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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ludo Tricks and the Unserious Actor in the Trucking Business

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Abstract

Anthropological studies based on participant observation, with the goal of producing context-sensitive, holistic sociocultural descriptions of high-risk industries, are few and far between. This article focuses on the intentional bending and breaking of safety-related rules and regulations in the European road-based commercial goods transport sector. When accidents and other unwanted events occur in the sector, loss of life and material damage are often inevitable due to the high energies involved in truck accidents and crashes. Based on fieldwork in Norway, the article explores rule bending in day-to-day work across the transport chain, from terminal workers and truck drivers to transport company managers and owners. It highlights both the performances and the rationalizations of rule-bending behavior and provides a conceptualization of rule bending as actions that are continually deliberated in the sector and justified by the concept of "the unserious actor." The main argument of the article is that this concept is a constructed category that both guides and restricts rule bending in the sector. This line of thinking draws on Fredrik Barth's (2010) discussion of the continuous establishment and re-establishment of ethnic groups and boundaries – an approach that has not previously

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been used to understand safety and risk taking in the road-based heavy goods transport sector.

Keywords

Anthropology of work, Safety and risk taking, Road-based transport, Norway.

Introduction

In 2015, a young man who had just obtained his CE-class driver's license for commercial trucks only a few days earlier, and who had recently started his new job as a truck driver, waited in the darkness of the early morning outside a terminal in Norway where he was supposed to pick up a shipment. The terminal workers loaded his truck, and he drove the shipment to its end-destination. He did not know what was in the first shipment, and he performed several shipments like this the following year. It was only much later that he found out through colleagues that he had been transporting some dangerous goods[1], shipments that required both a special license and specialized equipment, of which he had none. The transport of dangerous goods such as explosives and chemicals by road is heavily regulated in EU legislation. These regulations include rules governing the classification of dangerous substances and articles; the training of personnel involved in the transport; packaging; labelling; and the vehicles used to carry such goods. The rules applied within the EU are also harmonized with international regulations through the European Agreement concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road (ADR), under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

Talking to the driver some years after his early morning pickup, I was already several months into fieldwork in the trucking business. The topic I gave special attention concerned what employees in the sector and regulators such as the police and the public roads administration called rule bending, referring to instances where safety regulations and rules are sometimes ignored, only nominally complied with, or not followed strictly to the letter. My first encounter with research in the heavy goods transport sector had been some years earlier, interviewing car drivers who had gotten stuck in one of Norway's many sub-sea tunnels when a truck had started to burn while traveling downhill inside the tunnel. Although no one died following the fire or its enormous production of

[1] Dangerous goods are defined in and regulated by the European Agreement concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road (ADR) applicable as from 1 January 2011 (https://unece.org/adr-2011-files).

Image 1: Truck catching fire in the Oslofjord tunnel 2011. Photo: The Norwegian Public Roads Administration.

smoke, the rescue efforts had been dramatic and, for the survivors, quite distressing.

Crashes, accidents, and other unwanted events involving trucks can easily result in loss of life and in damage to private or public property. I was inspired by the tunnel incident and by the idea that rule bending in the sector may be a contributing factor to accidents (Njå, Braut, and Vika 2012). This article aims to use anthropological methods in the heavy goods vehicle (HGV) sector and contribute to understanding the term "rule bending," which has proven to be elusive. While the term is accepted as a part of everyday speech in the sector, it has not been shown to be particularly useful for the actors who regulate transport safety and investigate accidents (Kuran, Newnam, and Beanland 2022). The main argument of this article is that the concept of "the unserious actor" is a constructed category that both guides and restricts rule bending in the sector. This line of thinking draws on Fredrik Barth's (2010) discussions of the continuous establishment and re-establishment of ethnic groups and boundaries – an approach that has not previously been used to understand safety and risk taking in the road-based heavy goods transport sector. Barth (1990: 651) suggests that the key element is a focus on efficient causes, to show how the cultural and interactional enablement and constraints affect actors, with consequences that can be seen in the patterning of resulting acts and the aggregated entailments.

Transport and Value

The transport of goods can be viewed as a form of material culture (Webb 1974), including people, materials, technologies, and politics. This makes the road a useful arena to do fieldwork for anthropologists who have culture as their primary object of study (Clarke 2020). Roads can also be conceptualized as "non-places" (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012), spaces that should be accessible for cultural critique. This perspective aligns with the notion of container economics, which highlights the global circulation of cargo sustained by undervalued labor sources (Leivestad and Markkula 2021). This concept underscores the significance of the road-based sector as goods travel inland, accounting for kinship, ethnicity, and coexisting regimes of value in late-stage capitalism. While safety science researchers and safety engineers may describe the transport chain as a sociotechnical system, the main focus for an anthropologist is the people you observe, meet, and talk to. Field studies of people in the road-based transport industry have mainly focused on truck drivers (Nóvoa 2014; Sørli 2005). Topics explored in these studies include masculinity, nationality, and the truck as a symbol, rather than safety as such.

An economic perspective on the transport sector is unavoidable, and transport as coined by David Harvey (2017) is "value in motion." Indeed, the road-based transport system of commercial goods is the lifeblood of European trade and commerce, a vital part of the critical infrastructure of the EU and its member countries. In the EU, there are about three and a half million drivers responsible for a continuous flow of goods across the borders (EU 2021). The transport industry is also one of Europe's largest sectors, employing people in terminals, as forwarders, as managers, and, of course, accompanied by public servants in the role of regulators and controllers.

