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Chokepoints: Anthropologies of the Constricted Contemporary

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ABSTRACT

This article develops an anthropology of chokepoints: sites that constrict or ‘choke’ the flows of resources, information, and bodies upon which contemporary life depends. We argue that an ethnographic and analytical focus on chokepoints – ports, canals, tunnels, pipelines, transit corridors, and more – recasts longstanding anthropological concerns with the character and consequences of global circulation or ‘flow’. Chokepoints, we argue, are zones of operative paradox – where increased connectivity slows movement down; where the marginal become powerful; where local activities have distributed effects. Studied ethnographically, chokepoints reveal worlds animated neither by rapid circulation nor complete blockage, but by the dynamics of constriction and traffic. We approach the chokepoint as a site, an instrumental concept, and an analytic for exploring the constricted contemporary. Thinking with and through these choked arteries, we ask: What do chokepoints do? How? When? For whom? We conclude by offering eight dimensions of chokepoints as entry points for research.

KEYWORDS Chokepoints; circulation; globalisation; infrastructure; logistics

War chokes the flow of humanitarian aid through the port city of Hodeida and famine ripples through Yemen’s interior. Panama deepens its canal and distant ports scramble to dredge their harbours to accommodate the hulking ships suddenly able to transit the expanded waterway. Russian forces advance through the Caucasus Mountains via the Roki tunnel, taking the tunnel and, with it, the power to limit the eastward expansion of the European Union. Pirate ‘fishermen’ gather at the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, intending to capture ships bound for the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Central American migrants gather to make the perilous journey north, only to be funnelled into makeshift

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campus at the US border. Held there by half-baked policies and politics and occasional force, the would-be refugees wait indefinitely for asylum claims to be processed.

These are all chokepoints: sites that constrict or 'choke' the flows of resources, information, and bodies upon which contemporary life depends. Chokepoints have long been recognised for their considerable economic, political, and military significance. Narrow, often difficult to avoid, and heavily trafficked, chokepoints can present risks and potentially paralysing vulnerabilities to vital systems and networks. There is always the potential that they will be shut down or become too congested, crippling mobility, exchange, and communication. Some chokepoints are apparent like the overburdened internet server or traffic-prone intersection. Others shape our lives in covert ways. In either case, analysts tend to approach them at a remove – as nodes in networks or logistical problems to be solved. As a result, we know surprisingly little about how chokepoints work in practice and even less about everyday life *in* and *around* them.

In this special issue of *Ethnos*, we develop an anthropology of chokepoints. For us, the chokepoint is a useful analytic for examining the operative – and often generative – interplay of circulation and constriction in the contemporary world. The term 'chokepoint', which generally refers to a point of constriction or blockage within a system, network, or process, is used across a variety of domains, including: shipping, logistics, engineering, security, military operations, and labour organising. Across communities of practice, significant points of constriction may be recognised at different registers. The most obvious chokepoints are geographical sites associated with narrow passages, but others may be unrecognisable in Euclidean space. Think, for example, of a patent that restricts the production of cheap medicines, a regulation that slows internet traffic, or a shortage of key workers needed to keep traffic moving. Recognising that the concept refers to a range of phenomena, the anthropological approach that we develop focuses on sites conducive to ethnographic research.

For anthropologists and other scholars, we argue, the chokepoint can serve as an analytic that renders unexpected and significant spatiotemporal connections and social relationships visible, recasting a range of contemporary problems, including: mobility, migration, logistics, trade, geopolitics, security, and statecraft. But 'chokepoint' is more than a description of a site or node conducive to scholarly analysis. It is also a concept that a range of actors – politicians, planners, managers, and military strategists – deploy in their own analyses, claims, and interventions. Given that 'chokepoint' is used by our interlocutors as both a concept and analytic, sometimes in our fieldwork settings, what does it mean to redeploy it for anthropological ends? We argue that the chokepoint can be usefully understood as a lateral concept (Gad & Jensen 2016). To think about anthropological concepts in 'lateral' terms (Maurer 2005) underlines the fact that ethnographers and their interlocutors pursue parallel and, increasingly, intersecting (Riles 2000) lines of thought and analysis. Methodologically, lateral analysis entails 'tacking back and forth' (Helmreich 2011: 138) between the chokepoint as a phenomenon in the world and a concept used by others. With this as a point of departure, we ask: How do chokepoints work? For whom? With what effects? How are they implicated in power relations and struggles? What forms of labour – formal and informal, licit and illicit – do they depend on and

give rise to? What spatiotemporal relations do they produce? What methods and modes of analysis do they enable?

