies employed substantial force to suppress these illicit trades. Naval cruisers, police officers, and customs agents were all deployed to capture and punish merchants who subverted trading regulations. The armed forces of different states confiscated contraband, imposed fines, imprisoned traffickers, engaged in pitched battles with traders, and sank ships with their cargo and crew on board. Colonial authorities invested time, resources, and manpower to eradicate trafficking networks, yet it was a never-ending process. The traffics that could not be eradicated were subject to forms of coercion and violence that placed them beyond the pale of trade. The institutions that were supposed to structure market transactions were in fact responsible for segregating and harassing trade that did not conform to capitalist models.

Division, elision, and suppression were not distinct or sequential processes but were inseparable. Moreover, these processes powerfully shaped what was occurring within the frame of the market. In his genealogy of governmentalities, Michel Foucault suggests that modern, liberal governmentality takes this form. He argues that as the freedom of the market became the central aim of governance, government policies turned to managing civil society in order to produce free markets.[22] To put it a different way, by determining what was pushed outside the frame of the market and what happened there, bureaucracies could shape a particular kind of freedom within the market. Thus framing out is not just the overflow of efforts to integrate the world into the market but the structuring of market freedoms through intensive interventions at the margins of the market.

The concept of framing out highlights the visual and descriptive aspects of political economy. But it does not presume that these descriptions are linguistic or quantitative representations separate from physical reality. Michel Callon's discussion of framing/overflowing is part of a wider range of scholarly debates over the "performativity of economics." For Callon and others, economics is a description of reality that intervenes in that reality: it arranges and organizes the world in such a way that its descriptions are validated. However, there remains considerable dispute over the extent to which "economists make markets" and the conditions under which this might occur.[23] This scholarship, then, does not present a critique of economics as a discipline so much as a critique of its claims to be a purely descriptive science. These scholars are primarily concerned with tracing how economic models and concepts shape the world we live in.

This book builds on these notions of performativity, yet "economics" does not quite capture the ideas presented here. Economics as a positivistic science largely emerges in the second half of the twentieth century along with the neoclassical consensus.[24] In the nineteenth century, however, it would be almost tautological to suggest that political economy was trying to shape the world. The writings of Smith and Ricardo were examinations of human society explicitly developed to promote certain policies and reshape the state's relationship with the market. By the late nineteenth century, economists took a step back from this prescriptive mode and focused more on detailed quantitative studies of markets. Yet this new emphasis on quantitative measures intervened in markets in a more subtle way. Customs houses, statistical officers, and revenue collectors demanded new information from traders and in new formats. While trade statistics had been collected for centuries, in the late nineteenth century statistical categories and statistical analysis gained greater influence over trading practice and the determination of state policies.[25] Economists continued to follow diverse methodologies, but the increasing availability of statistics and the success of econometric analysis would eventually lead in the middle of the twentieth century to the neoclassical consensus and a unified conception of "the economy" as an object of study.[26]