The concept of worker estrangement can be valuable in this context, pointing to the gap between the work of drivers and managers and the wider sociotechnical system in which they work. Estrangement was originally articulated by Karl Marx (2016 [1844]) as central to understanding labor under capitalism. Marx identified four dimensions of alienation: estrangement from the product, the process of production, one's species-being, and other workers. These forms of alienation arise because labor becomes commodified, subordinating human creativity to the imperatives of capital accumulation. In late capitalism, as described by Ernest Mandel (1975), these dynamics intensify through globalization, financialization, and technological acceleration.

In the EU, there is a constant transnational flow of goods, technology, people, money, and services, fulfilling the societal demands for flexibility, mobility, and just-in-time deliveries and services. In 2022, the transport and storage sector in the EU-27 alone employed around 3.4 million people across 586,850 enterprises (EU 2025: 24). The drivers and

managers hold central positions in this complex, as their presence and work are integral to the facilitation of all supply chain functions (Bode, Lindemann, and Wagner 2011). Also, relationships and interconnections in the sector can be complex. As one informant with long experience as a truckdriver in Europe explained:

> One of the largest state-owned transport companies in Norway, responsible for the postal services, has daughter companies in Slovakia, which hire drivers from Romania, who are transported by bus to drive trucks in the Norwegian market, using Slovakian-registered vehicles.

Changes in EU policy have placed restrictions on many activities, but the overall approach from the EU has been to slowly deregulate and allow for a steady increase in the transport of goods (Lafontaine and Valeri 2005). The processes through which this occurs are shaped by many interests and by capital. Anna Tsing (2009) points out that leading companies make significant efforts to manage diversity among their suppliers, but supply chains are far more difficult to govern than corporations or state agencies. In the era of neoliberal globalization, they frequently operate in legal grey areas and shift continually with cycles of boom and bust (2009: 150). This may suggest that rule bending might not only be something that happens during the physical transport but is also a well-known feature of a complex system in which transport is regulated, negotiated, bought, planned, and performed.

Trucking in Norway

The bending and breaking of safety-related rules and regulations in the heavy goods transport sector – and the fact that this is a safety concern – is a well-known topic in the Norwegian mainstream media and on social media. A Facebook group titled "Stop the death trucks on Norwegian winter roads!" (*Stopp dødstrailerne på norske vinterveier!*) had almost 30,000 members in 2023 and is only one of many small initiatives. Posts in the group highlight instances in which drivers who are tired do not comply with rest- and work-hour regulations, use inappropriate tires for winter driving, or inadequately secure cargo, often linking to newspaper articles and essays.

While the public shows great interest in the conversation about traffic safety related to trucks, no comprehensive effort has so far been made to explain the scope of such behavior or why and how it occurs, beyond putting blame on "unserious actors" in the sector who prioritize profit over safety. This concept and social category – the unserious actor –

Image 2: Trucks during rest hours. Photo: The author.

is integral to workers' self-perception and to acts of rule bending, as I will explain in more detail in this article.

It seems that, while the widespread bending and breaking of safety-related rules and regulations by truck drivers is often taken for granted and characterizes work in the sector, the phenomenon is also supported by research (Grytnes et al. 2016; Sørli 2005). Activities that fall within the category of rule bending can include, for example, the loading of trucks with inappropriate cargo or inappropriate combinations of cargo; the driver not loading, securing, or emptying their own vehicle; the driver violating driving-time and rest-period regulations; the manager failing to provide their employees with the proper documentation for cargo; the company fleet controller assigning drivers to unrealistic routes or threatening to fire employees who want to comply with safety rules (Kuran and Njå 2016).

An issue worth noting is also that the workspace of truck drivers is very small. While they do have miles upon miles of roads, they are also confined to the cabins of their trucks. Several of the drivers I got to know used the opportunity to show me – either in the cabins of their trucks or by marking off an area on the floor – how little space they have to use in their daily work. The size of the cabin is not a limitation while they drive, but, for many, the cabin is also where they eat, sleep, and often spend their free time. For long-haul drivers, free time is also spent far away from both their hometown and their family. On trucker websites and in union magazines, the individual connection to the business and the job as a trucker is often expressed though legacy and familial connections. Some magazines have pages dedicated to truck drivers who have passed away, including their names and how long they worked in the business. Interviews with young drivers in the same press often feature paragraphs on why they chose to go into the business and what familial connections are important, such as references to a father or uncle who worked in the business. Indeed, "having trucking in the blood" is a common phrase. The

idea of trucking as a calling or, at least, as a way of life, is prevalent in the sector. This echoes how Tsing (2009) notes that supply chain capitalism is enmeshed in, and dependent on, the cultural tapestry of life, gender, familial bonds, and national status.

Methodology

In 2012, a paper by Ove Njå, Geir Sverre Braut, and Ove Erik Vika (2012) also highlighted rule-bending behavior as a major challenge in the study of safety in the road-based transport sector, since modern supply chains involve many layers of subcontractors, brokers, and informal actors. This makes it difficult to trace who actually performs which tasks or makes which decisions. Furthermore, they suggest that previous research has largely focused on accident data and immediate causes, giving much less attention to broader trends and current circumstances. Understanding the transport chain requires a more comprehensive approach, one that considers contextual, inter-organizational, individual, and cultural influences, leading Njå, Braut, and Vika to state that "the most effective way to achieve this is through ethnographic research methods" (2012: 2347).

In the last few decades, anthropologist have gradually widened their ethnographic gaze towards more interconnected communities and complex transnational processes. In this study, a challenge has been to provide an account not only of the drivers' day-to-day activities, but also of the practices of a broad variety of people operating across different localities, professions, legal frameworks, and statuses. How it is possible to create deep descriptions when the transport chain is so multi-local has been a guiding concern (Geertz 1973; Marcus 1995). The fieldwork has been multi-sited, with one initial major point of entry being participation in various groups and fora online.