Chokepoints are zones of operative paradox in several key ways. First, the anthropological (and public) imagination about global connection tends to assume that increased spatial connectivity – more and bigger conduits – leads to accelerated circulation. However, our ethnographic research in and around the material channels of ‘global flow’ – roads, tunnels, pipelines, and waterways – suggests that connectivity and speed should be conceptually delinked. At chokepoints, we find, increased connectivity may slow things down. As a matter of everyday operation, the resulting traffic is emblematic of chokepoints’ function and dysfunction. Second, chokepoints can disrupt conventional paradigms of power and agency, opening up space for potential transformation, even if subtle or limited. They are places where the weak can become strong; where the everyday tactics of getting through and getting by can undermine the grand strategies of capital and security; and where digital technologies can outperform analog technologies. An indigenous community blockades a key highway to protest extractivist encroachment, turning the state’s infrastructure against it. *Dhows* (wooden sailing vessels) navigate in the shadows of supertankers, ferrying everyday essentials between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Pilots are trained on miniature physical models to navigate the complex winds and currents that affect megaships plying the Panama Canal. Third, and finally, chokepoints may be locatable on a map, but they are not exclusively ‘local’ phenomena. What happens at chokepoints can ripple well beyond the chokepoint itself, making them geographically distributed in their effects. A well-timed strike at a logistics hub or port can cripple a supply chain. A terror threat at a major airport can trigger cascading delays worldwide.

The paradoxes associated with chokepoints are productive entry points for anthropological inquiry. Ethnography, in particular, can reveal the micro-workings of these pivotal spaces, showing how operative paradoxes structure lifeworlds and the networks and flows with which they articulate. An anthropology of chokepoints might allow the analyst to attend to how such spaces are mobilised from within, nearby, and at a distance – and to what ends. For militaries and businesses, chokepoints may be spaces to control and benefit from through the appropriation and of these forces. Chokepoints, in this regard, become staging grounds for capitalist, biopolitical and geontological agendas (Povinelli 2016). But for traffickers, repairmen, service crews, pirates, smugglers, soldiers and others, chokepoints can be ‘worked’ to a variety of ends so as to siphon off value, challenge the status quo, or subvert the logics of globalisation. What emerges in and around the chokepoint, then, are high-stakes interplays and tensions between circulation and regulation, local and remote forces, and human and non-human agencies, often with unexpected and far-ranging effects. These dynamics demand ethnographic attention.

By foregrounding constriction and tracing its effects across scales, chokepoint anthropology recasts longstanding concerns with the character and consequences of global circulation and ‘flow’. These metaphors, significantly, dovetail with meta-narratives that link ever-increasing connectivity with speed (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996; Hannerz 1989; Virilio 1977). Scholars have challenged global-centric obsessions

with flow on theoretical grounds (Rockefeller 2011) and political grounds (Escobar 2001). In practice, anthropologists observed, pathways, networks and linkages are lumpy, discontinuous, and contested (Walley 2004, 8–12). In response, scholars generated new concepts and metaphors for understanding global connection like assemblages (Ong & Collier 2004; Sassen 2008), technological zones (Barry 2006), logistical corridors (Cowen 2014; Chua *et al.* 2018), and infrastructures (Easterling 2014; Edwards *et al.* 2007).

While many scholars have argued ‘against flow’ (Starosielski 2015), we use chokepoints to think *against speed*. There is a sense that life has been speeding up everywhere in late capitalism (Duclos *et al.* 2017; Wacjman 2015),¹ even as the resurgence of borders walls, embargos, and detention camps highlights the persistence of blockage, enforced emplacement, captivity, and stuckness (Dunn 2018; Feldman 2015; O’Neill & Dua 2018; Ramadan 2013). Against this backdrop, the anthropology of chokepoints prompts a different reading of circulation. At chokepoints, the movement of people, commodities, and information is neither completely fluid nor obstructed, but somewhere in-between: slowed, filtered, controlled, and ‘choked’ in ways that ripple across space and time. This is a world animated not only by circulation (and corresponding dynamics of flow, blockage, and speed) but also, we argue, by constriction and traffic. To think through chokepoints, analytically and ethnographically, foregrounds a different set of actors, ecologies, and mechanisms. Chokepoints expose the underside of global circulation – the situated processes through which deterritorialized flows are channelled, diverted, and bogged-down in the murky, sticky particularities of localities.

