

# State formations, politics of circulation and critical infrastructure

Interview with Finn Stepputat

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## Introduction

Born in January of 1955, Finn Stepputat holds the position of Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)<sup>1</sup>, in Copenhagen, Denmark, since 2003. His training process is interdisciplinary across the fields of Science, Social Science and the Humanities: in 1983, he completed the M.Sc. in Economic Geography at the Institute of Geography at the University of Copenhagen. In 1992, he received a PhD in Cultural Sociology at the same institution.

His research themes are guided by investigations about State formation and citizenship, especially in regions with persistent armed conflict, and contestations over State power. One of his most insightful contributions to the Social Sciences is the concept of “formations of sovereignty” (Stepputat, 2015) which owes to his collaboration with Prof. Thomas Blom Hansen from Stanford University with whom he challenged a classic idea of univocal sovereignty centred on a reified State power. Therefore, they offer us a sophisticated concept that proposes a notion of plural sovereignty, always incomplete, and connected with everyday disputes for hegemony and order (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; 2005; 2006).

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1. *Website*: Finn Stepputat | DIIS.

His ethnographic research fields vary according to the chronology of his publications. From the turn of the 1990s to the mid-2000s, he focused on Latin America – countries such as Mexico, Guatemala and Peru – where he did research about displacement, borders and refugees (Stepputat, 1992; 1994; 1999) and later about State formation and sovereignty (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Stepputat, 2013; 2015; Stepputat and Nuijten, 2018). Then his analytical observations moved. Bringing sophisticated questions about security, violence and infrastructures, his research focus moved to Africa and the Somali-inhabited parts of East Africa (Stepputat and Haggmann, 2019; Stepputat, 2018; Buur, Jensen and Stepputat, 2007).

Stepputat's most recent projects are interesting for researchers, like us, concerned with value chains and mobilities around transnational markets of illegal products. His research on ports, corridors and maritime and land circulation routes<sup>2</sup>, above all, but also the project on how 'trade makes state'<sup>3</sup>. Concepts such as "politics of circulation" (Stepputat and Haggmann, 2019) are examples of the articulation between global logistical networks and local powers; and the relevance of his sociology to the contemporary debates that the set of articles collected in this dossier contemplate.

The interview begins by tracing the trajectory of this experienced researcher through his theoretical, thematic and empirical choices. Next, we explore some issues raised in the thematic dossier "States of circulation: The co-production of logistical and political orders", published in the journal *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (Schouten, Stepputat and Bachmann, 2019). At the end of the interview, Finn reveals that he is about to retire, so we take the opportunity to toast this special moment with advice for the next generations of Social Science professionals. Completing nearly 40 years of career, with this possibly being the last year before his retirement, Finn Stepputat introduces us to thought-provoking aspects of his career, reflections and analytical insights.

Part I: From Copenhagen to Mexico, from Guatemala to Somalia

*First, we'd like to thank you for accepting the invitation for this interview. We'd like to begin focusing on your academic trajectory, with something as a genealogy of your career. How did you get involved with the theories and subjects that you address?*

2. Port politics – Logistics, political orders and new hegemony in the land-sea nexus. See: <https://www.diiis.dk/projekter/port-politics-logistics-political-orders-and-new-hegemony-in-the-land-sea-nexus>.

3. 'Trade makes state', is a forthcoming book, see <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/trade-makes-states/>.

Finn Stepputat [FS]: I came out of a kind of Marxist geography in the seventies, and now I'm kind of coming full circle. Not so much with Marxist geography, but with critical geography and political economy. In the 1980s, I joined the Institute of Cultural Sociology, here in Copenhagen, and there I got to know more about Bourdieu, Foucault and everyday-life sociology. I also met anthropology. I taught courses together with some anthropologists. So, that had a huge influence. At the same time, I think that the political contexts of the different moments were quite defining for my work and the shifts I made.

In the mid 1980s there was this refugee crisis with Iranian refugees coming to Europe<sup>4</sup> and I got into discussions about that. And there was this "refugee fatigue". So that was when, you know, the whole restricted policy started. I got into global refugee studies and did my PhD on a Guatemalan refugee settlement in Mexico, discussing humanitarian aid. But also of course, a lot about violent conflicts and why people flee from their countries. Then I started getting more into studying armed conflict. Which was quite defining for a long time for me.