Based on continuous interaction with employees and sporadic observation in the transport sector over a five-year period, I approached the actions and perceptions of the actors from the perspectives of their day-to-day work in the transport chain, including terminal workers, fleet controllers, and transport company managers, focusing on performances of rule bending and rule breaking. Several sites and locations were used to do participant observation such as, for instance, being a passenger in trucks in the day-to-day work and speaking with various actors in gas station restaurants, roadside diners, and hostels. The control stations of the Norwegian Public Roads Administration (NPRA) were also key sites for observations and conversations. Furthermore, time was spent at three transport terminals in eastern Norway, and many visits to companies often included a tour of the facilities and conversations over lunches and dinners in the cantina of the companies. While it is difficult to estimate the total number of informants, key informants numbered about 20 and

Image 3: The author in one of the Public Roads Administration control stations in Norway. Photo: Reidar Mikkelsen.

others about 50. The informants were mainly drivers, terminal workers, and transport managers, as well as others in key roles in the NPRA, police, and driving schools for heavy vehicles.

One additional site consisted in the creation of a 10 ECTS course at the bachelor level at the University of Stavanger. The course, focusing on traffic and transport safety, ran over a semester, with sessions lasting for several days. I recruited people who worked in the transport sector, such as drivers, driving instructors, and transport managers, but also other people who had much to do with the sector in their daily working lives. This site functioned in the same way as a para-site, described by Hadi Nicholas Deeb and George E. Marcus (2011) as a forum in which, informed by fieldwork, some of the actors gather together and discuss topics in a more distilled and straightforward way than usual. While some of the informants were involved in developing the course, they were not, however, involved directly in the development of the course materials.

In my approach to the field, I have found it valuable to entertain the notions of process and exchange suggested by Fredrik Barth (1994). The cumulative effects of differences in the day-to-day performance of roles in the transport sector can contribute to an overall acceptance of rule bending and breaking. As Barth (1990) puts it:

> I wish to demonstrate the cumulative effects of such different role performances on the very traditions that are being transmitted […] expose the wellsprings of two basically different informational economies, by identifying the pressures that direct the intellectual effort of incumbents of those two very different roles (1990: 642).

In the choice of interpretative process analysis as my approach, I take it to be possible, through observations over time, to provide "a critical account of the actors' perceived purposes, concepts, and meanings," seeking the "inadvertent, cumulative effects of activity to which actors are propelled by perceived necessities or advantages attaching to other aspects" (1990: 651). This has been a focus in the fieldwork on ongoing social processes, not just structures or forms, but how decisions are made in real time. Thus, I have spent time situating myself in the field, applying a variety of opportunities to observe in the various sites, both physical and digital, and, over the five years of the project, I have built relationships with many informants, ranging from sales executives to individual truck drivers (Feldman 2011). Barth (1994) suggests that we look for "general features, the regularities in social life, repetitive actions observed in the social system" (1994: 33), which is what I have sought to explore when researching rule bending in the HGV sector.[2]

Bending the Rules

In the fall of 2017, I was conducting fieldwork, observing the daily routine at a roadside control station for heavy goods vehicles. The station was situated along one of the central roads in Rogaland County in western Norway, an area of the country characterized by its winding roads along the fjords, sudden changes in elevation, and many tunnels. As per normal procedure, the inspectors of the NPRA had turned on a bright sign, signaling to truck drivers approaching on the road to drive into the parking area of the control station for inspection. In 2019, about 90,500 vehicles were inspected at roadside NPRA stations in Norway. Of those 90,500, more than 20,000 were subsequently forbidden to finish their current transport missions, as they were judged by the inspectors to be unfit for traffic. Reasons given for the temporary bans were often to ensure traffic safety, requiring considerable improvements to be made to either the vehicles or the cargo before any bans could be lifted. Such improvements ranged from the re-securing of cargo or changing equipment to comply with EU and national standards. Also, issues could be raised by the inspectors concerning the registration of vehicles, the paperwork for the cargo, the licenses of the drivers, or suspicions regarding drivers violating driving-time and rest-period regulations.

On a particularly windy day, some inspectors were speaking with drivers who had pulled off the main road and parked near the control

[2] Ethical approval for the project was attained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data in 2022 and from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research in 2016. The project is in accordance with Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH 2024) and also informed by the ethical guidelines developed by the Norwegian Anthropological Associations – Forum for Ethics in Ethnographic Research (FEEF 2023).

station. The inspectors were checking paperwork, measuring the weight of the trucks, and occasionally asking the drivers to open their trucks to allow for physical inspection of the cargo. I struck up a conversation with a young Dutch driver in his twenties whose truck was parked some distance away from the main station. He had temporarily been banned regarding further transport by one of the inspectors. The reason given concerned one particular piece of cargo that he was transporting. In addition to various building materials and some crates, his truck also carried a drum filled with chemicals. The inspectors stated that, based on the markings on the drum, the contents constituted dangerous goods; that is, materials or items that are potentially hazardous and pose a risk to people, property, or the environment if they are not handled, transported, or stored properly. Examples of such dangerous goods include explosives, flammable liquids or gases, toxic or infectious substances, and radioactive materials.

The young driver's truck did not have the proper markings, nor did the driver have the certificates necessary to transport such goods. A friend of mine who was also at the site remarked later that there also seemed to be a problem with how the cargo surrounding the drum was secured; a metal plate appeared to be slowly edging into the drum, potentially applying critical pressure. The young driver himself was mildly agitated. He had been waiting for the inspector to return for a while before I started talking with him. Also, he was under some social pressure, having talked with his employer and the customer who was expecting the cargo to be delivered on time. He had also tried to call some local transport companies to see if anyone could lend him the equipment needed to rearrange his cargo at short notice and get the drum off his truck, so that he could do a local delivery of the rest of the cargo. A local customer was waiting for the cargo and was repeatedly calling the driver and asking for it. Moreover, the driver did not see a problem with how he had secured the metal plates. According to him, they had not moved in the transport. While we were talking, he pulled his shoulders up tight, threw his hands up in the air in a sign of resignation, and exclaimed: "They [the NPRA inspectors] have all the power here. It does not matter what I say." He further explained that he had not had any problems in his previous inspections in Norway or in any of the other countries that he had passed through on this trip. During the five-year period of the fieldwork, this proved to be one of many similar events observed in the field.

