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The Politics of Passage: Studying Checkpoints and Claim Making in Conflict-affected Settings

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ABSTRACT

Roadblocks, or checkpoints, are obligatory passage points that are erected by entities claiming authority over a given crossing. They are often the most common everyday interface between civilians and armed actors in conflict-affected contexts, but are overlooked in studies on either trade or authority amidst conflict. This article, which introduces a special issue on the topic, argues that roadblocks are a useful empirical entry point to questions regarding the practical, political and theoretical interplay of economic circulation and political contestation. It proposes the framework of 'the politics of passage', which focuses on the entangled struggles over movement and authority arising from the interaction of a claim to the right of passage and claims to power over it. Through this politics of passage a range of broader social, political and economic claims are made and contested. Within this framework, checkpoints are a privileged field site and useful heuristic device to understand the relationship between trade, conflict and authority in contexts of contested statehood. Roadblocks function as critical nodes where otherwise implicit claims by states and non-state actors are made explicit in the encounter — or confrontation — between people, capital and goods on the move, and those who claim authority over them. Understanding the nature of these claims, and what shapes the types of claim making that emerge in different contexts, is a central contribution of this article.

INTRODUCTION

'In Iraq, I Found Checkpoints as Endless as the Whims of Armed Men' — thus reads the title of a *New York Times* article on the purported chaos that reigned in the wake of the US intervention in Iraq (Rubin, 2018). As near-universal features of active conflict, roadside checkpoints staffed by a handful of armed militia men, have become a time-worn journalistic trope. Yet new research suggests that checkpoints and roadblocks are more than mere mundane epiphenomena of civil war. Evidence from Afghanistan to Yemen and from Mali to Somalia suggests that roadblocks provide entry points into thinking about a new geography of conflict, one that has little to do with

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control over territory or population but rather revolves principally around control over the movement of goods and people (see Ali, 2023; Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2013; Mohammed, 2023; Muzalia et al., 2021; Rights Radar, 2023; Schouten et al., 2021; Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2019).

Despite mounting anecdotal and empirical evidence, academic debates on conflict and order in areas of limited or contested statehood have largely overlooked the centrality of roadblocks in conflict. The few existing studies on the topic are disconnected and scattered across disciplines. This special issue addresses this gap by putting roadblocks on the map — both theoretically and empirically — with contributions presenting evidence from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. It also bridges different fields of study, bringing together anthropologists, geographers, historians, criminologists, area specialists, activists and international relations scholars to uncover the political significance of roadblocks for debates on conflict and development.

This introductory article makes the case that roadblocks in situations of armed conflict should be an object of study in order to understand broader political, economic and conflict dynamics. We define a roadblock — or checkpoint — as 'an obligatory passage point, erected by an entity that exercises … authority over the crossing' (Schouten et al., 2017: 13). Often the most common everyday interface between civilians and armed actors in conflict-affected contexts (Schon, 2016), roadblocks are a useful empirical entry point to examine questions around the practical, political and theoretical interplay of economic circulation and political contestation. We term our overarching analytical framework 'the politics of passage', which refers to the mutually constitutive struggles over movement and authority that arise from the interaction of a claim to the right of passage and claims to power over it. It is through this politics of passage that a range of broader social, political and economic claims are made and contested. Understanding the nature and variation of these claims, and what shapes the types of claim making that emerge in each context, is a central contribution of this article.

Conceptually, the contributions to this special issue are rooted in debates on the 'politics of circulation' (Schouten et al., 2019; Stepputat and Hagmann, 2019) — the study of the co-production of trade and authority in areas of contested statehood — and approaches that foreground the interplay of claims to authority and control over access to spatially bound resources, such as land or mineral resources (Lander et al., 2021; Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Sikor and Lund, 2009). These literatures inform our understanding of the relation between circulation and authority as a negotiated, essentially unsettled phenomenon that emerges from concrete checkpoint interactions. To refine our approach, we borrow from Charles Tilly to approach roadblocks as sites of collective claim making, where otherwise inchoate groups articulate a collective demand on others. This is a relational act that often involves the latent threat of violence, because collective claim makers expect possible resistance to that claim (Tilly, 2003). From this

perspective, roadblocks are nodal points where political, economic and spatial claims are made explicit in the encounter — or confrontation — between people, capital and goods on the move, and those who assert authority over them. Building on Weigand (2022), this article conceptualizes authority as a negotiated and relational process, in which actors — be they states, armed groups, or informal power brokers — assert claims to power. In the case of checkpoints, this is expressed through claims of control over passage.