When I finished my PhD, in the 1990s, there was a political moment of repatriation. After the cold war, the "proxy wars" kind of faded away, in this case, in Central America, but also in Africa and Asia. So, there was this wave of repatriation and since I was in it anyway, I started following that. In the same decade came the transformation of conflicts and the role of international interventions. There was this idea that the international community could solve these conflicts and kind of ameliorate, you know? Helping reconstruction after wars, and repatriation was just one part of it. I got into the bigger picture of actually reforming and reconstructing States. That was when I started working more on the concept of the State. Listening to, for example, the refugees before their return, their ideas about the State. Looking at the politics of space that evolved around the mobility and return of the refugees through which the State's institutions, rationalities and technologies suddenly became present at the frontiers of the State. So that was when I started this work.

4. The Iranian revolutionary movement of the 1970s was composed of distinct political segments – students, leftist movements, religious conservatives – who wanted an end to the monarchy and were dissatisfied with the regime under Shah Reza Pahlevi. Although initially diverse, the Islamic segment, especially Shiite, led by Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, consolidated itself as the revolutionary leadership. The year 1979 marked the beginning of the Islamic regime in Iran with the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlevi. In 2022, Iran is back in the news with a wave of large protests, under the leadership of girls and women, and the motto "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" (Woman, Life, Freedom) opposing the authoritarian regime. The police reaction to the protests has left hundreds dead. See: Gritten, 2022; and "Iran: At least 23 children killed with impunity during brutal crackdown on youthful protests" (October 13, 2022).

*What were the theoretical questions that you started to address? Could you tell us a bit more about what were the theoretical breakthroughs coming out of these new research projects and academic networks?*

FS: I was in a program in the 1990s that was called “Livelihood, identity and organisation in situations of instability”. It was basically about situations of violent conflict and migration. That was the context in which Thomas Blom Hansen and I did the *States of imagination* (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001). Then, we extended it with the book *Sovereign bodies* (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005). It was actually really interesting to try to use all of my “luggage” from Cultural Sociology to start working on “States” and “Sovereignty” from a more ethnographic and everyday life perspective. That was quite defining. Also, because, politically, or in international politics, it was when there was this belief in the ability to reform and remake States. The aftermath of violent conflicts were considered to provide a window of opportunity to improve governance and institutionalised States.

The whole idea of the State and State building was quite high on the agenda around 2000, especially after the State collapse in Somalia, the genocide in Rwanda, the mushrooming of new States in ex-Yugoslavia. Also, the seemingly unending conflicts in the Congo, Angola, Sudan, West Africa and Afghanistan, where not very efficient States, or with very little control were in crisis. In many ways, this defined the next 10, 15 years of what I was doing. This is because I’m working at DIIS, which is partly funded by the Danish government and partly by our own funds from research projects. We [DIIS’s researchers] always have to be in some kind of communication with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. So, we are in this field between basic research and more pragmatic work that in some sense should be useful for ministries to develop new policy areas. It has always been difficult to grapple, however, with the pragmatics of politics. But the whole State thematic gave a platform for combining the two, I would say.

*How did you change your empirical context from Latin America to get involved with other regions?*

FS: Many people had been saying in the 1990s: “Yeah, it’s very interesting what you’re doing, but why are you working on Latin America?”. In Denmark, after the armed conflicts in Latin America had waned in the 1990s, there was absolutely no political interest in the region. There was an economic interest in trade, but not really political interest. For pragmatic reasons, but also because I had this interest in States and sovereignty, I thought, “let me look at Afghanistan first” (however, we

didn't get the project). Later I became very much of a generalist. Then, I met Tobias Hagmann<sup>5</sup> who took up a position here in Denmark and we talked and realised that we actually had many of the same ideas about the role of markets and trade during and after armed conflicts. Very similar ideas about the Horn of Africa and, in particular, Somali areas that he had been working on. I had absolutely no knowledge about these regions and I'm not an Africanist, but he is.

We joined forces and developed the project GOVSEA, "Governing Economic Flows and Hubs in Somali East Africa"<sup>6</sup>. The idea was to look into economic flows across borders. In particular, because the Somali diaspora had actually extended a lot of Somali trade and business into Ethiopia and Kenya, where they already had substantial Somali populations. At the same time, Peer Schouten<sup>7</sup> came here to DIIS and he was working on infrastructure. We got together around this idea of circulation and could see that there was a lot going on in the area of logistics. Deborah Cowen's book came in 2014, for example. Something you might call "critical logistics" came up in the 2010s, I would say. Yet the State has been at the centre of my interest for a long time. So the themes were: trade logistics, circulation, and State formation, which we sought to capture in a special issue called "States of circulation"<sup>8</sup>.