For truckers, there are several types of employment. Independent owner-operators are individuals who own the trucks they drive and may either lease their trucks to a trucking company under contract to haul freight for that company or haul loads for multiple companies as self-employed independent contractors. There are also those who lease trucks from a company and make payments over a period of two to five years in order to buy the truck. Company drivers are employees of a particular

trucking company and drive trucks provided by their employer. Some of the challenges faced by the truck drivers can be exemplified by a driver who worked for a company owned by one of the larger Norwegian transport companies. This driver stated:

> While being a truck driver is still a job where you can earn a decent wage both in Norway by Norwegian standards and in, say, Slovenia by Slovenian standards, it is as if the old system where you could bend the rules and stretch the lines and make a lot of money is still there, but the fact that we earn less in Slovenia – this has been put to the test and in some ways formalized.

What he referred to was how the many opportunities for companies and managers to save money by having their drivers not strictly follow safety regulations had become an expected behavior of drivers. "Since I was only stopped and checked at a roadside control once in three years," the driver continued, "it shows that there is room to bend the rules."

Any anthropological study of transport traffic will also involve the managing of risks (Rosin 2003), exploring the aggregated consequences and interplay between human behavior and the broader systems within which transport operates. The drivers in the transport business are aware of the risks in their work, and safety was a topic that my informants often wanted to discuss. Some also expressed the opinion that working on the roads had become more dangerous in recent years. As a driver with 20 years of experience said: "The first year I drove, one guy I knew was killed on the road. Last year, it was five. I was surprised at how little it affected me. I had gotten used to it." A Norwegian driver also explained that, since many accidents only affect material objects and not people, they are not reported. "News and media are preoccupied with the use of seatbelts," he said, "how fast we drive and if we drink, but there are many accidents that go unreported, and some drivers' perceptions of risk are very different from others."

Managers in the sector are comprised of people working in the transport companies. They can have various formal responsibilities such as making sure that the health, safety, and environment handbooks are known by the drivers, that regular maintenance is performed on the vehicles, and that safety procedures are followed. But first and foremost, they are responsible for the continuous management of the companies' main output: that the goods are transported from one place to another, ensuring that the company has revenue. Managers are often former drivers, who know very well the challenges and pressures that drivers can face. Referring to how he often had to interfere by telephone and argue with controllers, customs, and border officials or police on behalf of his company's drivers, one manager exclaimed that "drivers do not know how to defend themselves, and often it falls on me to be their arbiter."

Having worked their way up the company hierarchy, they carry with them knowledge of how things are usually done in the day-to-day work of drivers. As one manager said: "We know how to bend the rules and use the appropriate Ludo tricks, when necessary." This approach is also prevalent in their everyday work as managers. When cargo is especially complicated due to its weight or form, they often have to apply to the road administration for permits. However, as a manager explained: "Sometimes we get the approval, and sometimes the regulators are being difficult. So, if we consider it to be safe, then we ship it anyway. It is regrettable, but it is what is."

Ludo Tricks

It was during fieldwork that I first heard rule bending referred to as "Ludo tricks" (*Triks i Ludo*). Even though this was the first time that I encountered the expression, it made immediate sense to me, having spent countless hours in my childhood playing Ludo at home, on vacation, or when visiting the cabin of my childhood friend. Ludo is a boardgame with roots from the Indian game Pachisi (Bell 1979 [1960]). The game is played with two-four players, who move their tokens based on die rolls, starting in a safe home area to a safe finish area. It is possible to capture other players tokens by moving to the spot where their token is, consequently sending the opponents' token back to their own safe starting area. First player to get all their tokens to their personal finish area wins the game.

The use of Ludo tricks as a metaphor made sense to me because the most obvious trick in Ludo is to stack your tokens on one square, making it possible to move them using one die roll for several tokens. By doing so, you can move the tokens faster around the board, but, at the same time, increase the risk, since another player can now capture more

Image 4: Ludo, by Micha L. Rieser. Attribution: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3226060

of your tokens at once. By doing a risk-filled gamble, one can increase the chances of winning.

However, this initial interpretation was later explained to me in a different way. Being able to stack one's pieces is just one rule in a very simple rule set and not really a trick, but rather a very risky gamble. Since Ludo is a closed system, a simple strategy game with binding rules, the idiom is used to imply the ability to do something almost impossible or sublimely clever: to sidestep the constraints of the rules. To do a trick in Ludo is essentially to subvert expectations by clever actions that give one an edge and save time. While the manager mentioned that the ability to use "appropriate Ludo tricks, when necessary" is common in the business, one interpretation is that the overuse or misuse of such tricks creates "the unserious actor" who stacks their tokens, thereby giving the entire sector a bad reputation for not caring about safety.

