

REVIEWS

Trade Makes States. Governing the Greater Somali Economy

by Tobias Hagmann and Finn Stepputat

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The racket we know as ‘the state’ has bedevilled political science, anthropology, geography and sociology for as long as these disciplines have been around. It is, therefore, no small gesture of audacity to make a new and original contribution to the literature. It is, nonetheless, what Tobias Hagmann and Finn Stepputat set out to do with *Trade Makes States*. They have even set themselves the difficult task of looking for the state where it has notoriously failed and collapsed: the greater Somali economy at the Horn of Africa.

The book is both focused and kaleidoscopic. The focus revolves around the regulation of trade and transport of goods where states are weak and dysfunctional. Instead of lamenting the distance between an idealised friction of government and the gritty facts on the ground, Hagmann and Stepputat go for the grit: what is actually happening. The absence of a state, they argue, does not mean that there are no rules, no governing institutions or no governance. Fundamentally, the argument is that certain state functions – notably security of goods in transit – are undertaken by organisations that exercise public authority in terms of taxation, protection and concentration of power. The great advantage of focusing on the empirics with theoretical questions and determined disciplinary openness is that the answers are original.

One central theme of the book is friction. Moving goods and wares – cattle, cement, electronics, flour, fuel, sugar and so on – over land through potentially hostile and plundering terrains requires some form of insurance. Here, local negotiations, understandings and deals can secure safe passage. In the wider world, the regulation of trade follows international conventions; a kind of freight forwarders’ Esperanto, if you like. The greater Somali economy does not exactly follow this language but requires more localised dialects of trust.

The proto states form a network that secures transport of goods. The actual configurations in the greater Somali economy seem functional and based on a single activity. Their only service is security and for that to be valuable they

depend on *in*-security for security to produce rent. While brokers can secure smooth passage of goods, the same brokers depend on the friction for their service to be valuable. Hence, the value of the specialist knowledge of the broker depends both on the problem of friction and the broker's ability to overcome it. By investigating a case with slim likelihood of operating governance structures, the book's editors show how political power emerges around problematics of government. The field of service provision by public authorities is competitive, and inevitably some organisations fail, while others prosper. The editors avoid facile culturalist explanations, and the book exhibits little evidence of ideology and legitimacy that could bolster the future exercise of authority. This academic praxis is welcome, even if I remain curious to learn more about how the exercise of authority is legitimated by the different actors.

Trade Makes States is also kaleidoscopic. Hagmann and Stepputat have gathered no less than fifteen authors to write a total of nine chapters. Each deals with a specific aspect of trade and authority. The chapters investigate trust as social infrastructure, the circulation of money, the governance of markets and flows, as well as fiscal techniques of revenue collection. The case chapters provide a fine sense of the intimate, personal, relations that require constant maintenance for the arterial structure of trade to operate. Often, anthologies have more variation than consistency, but this book remains focused in its diversity. This is thanks to the constant conversation all authors have with Charles Tilly, the American sociologist whose work on state formation reverberates through the pages.

Tilly's unsentimental analysis of states and wealth capture is worth engaging for anyone interested in a processual approach to the exercise of power. The discussions about the materiality of goods, the trust that organises the network and the multiple logics at play are very poignant and will stimulate work far beyond the greater Somali economy.

If the greater Somali economy represents a troubled region in the world, it also constitutes a challenging field for the collection of research data. There is little reliable quantitative data. The gathering of statistics has not been top-of-mind for any governing entity in Somalia for a long time. Researchers are left to make educated guesses about proportions and volumes, and to focus on qualitative data in a variety of ways. Yet even the qualitative data are not available in neatly packaged form. It is no small accomplishment by the authors and editors to have amassed, digested and interpreted significant amounts of amorphous data for their work. It bespeaks their tenacity and ingenuity in equal measure.

Tobias Hagmann and Finn Stepputat's pursuit of data to support counter-intuitive arguments provides insights to processes of trade, transit and authority in the greater Somali economy. The multi-disciplinary, open, approach is, no doubt, inspirational even in less troubled places where the equation between trade and public authority can seem simple at first sight. This is important work because some of the most hard-nosed clichés and stubborn myths must be confronted with evidence to give way to actual knowledge.