Consequently, in the period before we can speak of economics as a unified discipline, we need some alternative term to label the new concepts that were starting to pervade the trading world of the Arabian Sea. I employ the term *capitalism* despite the fact that it is so freighted with meaning and can be so multivalent as to preclude any analytical value. Capitalism means something different to Marxist scholars, world systems theorists, liberal social theorists, and others. I find compelling the critique that capitalism is somehow omnipresent and yet everywhere limited and uneven, or that it explains everything and consequently nothing.[27] Yet what if, instead of insisting that capitalism describes a bounded and comprehensive economic system, we utilize the term to refer to a performative set of ideas? Capitalism in this sense need not be internally coherent or analytically precise but rather indicates a loose set of ideas concerning free labor, property rights, monetized exchange, and competitive markets. To the extent that these ideas were adopted by government officials, were utilized in markets, and shaped trading practice across the world, we might consider them performative. Performativity also suggests that there are always exceptions and slippages, so these categories are maintained only through constant repetition and reiteration.[28] In this sense, capitalism was performative in the trading world of the Arabian Sea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Within the Arabian Sea we witness, not the perfect implementation of political-economic theories, but a far messier performance of these ideas filtered through the heuristics and preoccupations of colonial officials. These officials imbibed the ideas of classical and marginalist political economy in an often vague and haphazard way. Their understanding of monetary theory or marginal utility was often simplistic and imprecise; nevertheless, they were responsible for implementing regulations based on these ideas. Colonial bureaucrats were supposedly recording transparent knowledge about market prices, but they had to intervene in each transaction to elicit information about buyers, sellers, prices, and conditions. Customs officials extracted information from traders and translated complex trading relationships into simple and standardized market transactions. These transactions were then quantified, aggregated, and calculated to produce market prices that were not otherwise visible and market forces that were not otherwise operative. This information was then publicized as representing market conditions that traders should act upon. These practices of perceiving and representing the market thus shaped how traders interacted with colonial states and with each other.

The transformations detailed in the following pages involve the increasing penetration and hegemony of capitalist categories, yet this process never reaches completion. Among colonial officials and in their documentation, capitalist concepts became hegemonic, and they could dismiss the diversity of economic life as aberrations and anachronisms that would inevitably be integrated into the capitalist system.[29] These officials characterized slavery, piracy, and commodity monies as anachronistic holdovers, and economists began to see the family firm and barter arrangements as the vestiges of a precapitalist world. This periodization of trading practices was part of the performance of capitalism that this book seeks to unveil. In framing out diverse exchange relations as illicit and anachronistic we can see the constant iterative work that naturalized the categories and temporalities of capitalism.

CONTRIVANCE AND ARBITRAGE

Yet this was not a simple or uncontested process; the performativity of capitalist categories required the cooperation of multiple parties with varied incentives. Most importantly, the measurement of exchange relied on the truthfulness of traders as well as their inclination to translate their practices into the conventions of commercial statistics. Merchant networks recognized the importance of these measurements and quickly learned how to represent their transactions *as if* they operated within the rules of the market. These contrived forms of compliance were pervasive. Merchants complied with the letter of the law or documented their transactions as conventional exchanges. But they also subverted the intentions of the law or concealed practices that strayed from the standard documentary formats. Long before any social scientist, these merchants recognized and exploited the performativity of economic concepts in their trading world.

My use of the term *contrivance* builds on the theoretical frameworks developed by Michel de Certeau. De Certeau's theorization of "tactics" reveals the dispersed and clandestine creativity of individuals caught up in structures of discipline and suggests that their methods of "using the system" are central to understanding everyday life.[30] His exposition allows us to see how the strategies deployed by systems were entangled in the tactics improvised by those caught within these systems. The process of *framing out* that I have outlined so far was constantly interrupted and redirected by the traffics that were ostensibly expunged from the market. Traffickers bent frameworks, blurred borders, and expanded loopholes, thus affecting the structure of the free market. As many others have argued, power is relational, and those subjected to capital are constantly working to engage, co-opt, and domesticate it.[31]

These ways of "using" the system have been around for millennia, long before the disciplinary frameworks of colonialism. Scholars have studied the early controversies over *ḥiyal* (ruses or maneuvers) in the development of Islamic law. *Ḥiyal* refers to legal contrivances that allowed merchants to circumvent some of the constraints of the *Sharia*. While there was some dispute over the morality of these contrivances, they were generally condoned in juridical practice.[32] This highlights the fact that loopholes are often the most frequently utilized clauses in legislation. It is precisely by occupying the margins of categories that businesses squeeze out their competitive edge. Laws structured trade across the Arabian Sea, but merchants determined which spaces within the law were most heavily utilized. This feedback loop, in which regulations produce circumventions that are in turn incorporated into legal structures, is crucial to the history of capitalism across the Arabian Sea.[33]