The Unserious Actor

It is necessary to explain that managers and drivers who bend the rules and perform Ludo tricks do not consider themselves above the rules and regulations of the sector, but they do decide when they take the risk of getting caught. They do not approve of situations in which they feel that they have to bend the rules too often or that the risk of accidents or of getting caught is too high. Nor do they approve of those they deem to be "unserious actors"; that is, companies, managers, and drivers whom they believe are sacrificing traffic safety and flirting with the risk of getting caught by controllers and regulatory inspectors. At the same time, many acknowledge that they themselves make judgements they consider to be "in the grey areas of the law." As one manager put it: "We could also easily become one of the unserious actors. It depends on what the leadership of the company wants." Another way of understanding this is that there is a normative hierarchy where managers place themselves and the company they work for in relation to other managers and companies, based on how unserious or serious actors they are. Serious actors also bend the rules, of course, but not as much or as inconsiderately as the unserious actors in the sector. The potential for accidents and crashes is often discussed, but there is a strong vein of pragmatism in managers' attitude towards it. As one manager told me:

> At some point, there could be a big accident, and then there will be lawyers who can make it appear as if we do not follow the rules. There is, of course, a big potential for accidents, and the drivers do not know how to defend themselves.

People higher up in the transport companies, who hold positions of leadership and ownership, know that rule bending or rule breaking is common in the sector. While they do not themselves necessarily perform rule-bending actions at the sharp end of the day-to-day business, they or

their company could, in certain circumstances, be made economically responsible when things go wrong. But, as their responsibilities are often economic, their concerns and explanations for rule bending are often the same. As one transporter explained:

> I'm worried for the transport business. It's no longer possible to follow the rules and survive at the same time. Prices have fallen about 50% over the last two decades, and some companies have profits of only 2-3% in an entire year. And when you have 10-20 trucks… It's not a good time to have a company.

One company manager explained to me that they regularly had to carry out transport jobs that did not earn the company any revenue, but that they had to do the jobs in order to maintain customer relationships and prevent them from going to one of the cheaper nonserious actors. These competing, non-serious companies would use even more unsafe trucks and bend the rules like a rubber band until they broke. In this context, he saw their own actions as an adaptation to the market, to the customers, and to the other actors in the sector. In the words of another transporter:

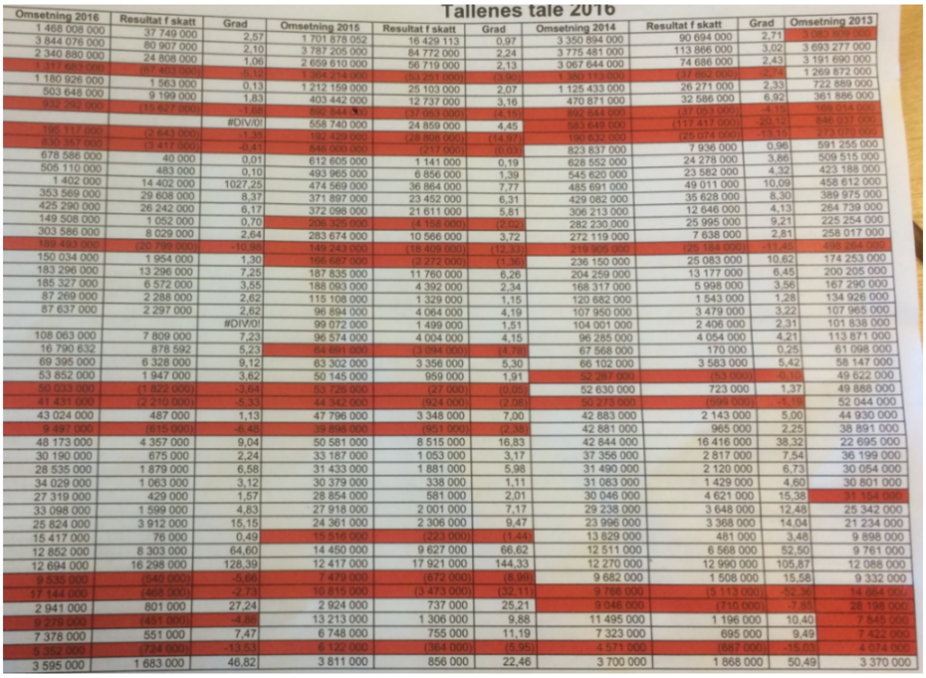
> We have to make deadlines for the loading and unloading of goods and charge the customers when they do not keep the deadlines, and we have to do this to make any money, as the transport itself is no longer profitable. Moreover, those who buy transport have become more cost aware. We sell missions to others, and also to other smaller companies, and, in so doing, we outsource the responsibility and earn some money when the transport mission would otherwise have cost us money if we did it ourselves. If you have nice and lucrative arrangements, like some local companies, these things are easier, but not for us as we compete for every mission.
>
> So, of course, we bend the rules by buying cheap transport material, and we also have trucks running for many years past

Image 5: Cargo securing equipment and truck tire lacking maintenance. Photo: Reidar Mikkelsen.

their prime. Since we have one man per truck, the use of the material is about 25%. It is better to have two men per truck, but it is not easy to find the people who want to do that. It is a little thing, but small things also make a big difference for the drivers. So, rules are being bent, and sometimes illegal and irresponsible co-loading of cargo can provide huge financial gains. And it is difficult to be busted by the police or roadside controllers for doing so. Also, many drivers who drive with more than one certificate card and break the working hours regulations can provide significant gains for a company.

I spoke with a department manager/dispatcher in a medium-sized company that both has its own vehicles and rents others. We talked about operations, finance, and health and safety, and I asked about how they ensure quality regarding risk, health and safety, and other requirements that they have in-house. The manager told me that they cannot include this; they only consider the price and have neither the time nor the interest in the other aspects. “We rent from sub-contractors when our own vehicles become too expensive to operate on current missions,” he explained, “and price is the only thing that matters. In other words, it's the economics that dictates, not risk assessment.”