Consider Lock No. 52: a non-obtrusive structure located on the Ohio River in Southern Illinois, just 23 miles upriver from its confluence with the Mississippi River. Built in 1929, the aging facility – concrete cracked, paint peeling – looks like an artefact of another era and a different economy, a now-mythical time when centres of American industry pumped cargo through the nation’s inland waterways via barges. Nevertheless, this structure remains one of the busiest conduits for North American commerce – and one of the biggest chokepoints on the twenty-first century United States economy. For years, traffic has backed up waiting to pass through the lock, which has regularly been closed for hours or days at a time due to issues associated with deferred maintenance. The lockmaster put it this way, ‘The lock is kept going with all of the bubble gum and duct tape we’ve got left’ (Kelley 2016). As a result of Lock 52 and Lock 53, just downstream, it can take 5 days to travel a 100-mile stretch of river. The chokepoint manages to be simultaneously out-of-the-way – distant from major cities, it is roughly midway between Nashville and St. Louis – and central to national commerce. Tens of billions of dollars of cargo – grain, corn, coal, steel, cement, and more – pass through it annually, so when it is closed or traffic-clogged, there are reverberations far beyond Illinois and the barge industry. Cargo is diverted onto trucks, which then overburden highways, generating chokepoints elsewhere. The prices of exports and consumer goods rise, constricting manufacturers’ international competitiveness and the everyday purchasing power of labourers. What happens at Lock 52 has implications for millions of people.² Such

chokepoints are not only good to control or pass through, they are also – to use Levi-Strauss’s timeworn phrase – *good to think*. But, how do we think about something like this? Something that is both a concept and a thing in the world?

Chokepoints: Site, Concept, Analytic

Undersea cables, ports, migration bottlenecks, pipelines, highways, and financial algorithms – these can all become chokepoints. So what makes a chokepoint a chokepoint? What we have in mind with the anthropology of chokepoints is an approach that turns on a signature condition of the contemporary: constriction. We argue that it is productive to approach the chokepoint as, on the one hand, a site and, on the other, a concept that our interlocutors use to analyse and act in the world. Thus, as we note above, it can be methodologically and analytically productive to tack back and forth (Helmreich 2011: 138) between the chokepoint as a site and a circulating concept.

Though many chokepoints are recognisable as Euclidean spatial forms (like a narrow geographic passage), others take on different forms specific to the systems, networks, and processes of concern. Indeed, networks, as Nicole Starosielski argues (2019), can have multiple chokepoints – and multiple kinds of chokepoints – which articulate with one another in predictable and unpredictable ways. The undersea cables of the internet converge at particular nodes (topological chokepoints), while, above the surface, a confounding array of regulatory chokepoints constrict and route the flow of information (and profits) to some and not others (Starosielski 2019; also Tusikov 2017). If chokepoints are sites in network space, the ‘chokepoint’ concept can also be a tool itself: a means of making claims (upon resources, territory, and so on) and a rationale for intervention (like securitisation or regulation). With the anthropology of chokepoints, we propose an approach that, by focusing attention on the interplay of circulation and constriction, as well as speed and slowness, illuminates spatio-temporal connections and social forms that may otherwise be difficult to see.³

Approached in this way, chokepoints can provide ethnographic purchase amid the kinetic fray of circulation and global connection. As a field site, the chokepoint is at once situated and distributed, confounding conventional understandings of locality. This calls for careful attention to the social, material, and technological particularities of the sites that serve as lynchpins of broader systems, including the forms of passage (and life) that they facilitate and impede. But local conditions are only part of what makes a chokepoint a chokepoint. Activities at these points shape geopolitics, economies, and everyday life far from their locations on the map. To properly frame chokepoints as objects of anthropological study, we need to trace something else: movement. Or, more accurately, *movement-through*. Only then can we begin to understand the dynamics of constriction that define chokepoints and, in so doing, shape the contemporary.

We are not, of course, the first to train our eyes on chokepoints. Historically, they have emerged as loci of attention, anxiety, and strategic planning for military tacticians and transport logisticians (Cowen 2014). Scholars of transportation geography, not surprising, have approached chokepoints as places in need of modelling and analysis –

logistical challenges to be managed in the service of broader transportation and shipping flows (Rodrigue 2004). Meanwhile, critical logistics scholarship has turned managerial analysis on its head by tracing the logics of power and capital embedded in and advanced through the so-called logistics revolution (Chua *et al.* 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson 2015). In this work, chokepoints figure as diagnostic nodes: sites that lay bare the contradictions, assumptions, and vulnerabilities of global trade and flow. Similarly, sociologists of labour and world-systems theorists have rediscovered chokepoints as sites of opportunity for reinvigorating global labour movements – locales where precarious workforces might disrupt the juggernaut of global trade in a manner that adapts the organising successes of the twentieth century to fit a changed set of conditions (Alimahomed-Wilson & Ness 2018; Gutelius 2016). All of these interventions highlight critical dynamics of chokepoints.