Trafficking networks were particularly attuned to the loopholes in law and the hidden margins of conceptual categories because they operated across multiple jurisdictions. It was precisely the movement of merchants across territories that rendered slightly different framings of the market visible. Capitalist markets were defined by the bureaucracies that governed them and the territories that they encompassed. The British Empire may have dominated the Arabian Sea, but it directly administered a comparatively small portion of its coastline. Different political economies influenced policies in independent states like Ethiopia and Muscat, as well as in colonies like Portuguese Goa and French Djibouti. Moreover, there were substantial variations in colonial rule between British colonies like India and Somaliland and between territories administered by British officials, like Aden, and those administered by subordinate princes, like Kutch. So trafficking networks were able to identify and exploit subtle differences in documentary regimes or the implementation of regulations.

Traffickers were engaged, not in equal exchanges within a market, but in exchanges that profited from the differences between markets. In a word, trafficking networks were engaged in *arbitrage*. Arbitrage takes advantage of a difference in price for the same good in different markets.[34] Trading networks across the Arabian Sea were acutely aware of opportunities for arbitrage arising from differences in climate, season, culture, and urbanization. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were increasingly attuned to differences in regulation, forms of documentation, statistics, and economic calculation. Trafficking networks selected which regulations to follow and filled out documentation to take maximum advantage of the variations in enforcement around the Arabian Sea littoral.

In economic theory, arbitrage is supposed to be evanescent because market participants quickly move to buy where prices are low and sell where prices are high. This should cause cheap markets to become more expensive as demand rises and expensive markets to become cheaper as supply increases, resulting in equalized prices. However, arbitrageurs in the Arabian Sea did not seem to bring about the same price coordination. Differences persisted, and diasporic merchants tended to see these differences as a resource to be cultivated and sustained.[35] The equalizing exchanges of free markets were performed for the benefit of colonial officials even as they were overdetermined by power differentials. Merchants documented their commodities at local market prices and then secretly bought below or sold above those prices. Markets around the Arabian Sea did not integrate because trafficking networks produced documentation that satisfied regulators without fully revealing the details of their transactions.[36] Competition was evaded because prices were hidden. Capitalist ideology framed transactions within its categories, but merchants also arranged their business to exploit the ambiguities in those categories.

The contrivances and arbitrage of trafficking networks were documented as licit transactions that were aggregated and analyzed as part of the free market. The transformation of diasporic exchanges into free trade was the result of merchant networks adapting to new regimes of documentation. But as these measures became important indicators of the progress of colonized societies, the fiscal rectitude of colonial governments, or the success of British trade, they also became compromised. Scholars have noted that the more a statistical measure becomes used for decision making, the greater the incentives are to subvert that measurement and the more likely it is that the measurement will distort the very processes it is supposed to measure.[37] To put it simply: people learn how to game the system. Merchants were anxious to have their transactions sanctioned by the British Empire and consequently arranged their transactions to exploit the ambiguities in regulatory categories. The free markets that emerged across the Arabian Sea were consequently framed both by the categories of capitalism and by the manipulations of trafficking networks.

It is worth noting that trafficking networks were not engaged in heroic resistance and are not necessarily something to celebrate. These merchants were not fighting the system or defending their way of life against the onslaught of colonialism or capitalism. Theirs was a form of accommodation and acceptance, but one that manipulated these new forms of trade and regulation to their own advantage. These merchants were exploiting peasants, enslaving children, and profiting from violence, but they were also subverting colonial governments and usurping capitalist profits. Contrivance and arbitrage are not something to celebrate, but they are nevertheless vital to understanding the history of capitalism and colonialism.