## Part II: The concept of State

*We would like to highlight one point of our dialogue so far: the concept of the State. It seems like this is a transversal concept that cuts across your academic production. How have your reflections about the concept of "State" changed through your production, from your research on refugees, borders, and then sovereignty, and now infrastructure and logistics? Do you think this has to do with empirical transformation in the very way the State functions?*

FS: Good question. The field of the Anthropology of the State which emerged in the 2000s has now become institutionalised. In Europe, this field is quite active and developing a lot of new work that I don't really follow anymore. But, in that sense, it's thriving. In terms of international politics, in particular with Afghanistan, there's

5. Senior Program Officer, Swisspeace, who has published widely on the Horn of Africa. He co-edited *Aid and authoritarianism in Africa* (2016).

6. See <https://www.diis.dk/en/projects/govsea-governing-economic-hubs-and-flows-in-somali-east-africa>

7. Peer Schouten is a Senior Researcher at DIIS and author of the book *Roadblock Politics: the origins of violence in Central Africa*. See: <https://www.diis.dk/en/experts/peer-schouten>.

8. "States of circulation: The co-production of logistical and political orders", published in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (Schouten, Stepputat & Bachmann, 2019).

this “deception”, the idea that maybe the State building effort went a bit too far. It was a stretch to believe so much in the powers of the international community to actually do this kind of social engineering. The Americans call it “nation building”, but it’s basically the same thing they talk about. There is this kind of “Actually, it’s much more complicated to build or reform a State and I’m not sure if we have the resources to do that”. The tasks were just accumulating – building justice systems, security forces, democratic security governance, etcetera – and for some the aim became to build copies of the Nordic countries or something like that, even though there were also ideas about the minimalist State and ‘a light footprint’ which was the initial US approach to Afghanistan. But there’s too much resistance when you try to build States, basically from the outside, even though you also have, of course, interested parties within the countries and the diaspora and so on. But, it kind of failed, the State building project. It’s not for nothing that historical sociologists talk about State *formation* – different from State *building* – as a process of decades or hundreds of years of accommodating power struggles, shifting hierarchies, developing institutions and cultures of State and so on.

That’s probably the most important change that has happened recently. We had another discussion a couple of years ago, this idea of a “pragmatic peace” that turns to what is possible to do. Also “the local” has been upgraded in terms of its importance for power structures and the political and economic divisions. In practice, that’s the development we see in terms of the State. Theoretically, I’m not sure. But of course, there is much of Bruno Latour (2007) and the “material turn”. Now it is a lot about infrastructure and States, and logistics and States. I think you can see it as part of the material turn, the turn to the interplay between social and political dynamics and the work of things such as infrastructures and the circulation of commodities. So, there is something that also talks to the Social Science fashions. But I think a lot of the work that came out in the 1990s and, and 2000s still holds, about the cultural aspects of how States work, how they influence people’s lives, and how people influence States. In that sense, it’s pretty much the same agenda.

*A curiosity: in your research trajectory, were there any empirical observations that made you think, “Oh, this idea of State as something like an entity is perhaps not working”?*

FS: When I went to Guatemala, I lived very close to the border with Mexico. I was struck by the fact that when they talked about the Guatemalan State, they were actually thinking about the city of Guatemala, the capital: “That’s where the State and the government are. We don’t have much to do with it here. They don’t come here a lot”. There was the army, which was the only representative of the State that



stayed all the time during the armed conflict. People tended to see the State from the outside, as something very distant. Even though you could show how the State formation process had influenced land tenure and this kind of changes. I remember talking with some village representatives after the conflict, when State institutions were appearing in the post-conflict conjuncture to stabilize the previously insurgent area. They had this perception that *now* things were changing: “Now, the State is not here to punish us. It’s here to come up with some services to help us”. So, in that context there was quite a strong image of a changing State.

There was another issue that was typical of the early 1990s, when I did a bit of work for the Danish Refugee Council. There was a kind of collective, partly self-organized return of refugees from Mexico to Guatemala, which was inspired by the guerrilla movement, and organized by the refugees themselves. I did a series of interviews with some of the NGOs that were supporting the refugee return. Many leftist movements of the 1970s and 1980s saw the State as something to combat, to keep at a distance or to do away with because it is repressive. But then, suddenly, in the early 1990s – in the wake of democratization in Latin America, I guess, you heard among leftist NGOs that “Maybe we can work with the State, maybe we can make some changes by working with the State”. Politically, that was a very interesting change in the perception of the State on the left.