Adopting a claims-based approach allows us to overcome a prevailing dichotomy in the literature between approaches that frame the blocking of roads either exclusively as expressions of domination by armed actors — prevalent in studies of roadblocks in conflict (Amir, 2013; Jeganathan, 2018) — or as a resistance tactic — as per the critical logistics literature (e.g. Chua and Bosworth, 2023). Instead, we adopt a more open-ended approach in which roadblocks significantly intervene in struggles over highly contested and negotiated terms of trade, freedom of movement, belonging and authority (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010, Sikor and Lund, 2009). Paraphrasing Timothy Mitchell (2011: 7), in this special issue we aim to understand the evolving and variable interconnections between economic circulation and political order by focusing on the links established between the movement of people and goods, power and authority at the narrow points of passage where control is particularly effective — and particularly visible. From this perspective, checkpoints are key sites where access, trade routes and supply chains are configured, often becoming battlegrounds for competing claims over who and what can circulate, under which terms, and to whose benefit.

While checkpoints exist across different territories and contexts, the questions that they raise are particularly salient in areas of conflict and contested statehood, the focus of this issue. Such areas represent spaces in which flows of aid and trade assume immense importance for already vulnerable livelihoods, and thus contexts in which even minor changes to the terms of trade have disproportionate impacts on local populations (Calì, 2015). At the same time, they present spaces where a multitude of actors seek to make claims to authority over circulation, as articulated most visibly through checkpoints.

The special issue as a whole demonstrates the utility of studying roadblocks as sites of collective claim making that shape and reflect struggles over mobility, authority and distribution in contexts of contested statehood. This introduction seeks to establish the theoretical foundations from which these articles emerge, to reflect on the theoretical significance of their empirical contributions, and to introduce the terminologies and methodologies that connect them. Through the framework of the politics of passage and the dynamics of collective claim making, we add to debates on the politics of circulation and bridge fragmented approaches that deal with the entanglements of trade and political order in areas of contested statehood. Specifically, we argue that the politics of circulation should be embedded within a broader understanding of the politics of passage and collective claimmaking,

and that this approach allows us to examine checkpoints beyond the conceptual spectre of the state, in a way that does not pre-emptively box them into commonly used frames like 'rebel governance', 'extraction' or 'taxation'.

We begin by situating checkpoints within debates on circulation, authority and state formation, laying out the theoretical foundations of the politics of passage and claim-making and illustrating their relevance for understanding roadblocks in conflict settings. We then illustrate the repertoires of claim-making that emerge through checkpoint encounters, which we highlight as the core empirical sites in which these claims are negotiated, and outline the nature of the different types of claims that are articulated and negotiated in these encounters. We subsequently discuss how the vagaries of commodity chains — such as the nature of commodities, their modes of transport, relative integration within global commodity chains and transport conditions — shape claim-making repertoires in the politics of passage. We conclude by reflecting on the methodological and ethical implications of studying checkpoints in conflict.

FROM RESOURCE WARS TO THE POLITICS OF CIRCULATION: THE EVOLVING STUDY OF TRADE AMIDST CONFLICT

Since the end of the Cold War, both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the relationship between tradable resources and civil war have featured prominently in academic and policy discussions. This scholarship has predominantly emphasized the availability, appropriation and profitability of primary commodities and their export (e.g. Ross, 2003). Notably, however, it has paid limited attention to the mechanisms through which armed actors convert natural resources into financial gains. The processes of trading and transporting resources within conflict-affected and fragile contexts were frequently taken for granted rather than subjected to empirical scrutiny.

Only in recent years have scholars begun to highlight the critical role of commodity transport and trade — not only of illicit flows and natural resources but also of consumer goods and humanitarian aid — in sustaining rebel financing and fuelling conflict. It has given rise to a growing body of work on the 'politics of circulation' (e.g. Stepputat and Hagmann, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019), which foregrounded the entanglements of trade and political order in areas of contested statehood. This perspective has illustrated the political dimension of commodity chains by showing that global supply chains are not only 'neutral' economic phenomena but often imbricated with violence and dispossession (Chua et al., 2018; Cowen, 2014) and, conversely, that competition over commodity chains and transport routes is central to state-making projects (Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023; Schouten, 2022).

Taking a long view, the relation between circulation and authority is historically and geographically variable, and in this empirical variation lies an

important key to the vagaries of economic development as well as state formation. Considering the relations between authority and circulation as contingent also means they are sites of political possibility; as others have argued, the reliance of supply chains on often narrow channels renders certain chokepoints amenable to disruption for the purpose of staking claims (Chua and Bosworth, 2023; Clover, 2016; Mitchell, 2011).