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

A merchant approached the eminent jurist Abdullah al-Sālimī and asked him whether it was correct for a foreign ruler to prohibit the export of goods or money from his country. Al-Sālimī was a Muslim jurist of the Ibāḍi tradition in Oman, so he explored this question as the ethical problem of addressing difficulties arising outside the scope of one's knowledge. Al-Sālimī opined that one could not know the needs of absent others, so it was correct for a person to prohibit the export of goods to another country if there was a real need for them in his own. He took the opposite stance in the case of wealth, because it was through the expenditure of money that scarcities were alleviated. In support of this opinion, he quoted a passage from the Quran stating that the poor had a right to the money of the wealthy.[38] Al-Sālimī thus parsed Islamic law to argue that in both cases the needs of one's countrymen took precedence over the needs of absent others.

This is a rather remarkable entry in the fatwa collection of Imam al-Sālimī. We are given wonderful insights into his legal reasoning and notions of political economy. We see a certain privileging of the local and an understanding of money as legally distinct from other trading goods. But al-Sālimī's fatwa opens up more questions than it answers. It is written in the abstract language characteristic of fatwa collections, so the specific circumstances of this merchant and his motivations are concealed from the reader.[39] There are tantalizing hints where al-Sālimī states that the prohibitor need not actually be from the country where he prohibits the export of goods. Could the merchant be asking about British officials in India? The fatwa uses the ambiguous phrase "the administrator of his money/wealth" (*mutaṣarrif bi mālihi*), which leaves open whether this is a wealthy merchant holding onto his capital or an official protecting a national currency. Does the discussion of absent others indicate the argument that a more pressing need in another country might override this prohibition? Indeed, is this merchant seeking sanction in the *Sharia* to smuggle goods against a foreign legal prohibition?

This study, like Imam al-Sālimī, is afflicted with the problem of the absent and unknown. We are trying to follow people who wanted to be inconspicuous and transactions that were designed to be opaque. Even businessmen engaged in perfectly legitimate activities did not generate or preserve detailed records because these would only proliferate the possibilities for lawsuits. So it would seem that there would be barely any trace of trafficking in the historical record. I found, quite to the contrary, that if you just look in the wrong places, trafficking has generated some of the most richly detailed records on economic life. It is merely necessary to read silence not as absence but as an indication of particular kinds of commercial and documentary practice. The letter that suggests continuing the conversation in person and away from prying eyes, the reliable evidence of a shipment that somehow disappears into thin air, the suspicious silhouette on a vessel that cannot be searched: none of these provide incontrovertible proof of illicit activity. However, they are silences that speak to patterns of concealment, evasiveness, and subversion of documentary regimes. Indeed, while they do not *prove* anything, they nonetheless indicate the success of trafficking. Silences and slippages in documentation are poor evidence in a courtroom, but they speak volumes.[40]

Historians of smuggling invariably apologize for the erratic nature of their archives, and economic historians more generally bemoan the lack of consistent quantitative data. Economists of smuggling, though, have long read the gaps in quantitative data as quantifiable evidence of smuggling.[41] While one might disagree with their conclusions, there is merit in the impulse to read into these silences. I came to this topic precisely because I was looking for a cultural archive of exchange in the Indian Ocean but found only quantitative data in colonial economic records. Only when desperation pushed me to look beyond these bureaucratic boundaries, did I stumble upon the prolific records of trade that exceeded the frame of the market. Police surveillance, court transcripts, and regulatory memoranda produced detailed, almost ethnographic accounts of trafficking. This highlights the extent to which the colonial archive is strategically silent.[42] The bounty of quantitative documentation renders invisible the sociocultural relationships that ordered transactions and accentuates the aggregate forces of market competition. The bounty of qualitative documentation on trafficking conceals the impact and extent of trafficking within the market. The silences of the colonial archive speak most eloquently to the framing out of the free market.

Records produced by imperial businesses provide another perspective on this process. Business records reveal the extent to which white skins and posh accents concealed far more diverse and complex methods of profit making. On the one hand, these firms relied heavily on government contracts, monopolies, and regulation to maintain their position as capitalists. On the other hand, colonial businesses depended on diasporic merchants to access local consumers. Personnel files, petitions, letters, and contracts reveal how the operations of reputable colonial firms were underwritten by "Asiatic" business practices. Far from disciplining local merchants to the superior efficiencies of capitalist production, colonial businesses profited by putting a capitalist face on imperial patronage and diasporic arbitrage.