The State, as an idea, has its ups and downs. Of course the neoliberalists of the Washington consensus in the 1980s wanted to reduce the State as much as possible. In the 1990s the pendulum started to swing back towards the State in development policy, focussing on building institutions and good governance of the State. Also, popularly, ideas vary between whether the State is a mean, dangerous monster, or if it has a more benevolent presence in our lives. Or, like here in Denmark, the State is part of yourself; people and State are so ingrained in each other. It’s incredible.

*Our last question to close this section about State: you talk about concepts as “sovereignty” and “governscapes” (Stepputat, 2013, 2018), which also relates to concepts such as “hybrid orders” and “normative regimes” (Feltran, 2011). Therefore, a question that relates to our research on cars (Feltran, 2021) and to your most recent work on corridors and infrastructure, would be: how could we reflect about the role of market-related actors, like in our case, for example, an insurance company or harbour administration?*

FS: One question to think about is what kind of sovereign practice these private actors engage in. I would say that there is a question of restricting access to resources and channelling values through more or less closed circuits by means of licencing, (sub-) contracting, tracing and international standards. The things that go on around

that restrict artisanal mining, for example. Or the dream of the smooth conveyance of commodities across borders, through ‘corridors’ for example, using standard containers, one-stop-border-posts, online customs systems, et cetera. In practice, however, it can work differently.

There’s Anna Tsing’s (2009) idea that supply chains are much more heterogeneous, that it is not just about one company controlling the whole thing. Supply chains snake in and out of controlled zones, of more formal conduits. In fact, 80% of global supply chains are fragmented because of extensive subcontracting – geographically and functionally – which in many areas makes it difficult for lead firms to account for how goods are circulating (Schouten, 2022, p. 17). There are these not very controlled and not very governed ways of producing and circulating value. That’s not so clear, but there is definitely something to look into – how private companies control streams of data, communication, access to different kinds of resources, and, in particular, the whole idea of chokepoints, whichever important in terms of who controls what and who can extract revenues from certain forms of circulation. Jatin Dua (2019) works with this idea of “chokepoint sovereignty”, the idea that the control of a point (a port, a strait, a mountain pass, a cable or pipeline) that is impossible or difficult to circumvent yields sovereign power in a certain domain or area. Dua relates this to Djibouti because of its location close to Bab al Mandab Strait where the oil to Europa passes through and where US, France, Saudi Arabia and now also China have naval bases. That’s one way of looking at this phenomenon.

Another approach derives from examining circulation and the kind of infrastructure that is built to channel circulation – like ports, railroads, and roads. It’s very clear that it’s too expensive for many States to finance this infrastructure on their own. So they make partnerships with private companies, private finance groups, and so on. This private-public partnership is really a sign of the times. And it’s curious because, when looking at Somaliland – a de facto State whose existence depends on the port in Berbera – there was this idea that DP World,<sup>9</sup> the port operator investing in an upgrade of the port to a modern container port would be detrimental to the State. People would say, “Okay, that will reduce the control of the government because it’s been privatised”, but the curious thing I see is that the entry of DP World strengthened the central government, because it helped the government to gain more control over the port vis á vis the locally dominant clan. Basically, the local clans were side-lined a bit while before they had a really heavy control of the port and could siphon a

9. DP World is a multinational logistics company specialising in port terminal operations, maritime services and free trade zones. The company is headquartered in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. It operates public-private partnerships in ports around the world, such as one of the terminals at the Port of Santos in Brazil.



lot of not very formalised kinds of revenues. Before, many people in Berbera had more or less easy access to the port. So, there were these surpluses circulating in the community around the port, the veterans, clan elders, football clubs, etc. But after the arrival of DP World, the dominant clan would say “The port is closed now”, so, no access if you’re not an employee.

It’s a paradox. It’s quite interesting that international investment can also help strengthen central governments. The other thing is that there was a lot of resistance and protests in Berbera during the first year. But after two, three, four years, particularly when the new infrastructure emerged, the cranes and so on, it was said that “actually there’s something happening here, and they pay better and more stable wages than the State”. So, after a couple of years, there was a much more positive evaluation of the presence of DP World. But DP World is so big, the most important actor locally. It might not last, this “romance”, but we’ll see.

