The shipping container

Hege Høyer Leivestad

ABSTRACT

When the Ever Given became stuck in the Suez Canal, the megaship was carrying 18,300 rectangular, steel boxes on her back. In the weeks and months after the incident, the concealed contents of the shipping containers – stuck in legal limbo – captured global attention. Technologically developed in the years after the Second World War, the standardized shipping container has featured as one of the protagonists of the transformations in international trade. But the container's logic of concealment and transaction has made 'the box' a common figure also in popular culture and social theory. This essay interrogates the shipping container's multiple repertoires by focussing on containers at work. By tracing how the shipping container moves through the port infrastructure this essay takes us from the Suez Canal towards another central maritime passageway: the Strait of Gibraltar. This essay reflects on the different scales at which the shipping container functions in the port: from heavy materiality to abstracted codes and units of measurement.

KEYWORDS

Shipping container; ports; labour; materiality

Steel box passages

When the Ever Given got stuck in the Suez Canal in March 2021, she was carrying 18,300 rectangular steel boxes containing goods of a total estimated value of $600 million to $700 million.[1] Three months after the incident, during the legal battle that followed, the Swedish furniture giant IKEA – which had several container-loads of goods on board – refused to tell CNN Business which of their products were still caught in limbo. Stakes were even higher for smaller companies, such as for the U.K. retailer Snuggy that reported to have over $550,000 worth of hooded wearable blankets on board the ship, a financial disaster for a company relying on only two big annual orders.

During those months, the concealed contents of a shipping container momentarily captured global attention. Containers are seldom under much scrutiny, but in the larger transformations of global trade the standardized shipping container is portrayed as game changing and iconic. The technology we know today was developed in the years after the Second World War, taking the maritime transport of goods away from break bulk cargo and towards mechanized intermodal systems. After a standardization 'war' that took place in the U.S. and Europe, by 1968 the ISO standard sized shipping containers were born, and coming 20-foot and 40-foot in size (Levinson 2016).

CONTACT Hege Høyer Leivestad hege.leivestad@socant.su.se Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, Stockholm 106 91, Sweden; Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Oslo 0316, Norway

Historians and archaeologists have claimed that these standardized steel shipping containers represent only a recent phase in a long cultural tradition of material packaging and concealment in maritime-led exchange (Bevan 2014). In classical anthropological scholarship on trade and exchange, from Malinowski's Kula Ring to Mauss' description of the Potlatch, containers – as technologies for storing and transporting material goods – were largely overlooked. In a 2018 History and Anthropology Forum, Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail reintroduce the container to anthropology as an 'engine of history (…) one that pulls and pushes us in ways that are now indispensable to human social life' (2018, 3). Containers, they argue, are 'anti-entropy machines (…) constantly at work applying order to their contents and preserving them from a natural tendency toward disaggregation' (2018, 3). But containers are also 'time-machines'; they can, for instance, slow down the passage of time by preventing decay (2018). Containers – broadly defined as material technologies of storage – invite these forms of conceptual experiments. When reflecting upon container-forms, from clay pots to carton boxes, one may easily end up asking: What is concealed and what is revealed? What about the boundaries between inside and outside? What are the social and political processes of boxing and un-boxing (Chu et al. 2020)? (Figure 1).

The standardized shipping container, with its logic of transaction, concealment and release, has made 'the box' a common sight in popular culture and a potent figure for social theory (Klose 2015; Levinson 2016; Martin 2016). We find that steel shipping containers have been transformed into anything from tiny houses to pop-up restaurants, and some even argue that the box has changed the way we think, functioning as a

Figure 1. Container close-up. Photograph by the author.

governing principle in all domains of life (see Klose 2015). There are, however, those who lately have questioned our fascination with the shipping container, claiming that its simple design and seductive qualities have led to a narrow and 'presentist' focus (Campling and Colas 2020). Our obsession with the container as an innovative technology, it has been argued, risks glossing over the historical and contemporary diversity and segmentation of a shipping industry that still relies heavily on the transport of bulk cargo, oil, liquefied gases and chemicals, to mention just a few (Campling and Colas 2020, 241–242).

Granted, containerization can be interpreted as just one repertoire among a wide range of modes of maritime-led transportation (Campling and Colas 2020, 242). However, the shipping container in itself holds multiple repertoires that we tend to overlook. A focus on containers at work allows us to tease these out more systematically. When containers are lifted on and off ships, or moved through a port, they do not appear as the kinds of smooth steel objects that authors like Klose and Levinson have historicized and theorized. Rather, they are objects defined by their changing material properties. They are also boxes that, in their sheer overwhelming number, form a currency that 'works' on multiple material, social and symbolic scales. By visiting some of these container-layers operating inside a port, we can reflect upon the different scales at which the figure of the shipping container functions: from its brute, hot and heavy materiality, to abstracted codes and units of measurement figuring into port production.

From big boxes to code-work

A work-centric focus on the shipping container takes us away from the Ever Given, through the Suez Canal, and along to a different maritime chokepoint (Carse et al. 2020) in Southern Europe that has been the centre of my fieldwork over recent years: The Strait of Gibraltar. On the Northern side of the Strait of Gibraltar lies the Spanish Port of Algeciras Bay, a so-called transshipment hub dedicated to the transfer of containers along global trade routes. Transshipment is a sort of sea-sea logistics, something that Janell Rothenberg (2018) refers to as 'world-world' logistics, or, to quote a port manager I spoke to: 'We unload a container from a ship and load it onto another ship that takes it to its final destination. It's just like the transits in the airports!'