At present, the seemingly intimate connection between circulation and the state is being called into question, sometimes brutally so, as evidenced by the fact that rebel roadblocks are often integral to 'logistical geographies' in the Global South (Coe, 2020). The contributions to this special issue amply support this observation. Throughout the collection, the breathtaking range of actors deploying roadblocks explicitly to contest state-making projects illustrates that it is not always the case that 'trade makes states' (Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023). The premise of this special issue is that studying the multiplicity of non-state roadblocks that often accompany commodity chains could contribute to developing a more nuanced understanding of the shifting relationship between trade and power, or circulation and authority, in contested political geographies.

This also informs our departure from established frameworks to understand roadblocks. Within the small but growing body of work on the topic, roadblocks have principally been approached as focal points for the top-down enforcement of often highly contested authority (e.g. Agbiboa, 2022; Amir, 2013; Jeganathan, 2018; Ngo and Hung, 2019; O'Driscoll et al., 2024). Existing scholarship also highlights how checkpoints are often crucial tools in the repertoire of order making by armed actors, who use the roadside strategically to project authority by exercising 'jurisdiction over navigation' (Lombard, 2013) and taxing economic exchanges (e.g. Bandula-Irwin et al., 2024; Mampilly and Thakur, 2025; Weigand, 2020). Similarly, scholars have explored the centrality of roadblocks in the political economy of conflict, with transit taxes imposed by armed groups often being crucial to sustaining them (Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Turkmani, 2018; Schouten, 2022). Notably, much of the existing scholarship features a vocabularly heavily inflected with the state — checkpoints have 'state effects' (Martinez and Sirri, 2020), are instances of 'rebel governance' (Florea, 2020), or reflect 'stateness' (Hoffmann et al., 2016) or 'sovereign mimicry' (Klem and Maunaguru, 2017) by armed groups.

While roadblocks are excellent entry points for studying how state-like forms of authority emerge during conflict, in this special issue we aim to develop an approach that refrains from reducing the politics of roadblocks to instances of state-like authority. In many contemporary conflict zones, it is precisely statehood that is contested, and checkpoints are often deployed by actors who explicitly or implicitly challenge the order upheld by central governments (Vogel, 2025). As the roadblocks studied in this special issue are largely operated by religious militia, ethnic organizations, traditional authorities or clan-based groups that variably express a dissatisfaction with the

state-upheld status quo, analysing them principally through the conceptual spectre of the state would miss much of what is meaningful and interesting about them — that is, the messy, unsettled, situated contestation involved in order making in conflict settings. By extension, our aim is to examine checkpoints in a manner that does not pre-emptively slot them into frameworks such as 'resistance', 'rebel governance', 'taxation', or 'extraction', while recognizing the valuable insights these literatures offer.

One way to circumvent this tendency would be to ground our analysis in the empirical features of roadblocks. Yet even their empirical features — such as whether a checkpoint is permanent or temporary, state or non-state operated, inland or border-based — do not map neatly onto how they operate in practice. The analysis of Kurdish smuggling routes in Iran by Zinati (this issue) and the study of Colombia–Venezuela border dynamics by Mantilla (this issue) both reveal that checkpoint governance hinges more on relational negotiations than on formal status. If state-operated checkpoints can be expected to be more predictable or legitimate than non-state roadblocks, the contributions in this issue challenge this equation. For example, Isar (this issue) shows how Taliban checkpoints in Afghanistan gained legitimacy over their state counterparts through routinized practices, while McCarthy and Nyana (this issue) illustrate how Myanmar's resistance checkpoints gain local acceptance through ritual and symbolism, in opposition to the junta's coercive practices.

In all cases, the empirical complexity resists easy classification: state checkpoints are not inherently more legitimate or predictable than those run by non-state actors, and the same checkpoint may be seen as a site of extortion or taxation, depending on who is passing through and from what vantage point (see Bahiss et al., 2022; Mampilly and Thakur, 2025). These findings call for an analytical approach that resists reductive binaries and instead attends to the politics of passage as contested and situated.