### Part III: Infrastructure, logistics and politics of circulation

*We’d like to explore some of the reflections concerning the articles published in the special issue of the journal Society and Space Schouten (Schouten, Stepputat and Bachmann, 2019). All contributions adopt the stance of looking at “logistics in action”, differently from frameworks that see it as something “inherently economic or purely technical” – and these are your words in the introduction. Could you explain to us what we can conceive as a “logistical turn” and “critical logistics”?*

FS: I think it is probably more of a question of how logistics became a subject of critical research. Infrastructure and circulation operate very much beyond the gaze of the everyday: they are there, in front of you, but it’s not something that you really notice in everyday life as long as it is working properly. Things flow through its channels and conduits. Hugely helped by the invention of the container, that made the globalisation of supply chains possible by helping reduce transport costs enormously. But then, when there is a blockage, like the EverGreen container ship that got stuck in the Suez Canal<sup>10</sup>, it suddenly becomes very visible how logistics and circulation are working and how vulnerable these systems really are. The changes in the post-1940s production paradigm helps us understand the problem when something like the Suez Canal blockade happens. Our form of economic production

10. In March 2021, the Suez Canal was blocked for six days due to the grounding of an Ever Given cargo ship 400 metres long and 200,000 tons. See: “Canal de Suez pode ficar dias ou semanas bloqueado após meganavio encalhar; entenda”, 2021.

has transformed from large-scale production with huge stocks to something much more flexible, with the “just in time” model and small stocks.

A great contemporary example of this, is what happened after Brexit<sup>11</sup>. The British government and businessmen suddenly realised that they don’t have stocks for months of all kinds of stuff, energy and whatever, but actually only for a couple of days, because logistics are working so smoothly and it’s so efficient in a way, the provision of goods from the East to the West, for example. And the consequence of the border and migration control chaos after Brexit was a serious lack of supplies. Especially in these moments, logistics become visible as some problems are pointed out. These experiences have kind of spurred this “logistical turn” together with, as we said before, the material turn in social and political science. Follow things, follow commodities, and so on.

Logistics is a science, it’s a discipline, it’s an art that goes back a long time. In the 1980s when I was working on humanitarian aid, I attended a Red Cross course for disaster delegates. It was interesting because among the 20, 25 people that attended, four or five were retired officers, army people. At the time, they were the “specialists” in logistics. They knew how to move things, and how to get goods through ports, how to hire trucks and how to make bridges when they had collapsed and all those relations that are central to logistics as a military discipline. That was really interesting to see “Okay, there’s these old officers going into humanitarian work and actually helping professionalising the NGOs working in humanitarian aid”. Otherwise, I remember from Geography of the 1970s, looking at territorial structures: in Africa, the infrastructure was like straws sucking out resources to the ports and so on. In that sense, there’s always been an interest about the immaterial basis of society and of States. But it comes together in this critical logistics lately. I am not sure it answers your question, but it’s one aspect.

*Could you elaborate on the notion of “circulation”? Why does it seem more appropriate than “transport”, “mobilities”, “flows” or “journeys”? Tell us more about politics of circulation, projects of circulation, and States of circulation.*

FS: I’m not sure, actually. These notions sneak in without you always being aware and, suddenly, pops up a concept and it fits into what you’re doing. You start using it, and then you realise that all those people have also started using it. So you kind of

11. Approved in 2016, “Brexit” is the name given to the referendum in which the United Kingdom decided for its formal exit from the European Union. The agreement came into force in 2020. See: “Brexit: Reino Unido sai da União Europeia”, 2020.

surf in waves that you haven't seen before. People articulate themselves in products, articles, and books. There is something about the times that also produce concepts and they can come from many different sites.

In Marxist terms, it does make some sense to talk about circulation as opposed to production because a lot of production has moved from the West to the East which has resulted in an increased circulation of goods as supply chains have been extended across the globe. Therefore, we see the enormous increase in transport and, with the container, also the reduction in transport costs. The share of the value of products that are used for transport has been going down. It's like 3% of the value now. That's the degree to which logistics have been made efficient. And you could also talk about trade in terms of circulation, because a lot of it is actually trade, even though a lot of it takes place within companies and subcontractors. Things are moved, they are not necessarily traded.

So, for the time being, it seems to make sense to talk about circulation, about what facilitates and slows down circulation. We may also talk about the circulation of people. Mobility is a different, relevant concept, but then it doesn't have the kind of production/circulation opposition. But, I don't want to be too dogmatic about it. It just works for now.