On a rainy day in March 2018, from a massive and deserted parking lot, I witnessed what this sea-sea logistics of shipping containers looked like for Rafael and Pablo, employees in one of the logistics companies dedicated to transferring containers inside the port installations located in downtown Algeciras. Rafael, whose fingertips were dark-yellow from smoking two packets of cigarettes a day, was sitting next to me in the truck, once again double-checking the lists of container codes he had been handed at the terminals. Rafael did not trust the digital lists provided by the terminal operators, and always made his own list by hand, memorizing each container code during that process. On a busy day, Rafael and his crew would handle up to sixty containers: moving them between the port's two container terminals, the warehouses, or over to the saturated border inspection point. Container-work for Rafael and his team of transport workers was time-consuming business, involving long hours of waiting and handling delayed transfers. To demonstrate this, Pablo showed me a different form of container he had to carry with him inside the truck; a tiny plastic box to pee

in on the days when the waiting time to enter the terminal could take up to five hours (Figure 2).

Taking care of security locks and handling the machinery, Pablo was in close contact with the exterior of the shipping containers, and very well acquainted with its material properties. On warm days the steel could be burning hot, while other boxes revealed their contents by means of intense smell seeping out through their steel walls. 'This weighs a barbarity', Pablo explained, while slowly manoeuvring the port's road systems with a container loaded on the truck we sat in. The container itself was 4900 kilos, but with its contents we were probably looking at somewhere close to 26,000 kilos that were to be moved. The white colour of the shipping container only told Pablo that it was refrigerated goods he was dealing with, but 'you don't know what you carry', he added. Rafael, who was in charge of the container lists back at the parking lot, had at least been able to guess from his codes that some of the containers they were handling on this day in March contained pharmaceutical products.

The variations in the containers' temperature, smell and weight, which port workers like Rafael and Pablo encountered each day, stand in contrast to the popular image of the shipping container as a sterile, cold and inscrutable box. As potentially leaking, smelling, hot or cold, heavy or light boxes, shipping containers are also material objects whose

Figure 2. Containers at work. Photograph by the author.

embedded properties change not only depending on the cargo they are carrying, but also through encounters with different climatic conditions. The doors of the shipping container are marked with letters and numbers, indicating weight, packing volume, ISO code and certificates. More importantly, the container is materially inscribed with a unique container number that makes each box identifiable internationally, tying the individual container to a global system of traceable units monitored by software programmes and mathematical modelling. Figuring as identification numbers on pieces of paper and on Rafael's two mobile phone screens, the shipping containers are 'at work' also as abstracted codes evoking familiar associations with the metaphorical 'black box' by revealing to its reader only partial information about the content that is being moved. Container codes are memorized, communicated between workers, manually dialled at the security gates at the terminal and printed out on paper receipts that finally form the basis for the logistics company's invoicing.

The container as mundane 'code-at-work' at Rafael and Pablo's logistics transport company reflects how 'production' in a container port is usually measured through not just individual container markings that make each unit identifiable, but also by the accumulative number of containers that are moved through its installations on an annual basis (Leivestad 2021). From the brute materiality of each single container being moved on the ground by port workers, the shipping container is transferred into ever more abstracted form, which measures production at worker- company-, and portlevel. Zooming out shows that the shipping container is furthermore one of the central foundations upon which the public port management and multinational companies measure and calculate success and failure as part of a system of inter-port competition. Personal and institutional 'production' is thus attached to the numbers of shipping containers moved through the port, expressed in so-called TEUs (Twenty-Feet-EquivalentUnits). The multiple modes in which containers operate in the port, indicates that the container acts as a form of currency; it is used to perform large-scale calculations and comparison, but also everyday conversions of logistics labour (Leivestad 2021).

Figuring (out) the container

The Suez blockage in March 2021, its legal aftermaths and the prolonged mystery over what kind of goods were delayed and held in transit, point us towards the work performed by the steel shipping container. Concerned with 'opening the black box', many scholars have in recent years given primacy to the shipping container as an analytical figure and theory-machine. The question is if such concerns with the governing principles and analytical potential of the box have distracted us from trying to understand container work – in all its facets – as a crucial part of global logistics. Fiona Greenland (2018) importantly reminds us that shipping containers perform different roles in different locations, sometimes opening up relationships and sometimes closing off circulation (2018, 17). In addition to being an 'engine of history' (Shryock and Smail 2018) the container moves and mediates between the concrete and the abstract in the here and now. Turning our gaze to the port shows how containers are not only concrete and troublesome 'things', but also abstracted units of value that 'speak' to the larger systems in which they operate. When a shipping container is moved through

labour-intensive operations at the port, these different layers of meaning are simultaneously activated.

The shipping container, then, performs scale-work that crosses material, social and symbolic boundaries, and that has real effects on the ground.

Note

1. The economic value of goods stuck on the EverGiven is supported in official statistics: while 24% of dry cargo is transported in containers, containerised cargo accounts for as much 70% of world cargo in value (Khalili 2020, 1).

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ORCID

Hege Høyer Leivestad http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2940-8304

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