CHECKPOINT ENCOUNTERS AS SITES OF CLAIM MAKING IN CONFLICT

Theoretically, we follow Paul Richards' (1996) suggestion to reintegrate violence into the social realm, positioning roadblocks within the wider landscape of social and economic struggles, rather than reducing them to mere expressions of greed or raw power. From this follows our suggestion that the politics of circulation should be embedded within a broader understanding of the politics of claim making. This is of particular importance in conflict-affected regions, where the connections between conflict and trade are often reduced to questions of conflict financing and illicit economies. Yet armed conflicts and their relationship to trade are just as likely to revolve around collective grievances that are voiced in the form of violent claim making. Indeed, we expect that in times and places where capital is significantly

concentrated in the trade sector, repertoires of claim making are, for practical reasons, focused on the transport network (Clover, 2016). This is certainly the case today: as Achile Mbembe (2024: 93) observes, 'forms of circulation are now a central stake of today's major social struggles'. From this vantage point, the prevalence of roadblocks in areas of contested statehood reflects and interacts with the broader political economy, in which transport and trade constitute central battlegrounds for questions of distribution, marginalization and belonging.

To operationalize this perspective, we follow Timothy Mitchell (2011) and Jatin Dua (2019) in conceptualizing claim making as the myriad ways in which actors define and defend their collective stakes vis-à-vis others. With Tilly (2003: 13), we treat *violent* claim making not as a deviation from but as an element in the broader repertoire of collective claim making (see van der Haar et al., 2020). Roadblocks exemplify this logic. Whether rudimentary or elaborate, temporary or permanent, operated by governments or armed groups, roadblocks or checkpoints constitute a distinct spatial strategy articulating an intentional claim to authority over the movement of people or goods at a strategic point of passage along a route.[1] All checkpoints, whether controlled by Indigenous groups, rebels, the state, or multinational forces, thus encode a collective claim to de facto authority over passage; all roadblocks are implicitly violent, threatening at the very least to disrupt movement if conditions attached to passage are not met. These claims are relational, because they are contingent on the attempt of people to pass — the very act of claiming the right of passage implies the recognition of the road-block operator's authority over passage, even if that authority is claimed at gunpoint and may otherwise be considered illegitimate (see Sikor and Lund, 2009). As with other spatial strategies (see Sack, 1986), roadblocks essentially serve to support ulterior claims — whether to money, public authority, recognition, or political clout (see Bandula-Irwin et al., 2024; Mampilly and Thakur, 2025).

These characteristics also differentiate checkpoints from related but distinctly different phenomena, including adjacent spatial strategies such as insurrectionist barricades, protest blockades and security gates which are meant to fully stop traffic (see Gülzau and Mau, 2021), and punctuated forms of predation on transport, such as highway banditry, which do not involve a visible presence along a route and do not necessarily claim jurisdiction over the right of passage (see Issa, 2010). We believe that the definition of checkpoints as a highly localized and decentralized spatial strategy

1. This is consistent with the United Nations definition of a checkpoint as 'any staffed physical impediment to travel within a territory' (cited in Longo et al., 2014: 1009), and with Jeganathan (2018: 403), who defines a checkpoint as a 'governmental or para/shadow governmental apparatus that blocks passage between two points, while imposing criteria … for passage through the checkpoint'.

through which claims are made explicit applies to most roadblocks and is recognizable to scholars and practitioners, as well as to people who regularly pass through them.

If we approach the politics of passage as an open-ended process revolving around claim making, studying this process requires a methodological focus on the situated interactions between checkpoint operators and their road-using counterparts — what we call the 'checkpoint encounter'. While open-ended, roadblocks nonetheless encode a relatively stable script, in that they often resemble one another to road users even though the operators involved may be enemies or the roadblocks in question may be continents apart. Indeed, almost everyone can roughly imagine what to expect at a checkpoint or explain how the encounter deviated from that expectation. Crucially, however, this sameness of form does not imply uniformity of function across conflict settings.

This makes the 'checkpoint encounter' a strategically situated empirical entry point. The particulars of how that encounter unfolds are significant because empirical variation determines whether and how claims to power over passage translate into other claims, like authority or revenue. The varying interactions at checkpoints thus also inform the changeable role that commodity chains play in conflict and how conflict shapes trade — that is, the mutual co-production at the heart of the research agenda on the politics of circulation (see Schouten et al., 2019).

A checkpoint encounter typically involves the road user slowing down and acknowledging the operator, followed, or not, by money changing hands, a conversation establishing the purpose of travel and the identity of travellers, and the presentation and inspection of documents and goods. During such encounters, friction arises from the interaction of possibly antagonistic claims: the act of the road user presenting themself physically at the checkpoint encodes a claim to the right of passage, and through it, a claim to freedom of movement, of access to markets, or to the right to handle a certain commodity. Conversely, the act of impinging on passage encodes a claim of authority over passage, often accompanied by an ulterior claim to revenue, access or better terms of participation in supply chains, or recognition of sovereign authority.