Public servants such as the police and the NPRA have different roles in the system. The police have the responsibility to ensure road safety, and they often do not have much information on the goings-on in



Tallenes tale 2016

Omsetning 2016	Resultat f skatt	Grad	Omsetning 2015	Resultat f skatt	Grad	Omsetning 2014	Resultat f skatt	Grad	Omsetning 2013
1 468 008 000	37 749 000	2,57	1 701 878 052	16 429 113	0,97	3 350 894 000	90 694 000	2,71	3 083 809 000
3 844 076 000	80 907 000	2,10	3 787 205 000	84 772 000	2,24	3 775 481 000	113 866 000	3,02	3 693 277 000
2 340 880 000	24 808 000	1,06	2 659 610 000	56 719 000	2,13	3 067 644 000	74 686 000	2,43	3 191 690 000
1 317 683 000	(67 403 000)	-5,12	1 364 214 000	(53 251 000)	(3,90)	1 380 113 000	(37 862 000)	-2,74	1 269 872 000
1 180 926 000	1 563 000	0,13	1 212 159 000	25 103 000	2,07	1 125 433 000	26 271 000	2,33	722 889 000
503 648 000	9 199 000	1,83	403 442 000	12 737 000	3,16	470 871 000	32 586 000	6,92	361 886 000
932 292 000	(15 627 000)	-1,68	892 844 000	(37 053 000)	(4,15)	892 844 000	(37 053 000)	-4,15	169 014 000
		#DIV/0!	558 740 000	24 859 000	4,45	583 649 000	(117 417 000)	-20,12	846 037 000
195 117 000	(2 643 000)	-1,35	192 429 000	(28 808 000)	(14,97)	190 632 000	(25 074 000)	-13,15	273 070 000
830 357 000	(3 417 000)	-0,41	846 000 000	(217 000)	(0,03)	823 837 000	7 936 000	0,96	591 255 000
678 586 000	40 000	0,01	612 605 000	1 141 000	0,19	628 552 000	24 278 000	3,86	509 515 000
505 110 000	483 000	0,10	493 965 000	6 856 000	1,39	545 620 000	23 582 000	4,32	423 188 000
1 402 000	14 402 000	1027,25	474 569 000	36 864 000	7,77	485 691 000	49 011 000	10,09	458 612 000
353 569 000	29 608 000	8,37	371 897 000	23 452 000	6,31	429 082 000	35 628 000	8,30	389 975 000
425 290 000	26 242 000	6,17	372 098 000	21 611 000	5,81	306 213 000	12 646 000	4,13	264 739 000
149 508 000	1 052 000	0,70	206 325 000	(4 158 000)	(2,02)	282 230 000	25 995 000	9,21	225 254 000
303 586 000	8 029 000	2,64	283 674 000	10 566 000	3,72	272 119 000	7 638 000	2,81	258 017 000
189 493 000	(20 799 000)	-10,98	149 243 000	(18 409 000)	(12,33)	219 905 000	(25 184 000)	-11,45	498 264 000
150 034 000	1 954 000	1,30	166 687 000	(2 272 000)	(1,36)	236 150 000	25 083 000	10,62	174 253 000
183 296 000	13 296 000	7,25	187 835 000	11 760 000	6,26	204 259 000	13 177 000	6,45	200 205 000
185 327 000	6 572 000	3,55	188 093 000	4 392 000	2,34	168 317 000	5 998 000	3,56	167 290 000
87 269 000	2 288 000	2,62	115 108 000	1 329 000	1,15	120 682 000	1 543 000	1,28	134 926 000
87 637 000	2 297 000	2,62	96 894 000	4 064 000	4,19	107 950 000	3 479 000	3,22	107 965 000
		#DIV/0!	99 072 000	1 499 000	1,51	104 001 000	2 406 000	2,31	101 838 000
108 063 000	7 809 000	7,23	96 574 000	4 004 000	4,15	96 285 000	4 054 000	4,21	113 871 000
16 790 632	878 592	5,23	64 691 000	(3 094 000)	(4,78)	67 568 000	170 000	0,25	61 098 000
69 395 000	6 328 000	9,12	63 302 000	3 356 000	5,30	66 102 000	3 583 000	5,42	58 147 000
53 852 000	1 947 000	3,62	50 145 000	959 000	1,91	52 287 000	(53 000)	-0,10	49 622 000
50 033 000	(1 822 000)	-3,64	53 726 000	(27 000)	(0,05)	52 630 000	723 000	1,37	49 888 000
41 431 000	(2 210 000)	-5,33	44 342 000	(924 000)	(2,08)	50 273 000	(599 000)	-1,19	52 044 000
43 024 000	487 000	1,13	47 796 000	3 348 000	7,00	42 883 000	2 143 000	5,00	44 930 000
9 497 000	(615 000)	-6,48	39 898 000	(951 000)	(2,38)	42 881 000	965 000	2,25	38 891 000
48 173 000	4 357 000	9,04	50 581 000	8 515 000	16,83	42 844 000	16 416 000	38,32	22 695 000
30 190 000	675 000	2,24	33 187 000	1 053 000	3,17	37 356 000	2 817 000	7,54	36 199 000
28 535 000	1 879 000	6,58	31 433 000	1 881 000	5,98	31 490 000	2 120 000	6,73	30 054 000
34 029 000	1 063 000	3,12	30 379 000	338 000	1,11	31 083 000	1 429 000	4,60	30 801 000
27 319 000	429 000	1,57	28 854 000	581 000	2,01	30 046 000	4 621 000	15,38	31 154 000
33 098 000	1 599 000	4,83	27 918 000	2 001 000	7,17	29 238 000	3 648 000	12,48	25 342 000
25 824 000	3 912 000	15,15	24 361 000	2 306 000	9,47	23 996 000	3 368 000	14,04	21 234 000
15 417 000	76 000	0,49	15 516 000	(223 000)	(1,44)	13 829 000	481 000	3,48	9 898 000
12 852 000	8 303 000	64,60	14 450 000	9 627 000	66,62	12 511 000	6 568 000	52,50	9 761 000
12 694 000	16 298 000	128,39	12 417 000	17 921 000	144,33	12 270 000	12 990 000	105,87	12 088 000
9 535 000	(540 000)	-5,66	7 479 000	(672 000)	(8,99)	9 682 000	1 508 000	15,58	9 332 000
17 144 000	(468 000)	-2,73	10 815 000	(3 473 000)	(32,11)	9 766 000	(5 113 000)	-52,36	14 864 000
2 941 000	801 000	27,24	2 924 000	737 000	25,21	9 046 000	(710 000)	-7,85	28 198 000
9 279 000	(451 000)	-4,86	13 213 000	1 306 000	9,88	11 495 000	1 196 000	10,40	7 845 000
7 378 000	551 000	7,47	6 748 000	755 000	11,19	7 323 000	695 000	9,49	7 422 000
5 352 000	(724 000)	-13,53	6 122 000	(364 000)	(5,95)	4 571 000	(687 000)	-15,03	4 074 000
3 595 000	1 683 000	46,82	3 811 000	856 000	22,46	3 700 000	1 868 000	50,49	3 370 000