*How do you conceive "circulation", and how does this formulation relate with the concepts of State and projects of circulation?*

FS: This is a big discussion, but in the context of the special issue we organised – about "States of circulation" – and the article "Politics of Circulation", it's about how to control the circulation of commodities, but also about the way that States rely on infrastructure and logistics in order to function.

You're asking about States and circulation. As I said before, the public/private connection is very important for constructing new infrastructure projects for circulation. But it's very much a competition also between different States and prospective States. In that sense, it's both making and unmaking States and State projects. It's interesting to see now Somalia, South Central Somalia, where you have the federal member States who see what went on in Somaliland, with DP Worlds' new container port and the corridor. So, they also want their port and their corridor to Ethiopia because the circulation of commodities to the Ethiopian market is gold. It is by exploiting these resources, the circulation of commodities, that the material basis for a State administration can be created in arid areas like Somali East Africa. There is some very practical economics in these circulation projects because it's how to attract and tap into circulation so you can get revenue from it.

It's also interesting to look at Al-Shabaab, which is an Islamist insurgency but also a State-like actor<sup>12</sup>. A lot of their revenue comes from taxation of bypassing trucks transporting goods between the Somali ports and either Ethiopia or Kenya, livestock, foodstuff, electronics, etc. They can make tens of thousands of dollars a month from a checkpoint. There are not many roads in Somalia, and Al-Shabab can create insecurity on one road, which is under government control, to have people use Al-Shabaab-controlled roads so they can tax them there. It's not competing projects, but, at least, competition over the circulation, which can be very important for making and breaking these very rudimental State structures that you see in the Somali Federal Member States.

We have a book coming out soon that is called *Trade make states: governing the greater Somali economy*. We're playing both with Charles Tilly (1985) who had this idea of "war makes States", but also with the idea of a "greater Somalia". This was the politically very contested idea in post-colonial East Africa that all the Somali areas should be united in one nation, including parts of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and then Somalia itself, which went very wrong. But economically, there is something you might call a greater Somali transborder economy extending to Nairobi and a large part of Eastern Ethiopia. Actually, globally, also reaching Dubai, North America, Malaysia.

This is vital because the Somali diaspora is so widespread and, financially, very strong. Somaliland is maybe the only straight-out case where you can see that there is a very clear relation between the freeing up of circulation – in this case of livestock for export that had been obstructed by militias and gangs' roadblocks during the armed conflict in the early 1990s – and actually providing the economic foundation for a State administration through the taxation of circulating commodities. It might be a very particular case. So, we've also been looking into other parts of Somalia and where it's less clear. But still, having a port is what explains the difference between the Federal Member States of Somalia.

In this case, the politics of circulation is actually a struggle over streams of revenue, over customs, typically. Because, there are so many States [in Africa] that still depend on customs. Also in Europe, historically, you had toll-States. Denmark was a toll-State that basically, formed on the basis of the toll, merchants had to pay to pass by the strait between what is now Sweden and Denmark. At the time Denmark had both sides, so that made it easier to pressure the merchant ships. So, "trade makes States", in some places, under some conditions. In a sense, I'm coming back to these political economy questions that were part of my geography upbringing, but now with a twist.

12. Al-Shabaab is an Islamist jihadist insurgent group based in Somali and Kenyan territories.

There is this classical example of 17<sup>th</sup> century France where State making and the making of infrastructures for circulation went hand in hand (Mukerji, 2010). The Louis XIV's construction of a canal in central France – a “project of circulation” if you like – disrupted the nobility's control of circulation. Canals became a much more efficient way of transporting commodities than the roads. This shift took circulation out of the nobility's hands and contributed to the centralization of power in Paris. These kinds of examples of “co-production” are pretty good.

*Still in the introduction of the special issue, you talk about two points: circulation in the margins and a co-production of logistics and political [dis]orders. Does thinking of circulation at the margins imply a move to look beyond logistics as a calculating project? It seems to us that there is also a methodological turn, to look in a more ethnographic way towards logistics and, such as Gregson (2017) says, “logistics at work”. How does this ethnographic turn on the subject of logistics take place and what are the contributions of this methodological choice?*

RS: Ethnographic methods are quite appropriate for identifying some of these counter examples. There's this idea of logistics and supply chains, that it's this smooth system of controlled conveyance of commodities in containers, for example, and so on. When you look at it up-close, actually it's not that way and it's much more fragile than you would expect: which is also what you see when suddenly a ship is stuck in the Suez Canal. There are also some good examples of how it's possible for different actors to tap into these global logistical networks and make a revenue from it.