The approach charted here builds upon and extends this work in two significant ways. First, chokepoint scholarship tends to focus on geographically conventional nodes (ports, straits, production systems, etc.), limiting the analytical potential of what chokepoints are and can be. We, by contrast, conceptualise chokepoints broadly, as sites that funnel and constrict not just commodity flows, but broader possibilities and dynamics. This allows us, for example, to see global climate hotspots as chokepoints not only of space but of time (Cons in this volume). Second, the chokepoint analytic focuses attention on the dynamic interplay of circulation and constriction. Useful here is Tsing's (2000) call to resituate global flows in 'landscapes' so as to understand how circulation is contingent upon the work of establishing and contesting 'channels'. The chokepoint analytic that we propose extends Tsing's metaphors of 'landscapes' and 'channels' and, later, 'friction' (2005). But, whereas friction emphasises how global interconnection works across and through difference, chokepoints foreground constriction as the means and ends of a range of practices and projects. Put another way, constriction is not simply a drag on unbridled flow and speed. It is a generative social process through which people engaged in different activities collectively alter the trajectory, pace, and character of circulation. This raises interesting questions: How – and by whom – does constriction happen? What forms of social, political, and economic life does it engender? How do actors negotiate or manipulate passage for their own purposes? What happens to things, bodies, and ideas as they move toward, through, and out of the chokepoint?

Dimensions of Chokepoints: What, Where, How, When, for Whom, Why?

We offer the following eight dimensions as openings for an anthropology of chokepoints. They provide analytic bearings and ethnographic entry points for navigating choked spaces and times.

- (1) *Chokepoints are constructed.* While physical geographies like narrow terrestrial and aquatic passages are often associated with the concept, chokepoints are brought into being and maintained by people and institutions who appropriate, manage, and alter sociomaterial features for political control, profit, surveillance, protest,

and so on. While the lifeworlds of chokepoints often appear peripheral to global circulation, they are mutually constituted through visible and invisible exchanges (Valdivia in this volume). Thus, we might ask: How is this chokepoint made, maintained, and manipulated? By whom? Why? To what effect?

- (2) *Chokepoints are a means of exerting control or amplifying power.* States, firms, organised labour, and social movements may seek to establish and control chokepoints because of their political and economic instrumentality; they are difficult to bypass and often vital to the operation of larger systems. Capturing and channelling circulation is a means of enacting political authority at multiple scales, from the national, where chokepoints can be deployed for statemaking (Dua in this volume), to the regional and global, where vascular geopolitics can create or alter international relations (Dunn in this volume). Thus, the chokepoint becomes a node where power can be established and exerted across larger territories (Rodrigue 2004; Mitchell 2011). By the same token, chokepoints are vulnerable nodes where acts of sabotage and resistance have amplified effects. What happens at chokepoints, then, can turn expected power dynamics upside down. But approached ethnographically, chokepoint power dynamics do not demonstrate a neat domination-resistance binary. As the articles in this volume show, diverse forms of power are generated around these sites.
- (3) *Chokepoints are relational or ecological.* While geopolitical and managerial analyses tend to highlight how particular sites or conduits are appropriated and deployed by pre-defined social and political groups to coerce, control, and exploit, the reality on the ground is negotiated and messy. Chokepoints are different things for different people at different times. For the city planner, congested roads are a problem. But for the smuggler, they are camouflage. And, for the roadside vendor, they create a captive market. Like infrastructures, chokepoints appear only as a relational phenomenon, not a thing that is stripped of use (Star & Ruhleder 1996: 113). What chokepoints are and do depends on one's position. Moreover, the profusion of competing claims and practices that come together around chokepoints – both actual and potential – can produce constriction and congestion within them (Cons in this volume).
- (4) *Chokepoints depend on and give rise to particular forms of labour.* Born of the relation between movement and site, their establishment, securitisation, and everyday operation require skill and expertise that can be site-specific. Not coincidentally, we see a familiar cast of characters – the regulator, the engineer, the navigator, the smuggler, the soldier, the pirate, etc. – ‘working’ chokepoints to different ends. For example, navigating large oceangoing ships through confined waterways depends on skilled pilots with embodied knowledge of the chokepoint environment (Carse in this volume). Acting in ways that span in/formal, il/legal, and il/legible domains, people also develop inventive and pragmatic means of working with and around immediate constrictions in ways that can have repercussions beyond the chokepoint itself (Middleton in this volume; Valdivia in this volume). We inserted backslashes in in/formal, il/legal, and il/legible to flag the fact that ambiguities and shifting roles in and around chokepoints can have a

range of possible effects. Customs agents, for example, organise rackets to smuggle goods and bodies through a ‘sensitive’ chokepoint. Who, after all, is better positioned to facilitate (and profit from) illicit passage than the gatekeeper?