After repeated encounters, these relational dynamics frequently congeal into routines known beforehand by the participants involved, often unfolding without any actualization of the threat of violence that looms large over checkpoint encounters (Verweijen et al., 2024). These routines, various contributions to the special issue underscore, are good proxies for 'order' along transport routes, structuring both passage and authority. By representing a claim to regulate the right of passage, checkpoints actively co-produce new practical norms that structure everyday mobility in areas of conflict or contested statehood and the often-vulnerable livelihoods that are sustained through them (see Cantens and Raballand, 2017: 6, 14). Roadblocks thus

often encode de facto political institutions, if these are understood as regularized collective claims backed up by the threat of violence (Tilly, 2003).

However, as many ethnographies of roadblocks emphasize (e.g. Jeganathan, 2004; Ngo and Hung, 2019; Volinz, 2021), unpredictability remains a central aspect of checkpoint encounters. In many contexts, such encounters are essentially open-ended moments of social interaction, meaning that each time a trucker is hailed by a rebel, or a farmer by a customs agent, claims to passage and authority over it — and therefore the relation between circulation and power, movement and order — are open for negotiation and potentially invented anew. The varying localized interactions at checkpoints thus shape variations in the relation between local conflict dynamics and commodity chains.

From this perspective, everyday checkpoint encounters are particularly well suited to exploring how public authority and patterns of order emerge out of situated processes of claim making. As Muzalia et al. (2021) point out, roadblocks offer an excellent example of what Christian Lund (2006) calls 'twilight institutions' (see Edle et al., this issue), whose relations to broader questions of authority, legitimacy, violence, wealth distribution and belonging are always at stake but never clear in advance. Furthermore, as crucial interfaces where civilians meet conflict actors, checkpoint encounters are where the legitimacy, authority and the very identities of collective actors are made and remade in negotiations over passage (see Weigand, 2022). The politics of passage and checkpoint encounters are a useful lens for analysing how these more abstract phenomena emerge out of concrete and situated events.

TYPES OF CLAIMS THAT EMERGE THROUGH CHECKPOINT ENCOUNTERS

The contributions to this special issue amply bear out the above assertion. In all of the articles, the relations between circulation and authority are fundamentally open-ended and essentially contested, and a variety of claims are at stake in the checkpoint encounters under examination. The contributions in this issue can broadly be organized around the kind of claim that is foregrounded. While claims frequently intersect, a distinction can be drawn between claims that are spatial, distributive, or symbolic.

The most basic claim articulated through roadblocks is spatial. As Tania Li (2007: 45) remarks, 'Authority over people and resources often rests on claims made through controlling access and pathways'. Just as checkpoints have historically been central tools for rulers to claim exclusive jurisdiction over national territories (Gülzau and Mau, 2021; see Deutschmann et al., 2023; Scholz, 2020), so they currently serve to articulate similar claims by criminal groups on the Colombia–Venezuela border (Mantilla, this issue), by the Karen National Union in Myanmar (Neil and Saw Day Chit Htoo,

this issue), or by rebels in eastern Congo (Hoffmann et al., 2016). Roadblocks emerge as low-cost, versatile spatial strategies to support claims to control over people, resources and territory by simply controlling passage at the main points through which they pass. However, many of the roadblocks discussed in this special issue collection are not located at points that can feasibly be used to support territorial claims. Instead of being 'omniscient outposts from which to control all' (Lombard, 2013: 161), the placement of roadblocks is often determined exclusively by the logistical utility of their location, and the claim to power they encode is one that is only meaningful in relation to flows of movement and acts of displacement. This nodal nature of roadblocks makes it possible for multiple actors to claim authority over the same commodity chain, leading to spatial patterns of 'diffuse authority' that defy easy conceptualization in terms of territorial control (Suykens, 2010; see Schouten, 2026).

Neil and Saw Day Chit Htoo (this issue) take the spatial ambivalence of roadblocks as their point of departure to challenge the disproportionate focus in the study of civil war and rebel governance on 'territorial control' as both a prerequisite and objective of armed groups. Focusing on competing armed actors in Myanmar, they show that the spatial claims they make through checkpoints are not pre-given. Armed groups seeking to maximize revenue extraction in the short term, as the Karen Border Guard Force does, may deploy checkpoints for control over trade routes, while armed groups that seek to act as parastate for their constituencies, such as the Karen National Union, will deploy checkpoints to create internal borders. Moreover, Neil and Saw Day Chit Htoo show that these variations in claims articulated at roadblocks actively shape how space is perceived and experienced, altering the symbolic and functional understanding of territory. Their case brilliantly illustrates how studying checkpoint encounters up close can help to elucidate the fragmented, contested and negotiated character of territorial control, especially in conflict-affected regions (see also Hagmann and Péclard, 2010).