One might then assume that vernacular documents provide an authentic voice for colonized populations. However, vernacular sources are usually the product of social and administrative elites. Like al-Sālimī's fatwa collection, these records tend to offer competing normative structures rather than firsthand accounts of trade. The practical interests of sailors and traders are at best objects of conjecture. In most cases the written Arabic of legal documents has little connection to the colloquial and hybridized Arabic spoken by Arab sailors and merchants, much less the Swahili, Kutchi, and Iranian spoken by residents of the Arabian Sea littoral. At best these other languages are preserved in marginalia and a few stray letters, but more often their dialects and pidgins were an effective mode of keeping information secret. We can never know the mentalité of traffickers in the Arabian Sea, but that is no excuse to ignore their actions.

The correspondence of merchant families provides a view from below, but these documents are directed upwards toward courts and political authorities. Studies of merchant correspondence strongly suggest that merchants preserved certain documents precisely because they might be useful in a courtroom.[43] Deeds, contracts, and letters were preserved in the hope of collecting debts and enforcing commitments when other forms of coercion were not available. The documents maintained in family collections are consequently the product of a certain form of self-censorship: they omitted activities that might draw the attention of authorities. Ironically, the only uncensored access we have to merchant practice is the result of government censorship: a few scraps of correspondence captured from ships or extracted from telegraph operators. Merchants tried to keep their information secret, and they were incentivized to preserve information only when they derived benefits from such an effort. Thus even merchant letters and accounts cannot be taken as authentic representations of mercantile practice.

Even when nothing untoward was occurring, these traders had little desire to record, much less preserve, documentation of their activities. When I asked the descendant of the preeminent merchant of nineteenth-century Muscat whether his family maintained old account books, he explained that every Diwali (the Hindu New Year) his ancestors would transfer any outstanding debts and credits into a new accounts ledger. Then they would travel out to sea and in a little ceremony would throw the previous year's ledgers into the water, allowing the waves to wash away both the victories and the hardships of the preceding months.[44] When I first heard this, my heart broke. Like most historians, I lamented the loss of precious traces of the past. But in the following years, as this issue of absent documentation has repeatedly resurfaced, I've come to see this practice with more equanimity. It represents the fact that these merchants preserved what they wanted of the past. They succeeded in silencing the histories that they had no use for, whether because these were compromising or simply because they did not wish to be tied to the past. We cannot access an exhaustive and objective picture of this past, but in reading the tactics of silence and the strategies of archiving we might get a glimpse of a more entangled history.

The concern for objective documentation is largely the preserve of courts, bureaucracies, and of course historians. The silence of subaltern voices has become an enduring frustration and tragedy for cultural historians. Since it is clear that we cannot access the "authentic" voice of these populations, it may be worth considering that the failure of the historian might also reflect the success of the subaltern in evading documentation.[45] This book consequently seeks to make a virtue out of a failing: it attempts to trace the tactics of sailors and traders by paying close attention to the silences in different forms of documentation and triangulating between them. Transactions were performed for certain audiences, and documents were carefully curated to produce strategic silences. So, just as merchants in the Arabian Sea sought out slippages and ambiguities in colonial regulation, we might arbitrage across archives to gain a mobile perspective on trafficking networks. In paying attention to silences and shuttling between archives, we might—to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld—turn unknown unknowns into known unknowns.[46]