- (5) *Chokepoints can be geographically distributed.* As sites in various forms of space (Euclidian, networked, etc.), chokepoints transcend locality. They can come into existence and morph through the convergence of long-range forces (Dunn in this volume). Their existence, control, and constriction have both upstream and downstream dynamics, which can be imagined as deltas of influence. This distributed spatiality is, of course, central to their definition as chokepoints because the term implies a relationship between a node and a longer network or larger circulatory system.
- (6) *Chokepoints are locationally sticky, but can also be mutable and mobile.* It is easy to imagine how chokepoints can be appropriated and reappropriated by different groups. Less obvious are the ways that chokepoints can be moved or transformed. To be clear, this is not easy. Because chokepoints can produce stubborn entanglements of social and material forms, shifting them may require immense labour and investment. But it can be done (as Dunn emphasises in this volume). Indeed, as commercial and geopolitical imperatives shift, old chokepoints may be rendered obsolete and new ones constructed. As Jatin Dua (this volume) shows, chokepoint sovereignty is a tenuous thing. Chokepoints, then, can be understood as sticky phenomena that become mutable and mobile with enough heft and luck.
- (7) *Chokepoints emerge in time and constrain temporalities.* Chokepoints are sites where multiple temporalities intersect. Measured in the time of hours and days, they draw attention to the variable speeds at which things circulate in relation to material features. The heavy traffic and slow movements that define chokepoint time raise questions about the sense of steady acceleration often linked with the temporal experience of modernity. While we often imagine chokepoints as spatial phenomena that exist in time, the concept of a narrow passage that constrains movement from one point to another can be extended to consider the relationships among temporalities. Just as a pipeline limits the flow of oil, there are spaces where multiple dissonant futures are invoked and actively anticipated in the present: industrial development promising boundless economic growth coexists with impending environmental apocalypse. As a temporal metaphor, the chokepoint reveals how future possibilities may be constrained – or choked – by the coexistence of too many proposals in the present (Cons in this volume). We may, accordingly, posit that there are both chokepoints in time and of time.
- (8) *Chokepoints enable telescopic analysis.* Chokepoints look different depending on the scale of analysis. From the bird’s-eye-view of the geopolitical or logistical analyst, the chokepoint is conceptualised as a node among lines and boundaries. Nations make territorial claims, pursuing political advantage. Firms seek to capitalise on supply chains. However, the everyday dynamics of chokepoints trouble these strategies and the meta-narratives of global circulation, connectivity, security upon which they are predicated. For example, the global transition to a new class of megaships hinges not only on reengineering infrastructure and environments, but

also, and crucially, training pilots to develop a ‘feel’ for how larger vessels handle in confined waterways (Carse in this volume). Seen through the lens of everyday pragmatics (Middleton in this volume), geopolitical strategies and techno-formal processes of logistics and security also give rise to and are confounded by local tactics of getting through and getting by. Thus, chokepoint ethnographies can be a useful complement to macro-scale analyses and provide new entry points for theorising global circulation – from the margins ‘within’, as it were (Valdivia in this volume). Here, the big doesn’t only explain the small; the small also explains the big. As an analytic, then, the chokepoint serves as a telescope for exploring relationships and disjunctures across multiple spatial and temporal scales.

Notes

1. To be clear, this wasn’t a new phenomenon or even a new recognition. Indeed, the history of modernity can be read as a relationship to the future associated with a sense of acceleration (Koselleck 2004). Scholars locate transportation and communication networks at the centre of a longer history of space-time compression (Harvey 1989) and the lived experience of the ‘annihilation of space and time’ by speed (Schivelbusch 2014).
2. This paragraph is based on journalistic reporting (Kelley 2016; *The Economist* 2017). At the time of writing, the aging locks are in the process of being replaced by a new facility, which is open but not yet fully operational.
3. This is inspired by Barry’s (2006, 243–44) conception of technological zones. He notes that the concept is a heuristic that illuminates certain relationships and forms, but, in so doing, it abstracts from the immense social complexity that exceeds its analytical framing. The chokepoint concept can be understood in this same way.

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