If spatial claims are central to roadblocks, perhaps they are most reviled by road users for the economic claims they routinely make. As has been suggested elsewhere (Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023; Schouten, 2022), there are several contexts in which claiming 'payments on flows' (Tilly, 1990: 87) is, in fact, the primary reason people seek authority over passage. Indeed, part of the reason why checkpoints increasingly surface in studies of conflict is because they collectively transfer millions if not billions of US dollars annually from traders to the pockets of rebels and soldiers (e.g. Schouten, 2019). In this special issue, a concern with claiming revenues runs through most of the papers, whether in the form of ostensibly legal taxes fiercely dodged by smugglers in Iran (Zinati, this issue), checkpoints as a main source of revenues for a Somali armed group designated as a terrorist group (Edle et al., this issue), or as an elusive but much-coveted objective in Myanmar (1955–85) (Buchanan, this issue). As Isar (this issue) shows, in Afghanistan,

capturing the most strategic checkpoints allowed the Taliban to first claim considerable financial resources, eventually opening the way to control the state apparatus.

Despite the importance of the economic claims staked at roadblocks, we contest the implicit suggestion that all such claims are singularly motivated by rapacity. In trade-dependent societies where the rents from commodity chains are typically unequally divided, the demand for a payment at a roadblock may encode a reasonable 'distributive claim' (Ferguson and Li, 2018). Indeed, Edle et al. (this issue) bring to light that the nature of Somalia's political settlement is to privilege a few larger clans to the detriment of many smaller ones. In turn, they may erect their own roadblocks to claim rents and authority, either autonomously or as members of al-Shabaab, a notorious checkpoint operator that has positioned itself strategically as an avenger of marginalized clans. As the cycles of conflict, schisms and alliances around checkpoint rents in Somalia illustrate, roadblocks may violently embed trade profits in social struggles.

Finally, the contributions to this issue show that in contexts of conflict, checkpoints enable their operators to articulate a wide range of symbolic claims, from political relevance to social recognition and public authority (see Bandula-Irwin et al., 2024). Of course, by claiming authority over navigation, armed groups lay claim to an essential prerogative associated with sovereignty, if it is understood that the 'regulation of movement contributes to constituting the very "state-ness" of states' (Torpey, 1998: 239). By laying claim to this state prerogative, roadblocks in conflict settings may be considered as intervening significantly in the history of variable state control over transport networks and the advantages that can be derived from it.

Accordingly, most contributions to this special issue examine precisely how checkpoint encounters alter patterns of authority over trade routes and commodity chains. Each offers fascinating insight into the manner in which disruptions or routinizations of claim-making at roadblocks lead to patterns that are central to political order as it is experienced. For example, for Myanmar resistance groups, the routinization of roadblock interactions is important to institutionalize the claim to authority of their operators (Neil and Saw Day Chit Htoo, this issue; see also Baaz et al., 2018; Olken and Barron, 2009; Zanoletti, 2022). Situated in Northeast India, Thakur's study (this issue) describes this routinization among the checkerboard of armed actors along Manipur's contested trade routes as 'checkpost figurations', relatively stable situations in which a multiplicity of competing armed actors seem to be locked in a durable equilibrium.

In these and the other contributions, the manner in which individual checkpoint operators claim legitimacy is always relational to other checkpoint operators, with militias in some cases seeking to mimic the state to claim legitimacy, while in other cases they purposefully differentiate their roadblock practices from those of the state, with the same intent. In the case of the former, a convergence of the claim making of competing roadblock

operators can blur the differences between state and non-state roadblocks to the point where they are indistinguishable, deepening the 'twilight' character of checkpoints. This can make it difficult for road users to discriminate between competing claims (see Förster, 2010), which exposes them collectively as a veneer for institutionalized extortion and abuse (Agbiboa, 2022; see also Meagher, 2016).

As Neil and Saw Day Chit Htoo and Edle et al. (this issue) remind us, symbolic claims at roadblocks should not simply be understood in terms derived from the spectre of the state, as claims are often embedded in and reflective of alternative moral economies. In Myanmar, roadblocks are entangled in a web of cosmological claims which, in some cases, involve elaborate religious rituals, while in Somalia, roadblocks are first and foremost understood by participants as claims based on — or in the case of al-Shabaab, against — clan prerogatives. In such cases, checkpoint encounters may invoke the script of gift-giving and tribute, which blurs the boundaries between registers of imposition, extraction, bribery and reciprocity (see Elsing, 2019). These case studies are a powerful reminder to attend to how roadblocks are involved in claim making beyond a narrow understanding of contentious politics.