MARGINS OF THE MARKET

Examining the shadowy world of trafficking is consequently an attempt to understand the history of the market but from its margins. Margins are relevant to this study in three distinct but interrelated senses. The first chapter of this book engages with spatial margins: the borders and coastlines that mark the limit and the commencement of a particular territorial market. These geographic boundaries were essential to the freedom of markets because they were the sites where duties were collected, contraband was confiscated, and trade was carefully documented. This regulation at the coastline formed a sort of exoskeleton for colonial markets: both defining external limits and providing structural support for the exchanges inside. By acting at the limit of their territorial power, colonial governments could adopt laissez-faire policies within their markets. This chapter therefore examines the steamship lines and dhow (littoral sailing vessels) traffics that connected the coasts of the Arabian Sea. It traces how these different ships were monitored, regulated, and channeled into particular routes. The chapter reveals how steamship lines came to represent a model of free trade in which distance could be reduced to price and the sea was an empty space between markets. However, there were also competing and complementary traffics of dhows that subverted this vision of free trade. Dhow networks revealed the extent to which the sea was a vast and occluded frontier and free markets were both penetrated and produced by illicit traffics.

The middle three chapters examine the margins of the conceptual market: those exchanges that occurred in the dark corners of the marketplace. The concept of the free market evokes a space of exchange characterized by equality, competition, and fungible commodities. But many types of exchange do not conform to this model of the market, including gift exchange, ritual exchange, charity, marriage, theft, and fraud. They cannot be quantified as market exchanges, and thus they are marginal to the concept of the free market as envisioned by classical political economy. These exchanges were not marginal in that they were unimportant but rather in that they reveal precisely how porous the boundaries of the market really were.

In the Arabian Sea, three physical objects were particularly transgressive of the boundaries between market and nonmarket exchange: bodies, weapons, and coins. Human beings were buyers and sellers in the market, yet they were also exchanged in marriage and adoption. Human labor was exchanged as a commodity in the free market, but human bodies were contraband. The human body thus occupied different roles, was divided many ways, and was exchanged in different forums. Weapons traversed similarly marginal zones of the market. Guns used for sport or the protection of private property were perfectly acceptable commodities, but they also helped usurp property rights through theft and extortion. Weapons used to secure borders were outside the market but essential to preserving the security of private property within the market. Lastly, bullion was exchanged in free markets and was among the first commodities to have a global market price, yet as the basis of monetary standards gold and silver had to be rigorously controlled. However, gold and silver denominated as charity both escaped the control of monetary authorities and subverted their efforts to maintain stable currencies. Bodies, weapons, and coins were thus intermediary objects that transgressed the limits and spanned the margins of the conceptual market.

The final chapter of this book examines a type of margin that comes into existence only in the 1860s: quantified marginal utility as a measure of value. The marginalist revolution in economics introduced the notion that it was utility at the margin (the final unit produced or the usefulness provided when buying one more unit) that determined value. Market price was a quantified expression of this value because it coordinated marginal utility with marginal cost. However, in marginalist economics price was a publicly known quantity, while in the trading world of the Arabian Sea it was a carefully protected piece of intelligence. This chapter unpacks how marginal utility was performed in the trading world of the Arabian Sea by standardizing weights and qualities, demanding documentation, and enforcing market prices on merchant networks. While trade statistics had been collected for decades, equilibrium market price now became the measure of "real value." These market prices were then enrolled in the determination of tariffs, the production of macroeconomic indicators, and the organization of colonial development. By the same token, merchant networks exploited the ambiguities of invoices, scales, and categories to shift market prices in their favor. Real value was not just the product of market-determined prices but a contentious interaction between merchant networks and customs bureaucracies.

The margins of the market are consequently a much-neglected yet constitutive part of the history of capitalism. They are not necessarily representative of the larger trajectories of economic history, but they expose the mechanisms that undergird the expansion of capitalist forms of exchange and the hegemony of capitalist categories of political economy. Trafficking networks did not resist changing structures of exchange but manipulated and subverted them through contrived compliance and astute arbitrage. Ultimately, this book demonstrates how capitalism in the Arabian Sea was framed both by colonial states that formatted trade according to capitalist categories and by trafficking networks that arbitraged across the margins of these markets.