Image 6: “Tallenes tale” (The numbers speak). An unofficial overview of the numbers of local transport companies regularly going in red, shown to the author by a transport manager, indicating how managers feel that the “knife is on their throat fiscally.” Photo: The author.

the heavy goods sector. "We do very little intel on the business," a Norwegian policeman admitted, acknowledging that knowledge on safety and heavy goods transport is scanty. The responsibility for factors that might affect road safety, as the police see it, rests with the drivers. The NPRA has its own attitude towards the heavy goods sector. As a controller explained: "The mentality in the business is to stretch the rules as far as they go." One driver who had started working for the NPRA as a controller said that he got the work due to "knowing all the different tricks of the trade." When doing audits of companies or investigations of accidents, there is usually a front- and a backstage of information about how rules are regularly bent. One trick, for instance, is to keep multiple logbooks, as both observed during my fieldwork and pointed out by Alvin J. Williams and Babu P. George (2013).

As seen by the example with the Dutch driver in the introduction, the securing of cargo is an area of particular interest to the NPRA, and it is also an area that is relatively simple to inspect at the roadside. Still, many drivers do not consider the NPRA roadside inspectors to have sufficient knowledge of how to secure cargo. Drivers feel that the inspectors have a "too literal focus" and that many of the things they want are impractical in normal transport. One such story concerns a driver who had secured his cargo with three straps. After the inspector had finished calculating the weight and assessing the capacity of the straps, the driver was told that he needed at least 20 straps before he could continue on the road. The driver found the whole situation ridiculous and shared the entire affair with other drivers at a dinner, earning humorous applause of the other participants. The story was further used as an example to show that, while they have respect for the inspectors – "they are doing important work that is necessary to stop unserious actors in the business" – the drivers do not believe that they have the inside knowledge of what is safe enough. On the other hand, the NPRA inspectors see unconformity and rule-bending behavior among the drivers as a safety problem.

The specter of the unserious actor – those that increase personal profit by dumping prices and breaking rules and regulations, assuming that customers prioritize price over safety – feels almost tangibly present in conversations with drivers and managers. The risk of accidents on the roads is leveraged against the risk of being out-played by the unserious actors. This creates an alternative political economy in business, where the public vice of rule bending is justified by the private in-house virtue of keeping the wheels turning (Carrier and Miller 1999). Managers and drivers achieve this through careful boundary management (Barth 2010), bending the rules somewhat in day-to-day operations and, at the same time, communicating the dangers posed to the public by the unserious actors. The perceived safety, or "seriousness," of a business is presented as a selling point to potential customers, well aware that while customers

do often prioritize price over safety, it is also necessary for customers not to seem like they do not care at all.

Thus, reciprocal bonds are made between drivers and managers to utilize Ludo tricks and also, though not necessarily explicitly stated, between businesses, signaling that the rubber bands of the rules can be stretched, but not too far. This exchange and boundary management can also be interpreted as a form of solidaric gift-giving between companies. As Peter Simonič (2019) has argued: "For Mauss (1966 [1925]), solidarity was an ideological side of established social order. Solidarity can arise from either contractual arrangements of individualised types of society and market exchange or through gift-giving of mainly non-European, primitive, stateless societies" (Simonič 2019: 11). Following this perspective, a transport company cannot push boundaries too far or risk being labelled an unserious actor by other companies, yet it can bend the rules within limits that do not endanger the social solidarity in the sector (Komter 2005).

When thinking about his transport of dangerous goods without a license, the young driver mentioned in the introduction further described to me that he considered his actions a sort of transaction between him and his company:

> People do not do this kind of work all the time, but there are a lot of dangerous goods on the roads that are transported illegally. I think that a good estimate would be to say that about 80-90% of smaller pieces of dangerous goods are shipped this way.

I was a little taken aback by this and asked whether that might not be a bit of an exaggeration. He disagreed but said that this is a grey area of the sector, and it is hard to give anything but guesses. A manager I spoke with some months later, when anonymously presented with the young driver's quote about 80-90%, stated that:

> Breaking the ADR happens often, and terrifyingly few are stopped and checked by the roadside controllers of the NPRA. Indeed, breaking the ADR regulation happens more and more often, and it is terrifyingly few who are stopped, say, with radioactive material, where the vehicle was not rigged for it. Well, this happens because the transporters are in control. When we talk about non-serious actors and still act like this, then it is wrong to look down at the controllers. We should in fact be more appreciative of the work they do.