HOW COMMODITY CHAINS SHAPE CLAIMMAKING

While we have hitherto discussed processes of claimmaking in isolation, they are not free-floating. As the contributions to this issue highlight, the politics of passage is shaped by three factors: the obstructability of commodities, itself a function of their bulkiness and the terrain through which they are moved; their modes of transportation; and their relative integration into global supply chains.

Some goods — particularly bulky items destined for export to a well-structured international market — will have more centralized marketing channels than goods that are more compact and sold in less organized markets. The obstructability of goods (Ross, 2003) simply means that a truck piled with timber, for instance, is easier to intercept and tax than someone with a pocketful of diamonds. In trade-dependent economies, the commodity chains of high-value bulk goods such as fuel, voluminous natural resources, livestock and manufactured products tend to be run by elites as a result of which these goods may enjoy special privilege or additional scrutiny at checkpoints. This is precisely why, as McCarthy and Nyana (this issue) illustrate, checkpoints operated by resistance groups in Myanmar focus disproportionately on the harassment and taxation of transporters of bulky goods, which tend to be in the hands of businesses owned by the military junta and, conversely, why Buchanan finds that the historical geography of checkpoints in Myanmar reflects the pathways of opium smuggling (Buchanan, this issue). The properties of the poppy — non-perishable,

concealable and high in value — combined with difficult terrain and the fragmented presence of armed actors, he argues, historically shaped not only the configuration of roadblocks but also the wider context of conflict. The relative obstructability of goods is also the reason why checkpoints may be employed to tax villages, artisanal mines and farms 'at a distance'; it is easier to tax them along roads where they pass in bulk rather than at dispersed production sites. This accounts, for instance, for the extraordinary concentration of checkpoints that Edle et al. (this issue) find along the feeder roads connecting Somali farmlands to urban markets.

Beyond the characteristics of goods, different modes of transport also shape variation in the politics of passage and the types of claims that can be made through roadblocks. Blaszkiewicz (2021) suggests that commodities are paced differently as they move through space depending on the type of transport route and the associated mode of transport. As Georg Dobler (2016) observes, it is easier to demand regular rents from or exert bureaucratic authority over the drivers of rows of trucks confined to paved highways than over small-scale traders making their way by foot over hilly jungle paths. That the logistical features of landscapes restrict or or create opportunities for setting up obligatory points of passage and extracting wealth from trade, permeates the contributions to this issue, but is brought to the fore most clearly in the contribution by Buchanan (this issue), who observes that mile-long donkey caravans shuttling opium through the forested hills of Myanmar were often so large and unwieldy that none but the most well-organized armed group could aspire to holding them up, and then only at specific natural passage points. The limitations and possibilities that the physical terrain present in the articulation of claims over passage are also evident in Zinati (this issue), who shows how Kurdish smugglers in Iran creatively navigate narrow and remote terrain by modifying their vehicles and alternating between evasion and negotiation to reduce exposure to both state and non-state extortion along main corridors. Mantilla (this issue) similarly traces how cross-border traders in the Colombia–Venezuela borderlands have turned to jungle footpaths which, although more arduous, offer an escape from the arbitrary violence and taxation along official routes (see Shell, 2015). However, such shifts in trade geographies often precipitate adaptation by armed actors, who are quick to seek and lay claim to control along such alternative routes.

A further consideration in relation to the nature of trade and how it may impact the types of claims made at roadblocks, is the relationship between commodity flows and global supply chains. Many of the commodity flows passing through the checkpoints under study in this issue ultimately connect to global supply chains, meaning that roadblocks shape and are shaped by transformations in global trade (see Schouten, 2022). Where livelihoods and wealth accumulation derive from the sphere of circulation rather than from production, threats to withhold passage are an especially powerful tool for collective claim-making. While development narratives often frame trade

as a driver of peace and prosperity, a deepening, yet often unequal, integration of people in global peripheries into international commodity chains (see Meagher, 2019) means that the violent distributional claims roadblocks articulate may in turn shape the embeddedness of commodity chains in local conflict dynamics. What may appear as cynical battles over checkpoint rents thus warrant the question of whether it is those excluded from the spoils of global supply chains that operate the roadblocks, or whether the capacity to operate a roadblock along a transnational trade route and extract wealth from it presupposes a degree of privilege within the local context. What is certain is that by embedding roadblock claims in the circuits of global supply chains, checkpoint operators are part of the friction that both sustains and structures the global flows of goods and capital (see Tsing, 2005), making their claims central not just to local order making but also to the contested processes of global development (see Raeymaekers, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

This article proposes the politics of passage as a new conceptual framework for understanding roadblocks, not simply as by-products of war or expressions of armed dominance, but as dynamic sites where economic, spatial, symbolic and moral claims are articulated and contested. This framework offers a set of analytical and empirical reorientations for the study of conflict, trade and order making more broadly.