I love an example in Haugen's article (2019) in our special issue about how the content of containers, clothing for example, is put under pressure. How African traders working in a Chinese port-city manage to squeeze more goods into the containers to have just a little added to their meagre profit margins. The extra 5% can be essential for making or breaking their business. But also, how is it still possible to bribe your way into a Chinese port, and many other places. These observations are not easy to make without an ethnographic gaze. You have to be there and talk with people and get a sense of how the everyday life of logistics is going on. I must say I haven't really been able to live up to this in my work in Berbera, because I've only been there on short visits and basically just made interviews. I would've liked to do some observation in the port. However, it's not simple, because ports are areas of restricted access.

I was talking with Anna Tsing<sup>13</sup> who had just started working on a port in Indo-

13. Anna Tsing is an anthropologist and professor of the University of California. She has published widely on globalization, Anthropocene, and feminist theory. Her best-known books are *Friction* (2004) and *The mushroom at the end of the world* (2015).

nesia and asked, “So, how do you do?”. I said I was thinking, for example, of talking with people in the port community. Nowadays, ports are often removed from towns, but you still have places where you recruit workers. Talking with local “organic intellectuals”<sup>14</sup>, people who are interested in local histories, or former workers who worked in the construction of the port, for example, and also contemporary workers; they will give you a lot of insight into how processes work in reality and not only how they’re supposed to work.

The other question is about the margins of the logistical systems. We become aware of these struggles – or politics – around how to organise circulation. In the margins, global logistics meet pre-existing systems of circulation, in which traders, trekkers, and truckers move goods under difficult circumstances. They are skilled logistical operators, who rely on social infrastructures, knowledge, and risk-calculation. When new projects of circulation like the Berbera corridor-project emerge, there are losers, there are winners, there are new alliances as I talked about earlier. But pre-existing systems are not necessarily wiped away. In Berbera, there is what I call buffer institutions who mediate between local truckers and WFP,<sup>15</sup> for example, which is a huge international organisation. They work with all the modern bureaucracy, contracts, receipts and so on. But the truckers who usually bring aid to Ethiopia work on handshakes. I mean, no contracts. So, WFP works through local logistical firms, who are the buffers that can bridge the gap and mediate between a contract system and a handshake-system, so to say.

We become aware of these things when we are present in the area and start talking with people and see how processes work in practice. Not everything is regulated and streamlined. Rather you have a lot of different operators who are being linked into the value production of large companies and international organisations without necessarily being subsumed.

Part IV: Future plans, new theoretical perspectives, and the new generations

*Could you share some of your research plans for the next few years? We know, for example, about your project called “Governing the dead”. Which are the empirical and theoretical perspectives you are interested in developing?*

FS: First of all, I usually say that I’m on a retirement track and I plan to retire next

14. Refers to Gramsci’s idea of intellectually thinking but not highly educated individuals among peasants or workers.

15. The World Food Programme with a regional logistics centre in Berbera.



year, maybe being emeritus or something – but I haven't made any plans. Right now, I'm just focusing on finishing our port project and the book on trade. In the "Port Politics" project, we have an opening to think about some interesting new perspectives coming out if you look at the ports in terms of the shifting land-sea nexus. Because ports are nodal points in supply chains, connecting land and sea transport, and what we see in the Horn of Africa is that maritime actors, of the "blue economy", try to develop their markets beyond the ports, into the hinterlands. This is contrary to the different attempts to regulate the sea and the resources at the sea that come from territorial States, from the land-side<sup>16</sup>.

When looking at logistics around the Horn of Africa, and that's what I'm trying to figure out now, we see many of the firms that operate maritime logistics networks in the region – both shipping lines, port managers, and global logistical firms – work on extending the container-based systems inland from the ports, through corridors and dry-ports. They are in this competition for end-to-end logistics. There's a huge competition now for that market. And this is very much what Amazon is doing, for example. They try to monopolise end-to-end, or door-to-door logistics. So, it's all into one system, one company and all its subcontractors, subsidiaries, and alliance partners. The way it's working is through acquisitions, through alliances. It's actually extremely complex but visible in many places, such as the Horn of Africa.