The transporters and managers refer to a balancing dilemma. One manager explained that "we have to have several loads on each truck; that is the only way to make ends meet." It is also recognized that, while this practice is necessary, it also exposes the company and other people on the roads to an increased safety risk, and accidents do occur. As one manager described:

> In one case, it was only luck that the accident that occurred did not end up as a much larger and much more serious accident. The driver had only driven for us for a couple of weeks, and he did not have much experience. Still, it was his responsibility in the end.

Drivers also find themselves in a balancing dilemma. As the manager said, the drivers have the least amount of power in the system, yet they have the final responsibility. For drivers who feel pressured, this is acute. One driver explained to me that "the management tells us one thing and tells you [regulators and inspectors] something else. We are not given the opportunity to do the job in a safe and lawful manner."

That rule bending is considered common behavior, and that the drivers are usually the ones to end up with the blame when unwanted things occur, is a dilemma that is widely recognized and often discussed by those working in the sector. Indeed, as explained, many managers are themselves also current or former drivers. Still, as one informant said:

> It's a dilemma that drivers have to carry the burden; say, for example, that there is a less experienced driver who feels that something he is tasked to do is unsafe, what opportunity does he have to say no to the task?

The relatively low status of individual drivers and the managers' self-perceived powerlessness color most exchanges. This power disparity was even more pronounced when I talked with drivers who were far from home and whose salaries were fixed to the number and composition of transport missions, meaning that their main or true budget was their time and, if they used it effectively, they could both earn a living and spend more time at home. The balance is exemplified in the following comment by a driver who introduced himself "as someone who bends the rules all the time." He explained:

> There are few or no clear demands from the public auditors, and one problem, in particular, is the large companies that have all the paperwork the auditors want in order, even though what they say is not carried out in practice. For such auditors, it is difficult to catch them. If the employees and the employers in the company have documentation on paper stating that everything is in order when, in fact, it is not, then irregularities are very difficult for auditors to catch.

Often, safety procedures are not read, but obligatory documents are kept in the trucks and the offices in the case of an audit. And, as one manager said, "the rules for cargo security have become very complex and hard to understand. In our company, it is practically guaranteed that things are not done according to the book." This allows the drivers and managers to use a tactic somewhat similar to what Hege Høyer Leivestad (2021) describes in her studies of cargo ports as the "moral act of not knowing" (2021: 59). Furthermore, rules can also be considered less

relevant when they are practiced differently by different auditors and controllers of the NPRA. As a manager told me:

> When getting permits for changes to the vehicles – if you think that it's difficult to have your vehicle approved in Stavanger, you can always go to a different place where it is easier, even though the controllers supposedly follow the same rules.

The actors in this field – drivers, managers, and others – interact with one another in their respective functions within the hierarchy. These interactions transform constraints and incentives into distinct patterns of behavior (Barth 1994: 35). The work of a driver is in a constant pressure between these other actors in the system. As one driver said:

> Any system can be manipulated if you have mortgaged your house and are driving on the brink of collapse. The customer calls and is wondering where you are. Some companies will not give out the numbers of the drivers, but others will, because, of course, you want to do extra service. This can make you exceed speed limits or skip fastening the cargo properly. The NPRA places heavy demands on us – and that is how it is supposed to be – but I do feel that the NPRA controllers do not understand the complexities. If you are looking for something, you will always find something. That is why I will unionize only when I see that there is something in it for me.

Conclusion

Rule bending in the heavy goods transport sector can be understood as a form of behavior that is collectively recognized as influencing safety, yet occurs within a socially constructed normative hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, some actions are socially accepted to a certain degree while others are not, thereby enabling the social construction of the "unserious actors." Referring to Susana Narotsky (2007), Simonič (2019) suggests that "[f]rom a point of view of economic anthropology, it is worth studying reciprocity and solidarity as forces of integration and group building" (2019: 11). Following this proposal, I suggest that the type of boundary management performed by drivers and managers when they only use Ludo tricks when necessary is a contribution to an understanding of the grey areas of the heavy goods transport sector. The use of Ludo tricks can be understood as practically driven but also as collectively mediated through concerns of becoming an unserious actor – an unserious actor who creates many risks such as the risk of accidents, the risk of disadvantaging other actors who are not as willing to bend the rules, and the risk of producing an unfair image of the transport sector.

The final point also speaks to issues of solidarity. Truck drivers and managers in the European long-haul transportation sector balance

many concerns: personal economics, family demands (Hanson 2021), customers' expectations of on-time delivery, and safety concerns from regulators. Rule bending is one strategy that is shared and understood by drivers and managers, often perceived as a necessity and a joint endeavor by both parties. This is a consequence of a special perception in the sector in which actors locate themselves within a normative hierarchy of serious and unserious actors, with the more serious actors bending the rules to a limited extent, whereas unserious actors are considered to bend them to excess. The aggregated consequences of these actions, together with the shared perceptions of this hierarchy, perpetuate it (Barth 1994) and create fertile ground for the continuation of rule-bending practices.

The concept of the unserious actor corresponds with what we, in a Barthian sense, can describe as differences between us and the other. This distinction provides opportunity in late-stage capitalism and in the sector of heavy goods transport, where it is true that the decrease of profit and the slow reorganization of the sector create feelings of both estrangement and the loss of power. The concept of the unserious actor can counteract these feelings because it provides a sense of agency since it both permits and restricts the use of rule bending and Ludo tricks. Thus, the unserious actor is not only a potential economic Other that exerts pressure on the companies, but also a moral Other, enabling the drivers and managers to construct a moral bulwark that can make them feel good about "having trucking in the blood," secure in the knowledge that, while they do bend the rules, they are still serious actors as long as they bend the rules responsibly.

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