First, it shifts the empirical locus of inquiry from territorial control to the regulation of circulation, inviting scholars and practitioners to treat chokepoints, corridors and everyday encounters as primary sites where authority is constituted and contested. This opens new avenues for comparative research across ostensibly disparate settings — from borderlands to urban peripheries — by focusing on how claims over movement structure political order. Second, it provides a vocabulary for disaggregating authority into spatial, distributive and symbolic claims, allowing for a more precise analysis of how claims over trade allow dissimilar actors to pursue different agendas through the same mechanism. Checkpoint encounters are rarely reducible to coercion or extortion alone; they are often sites of ritualized practice, moral performance and social ordering. Third, the politics of passage foregrounds the embeddedness of local claim-making practices within both situated material landscapes and global supply chains, suggesting that circulation in conflict-affected settings, whether trade or aid, inevitably interacts with and operates through local conflict dynamics rather than hovering over it.

Finally, methodologically, the framework underscores the value of studying situated interactions as generative of political order, thereby encouraging approaches that combine fine-grained ethnography with the analysis of broader logistical and economic systems. In doing so, we shift analytical

attention from static categories like 'state' or 'rebel governance' towards the relational and negotiated forms of authority that emerge in areas of contested statehood, through what we call everyday checkpoint encounters. Ultimately, the framework is not only a lens for interpreting checkpoints, but a portable heuristic device for rethinking how circulation, authority and conflict co-produce one another across scales and settings.

The collection of articles comprising this special issue conveys two broader points. The first is that historical and spatial contextualization are paramount. Several contributions illustrate how contemporary roadblock practices draw on long-standing patterns of control, such as colonial taxation regimes or clan-based trade facilitation, or mimic the very fiscal logic of the state that is contested. Tracing such continuities — or ruptures — helps to denaturalize the present proliferation of checkpoints across the world, and to situate checkpoints within broader genealogies of governance and circulation. Such approaches resist ahistorical readings that see checkpoints solely through the prism of recent conflict or as symptoms of state failure.

Second, the collection evinces that studying the politics of passage demands close attention to the way power is enacted, recognized and resisted in concrete practices. It calls for methodologies attuned to situated, idiosyncratic interactions and to the manner in which they are embedded in and interact with larger patterns of trade, governance and global circulation. As the articles in this collection demonstrate, in-depth qualitative research and ethnography, with sensitivity to ambiguity, repetition and contingency, prove especially valuable for capturing the negotiated nature of authority at roadblocks. Studying this enables researchers to trace how legitimacy is produced, how claims are framed and how authority becomes institutionalized — or remains contested.

As the background of the contributors to this collection shows, achieving this kind of proximity is contingent on intimate, locally grounded knowledge, not least to assess and navigate the ethical and security quandaries involved in settings where mobility itself is highly contested. The relations underpinning this special issue were often forged first through activist or humanitarian collaborations, demonstrating the extent to which current institutional frameworks at universities are largely insufficient (Cheng and Day, forthcoming). Conducting studies of checkpoints requires researchers to navigate complex landscapes and, frequently, to negotiate passage themselves. Hence, this special issue relies extensively on collaborative research with scholars from contexts that are characterized by the presence of roadblocks, and on ethnographic approaches which provide space for the authors to reflect on their positionality (see Vogel and Musamba, 2022).

By way of conclusion, roadblocks are sites where power is performed, claims are negotiated and the meanings of authority, legitimacy and belonging are forged in motion. The framework of the politics of passage invites scholars to treat roadblocks not as static emblems of state collapse or rebel rule, but as empirical sites where abstract forces — global capitalism, state

formation, insurgency — take material shape. By foregrounding claim making as the central dynamic of roadblock politics and by situating checkpoints within the broader contexts of conflict economies, contemporary supply chain capitalism and historical vagaries of state control over transport networks, this special issue contributes a foundational perspective for future research. The politics of passage, we argue, is not peripheral to questions of trade, development and statehood; it is central to them. This special issue underscores the importance of studying roadblocks not as isolated phenomena but as critical nodes where global, national and local processes intersect, shaping the lives of those who navigate them and the broader systems of circulation they disrupt and sustain.

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