Apart from this, I don't have major plans. I've been reducing my area of interest because it was too wide and you just cannot follow the new literature in so many different fields such as migration, State, sovereignty, armed conflict, trade, logistics, etc. It seems that what's left now is the ports and dead bodies. "Governing the dead" (Stepputat, 2020) was a side project that I have had since 2007, I think, when I was spending a year at Yale University (USA), after my wife died. Actually, it was a chapter I wanted to write for a book on Guatemala that I have never written. I started thinking about one of these ethnographic experiences that you have and you don't really know what to do about it. It's obviously very interesting, but what can you use it for? What does it tell us?

One day I was supposed to go with the local judge to a place very close to the border in Guatemala. To discuss a solution to a land conflict or something like that. The judge didn't have a car, so I promised to give him a ride. But in the morning, during the way, there was a military officer, the colonel from the local base, and other people. I thought "There's something going on". It appeared that there was an army

16. See for example the book *Capitalism and the sea*, by Campling and Colás (2021), that investigates how territorial States try to extend their legislation and also international legislation into the sea with exclusive economic zones, flags of convenience and so on.

patrol that had killed a guerrilla fighter, whom they had just met with a small group and there had been a shootout. Therefore, there was this dead guy and it was in an inaccessible area. Well, they'd been carrying around this guy wrapped in plastic for a day until they reached a road. The judge was going there to do what is called a "*levantamiento del cadaver*", a kind of crime scene investigation.

The context was this un-monitored war-to-peace transition where the army also played into. They said, "Okay, now we want to have the civil authorities involved in this because there's a dead person, and now we have to follow the peace-time rules". These rules had just been reformed to ensure due forensic and legal procedures. It was all very new, and it took the whole day doing the registration of the dead body, to try to identify this person. I spent the day there with the judge, the army, and local people. In the end, they wanted to bury the person in the local village, but then the UN officials, who were there as part of the UN mission, said that the body should be taken to a morgue, which was like four hours' drive away. None of them had a vehicle that could be used for that, but me. They just asked me to take the body to the morgue. It was six o'clock in the evening. I said, "Hmm, okay". And at the time there were still roadblocks by the guerrilla groups and military. I didn't want to go alone with a dead guerrilla fighter on the flatbed, so a police officer accompanied me and we took those four hours to the capital of the province.

That story was super interesting, but I couldn't figure out what to use it for. When I got to Yale, 10 years later, I decided to write about it. I had to get into what are actually the rules of treating dead bodies and how they are related to how the State historically had developed its legislation and practices around dead bodies. Who controls the dead bodies? And why? That was why I got into this project of "Governing the dead".

In addition, I had this experience when my wife died. It was like midnight when we found her. There was an ambulance and police and whatever else. Our house was suddenly full of people. I asked if we could keep her overnight, just to say goodbye. I had this very romantic idea of having candles and other things that I had seen in a refugee settlement in Mexico once. But then they said, "It's not often we get that kind of request. And actually, in principle, it's a criminal case. So, you cannot be left alone with a dead body. We have to take her away". They gave me 20 minutes. Since I was interested in State and sovereignty, I started wondering how the State becomes so active and so visible in the transition between life and death and began to see this State-control of dead bodies as an expression of sovereignty.

Those two were the inspirations for the project "Governing the dead", that produced an edited volume and I've done a few other works. With the covid-19 pandemic, one of the early subjects in the press was the army trucks bringing out

dead bodies from Bergamo, Italy. I wasn't in a position to do any research myself, but I got a couple of people together and we had a lot of contributions, a lot from Brazil and Mexico, nothing from Asia or Africa. That might be what I'll continue with. I have a project I never applied money for, but I would like to compare Mexico, India, and Ethiopia in terms of how governance of dead bodies has evolved, also to talk about State formation, because it's very much colonial States that have defined the legislation. But also, as in Mexico and Brazil, civil society and organized crime take part in the politics of dead bodies. Yes, that's the plan.

*We didn't know that you were thinking about retirement. This makes this interview even more special! Finally, one last question: based on your trajectory and the research you have done, what is your advice for future generations who are thinking about these issues, and theoretical perspectives?*

FS: One activity that has kept me in movement and kept my curiosity going is actually the fieldwork. Sitting with people and seeing what's going on and talking with people in environments where you don't usually go. Because these experiences always add perspectives and questions. It's extremely inspiring. When you just sit behind your computer, and you read articles, and you write, and analyse, and so on, it is great. But I think that a lot of my fuel comes from other people. Just out of the office. And then the workshops. I love workshops. My favourite kind of format. I really need these encounters with people.

Interview conducted in August of 2022

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