

THEME SECTION

Inside container economies

Hege Høyer Leivestad and Johanna Markkula

Abstract: This introduction proposes an anthropology of global cargo circulation by placing the maritime shipping industry at the center of global capitalism. With “container economies” we refer to the maritime global circulation of cargo that is sustained by an undervalued labor force, dependent upon unstable logistics infrastructures and driven by speculative capital. Container economies, we argue, are produced by adding, moving, and destroying value through the maritime supply chain. In this introduction, we reflect upon the implications of containerization and its wider consequences for logistics labor. We argue that maritime logistics and labor is best understood by taking into account their wider networks of dependency expressed through kinship relations, ethnicity and coexisting regimes of value.

Keywords: cargo mobility, global trade, labor, logistics, maritime shipping

In 2016, shockwaves went through the shipping industry as the news was announced that the world’s seventh largest shipping company, South Korean Hanjin Shipping, had lost its financial support. The fall of Hanjin Shipping had, as *The Guardian* put it, “thrown ports and retailers around the world into confusion, with giant container ships marooned and merchants worrying whether hundreds of tons of goods being carried by the South Korean company will reach shelves” (McVeigh 2020). In the wake of the collapse, Hanjin ships were seized and major disruptions affected all parts of the supply chain. Meanwhile, hundreds of seafarers found themselves stranded at sea

under increasingly desperate conditions, held hostage by a system that could not afford to come to a halt.

The shipping giant’s bankruptcy, finally declared in 2017, was in many ways an announced death. Since the 2008 economic recession, a weakened economy hit a shipping sector that, based on previously high freight costs and good economic prospects, had made massive investments in constructing more and substantially bigger containerships. Seen as a cost-efficient strategy during the years when the world economy was thriving, the sector was now suddenly faced with overcapacity. Still, while falling freight rates were making their impact on the industry,



ship orders continued to come in, and in 2015, they reached an all-time high.

Hanjin's sudden fall—a direct outcome of these longer-term developments—is the largest container shipping bankruptcy that history has ever witnessed. Yet, despite the magnitude of the collapse and its immediate consequences for global trade, the Hanjin news hardly made it outside the business sections of large American and European newspapers. Compared to the fall of Lehman Brothers and other financial scandals covering front pages during and after the financial crisis, Hanjin's bankruptcy—also recounted in Elisabeth Schober's contribution to this issue—was a drama largely playing out behind the scenes. What is more, the story that ended up being told was partial at best, leaving out important aspects of Hanjin's collapse that had to do with kinship, fractious family ties, and other seemingly unpredictable, non-economic matters.

In hindsight, the Hanjin bankruptcy of 2017 was just a small-scale precursor to the gigantic crisis currently playing out on the world's oceans. As we are writing this introduction, a global pandemic, for the past few months, has revealed the dependence of nation-states on just-in-time delivery of health material and essential goods. When the COVID-19 outburst first practically forced China to close down large sections of its economic activity, hundreds of container ships lay stranded at the country's enormous ports. With about one third of the regular trade between Asia and Europe gone overnight, the shipping industry anticipated huge losses.

But with the pandemic came also alarming reports from ports and onboard cargo ships, where hundreds of thousands of seafarers were effectively being held prisoner at sea, sailing from port to port on expired work contracts and unable to go home to their families, as Johanna Markkula describes in her contribution to this issue. The extreme events of the last few months have shown us that the inner workings of global shipping—and its dependence on an essential but also racialized and replaceable labor force—

remain invisible as long as the world's goods keep moving. It is only when a systemic crisis happens, when basic supply chains are threatened and what we once took for granted is collapsing around us, that we are forced to ask what it actually takes to “keep the world's trade afloat” (McVeigh 2020).

With over 90 percent of all the world's goods being transported by sea at ever-increasing volumes, the shipping industry is the beating heart of the global economy. As Laleh Khalili puts it: “Maritime Transportation is not simply an enabling adjunct of trade, but is central to the very fabric of global capitalism” (2020: 3). Food, electronics, clothes, oil and gas, weapons, garbage—you name it—nearly everything at some point travels across the seas onboard one of the nearly 100,000 ships that work the world's oceans (UNCTAD 2019). These ships are crewed by some 1.6 million seafarers, most of whom are drawn from labor pools in South, East, and South-East Asia. Sites of production, consumption, and disposal, as well as financing and labor are often situated at completely different ends of the world. With what appears to be a nearly insatiable hunger for consumption, a leviathan movement of goods takes place across the globe.

Many of the critical sites enabling the mobility of goods are themselves on the move, as cargo circulation is dependent upon complex, and often remarkably unstable, maritime infrastructures and brokerage systems. Besides the inherently mobile ships, ports, shipping routes, and even entire industrial hubs for building and scrapping ships also rise and fall in importance with the fluctuations of the global economy and the development of new technologies. The shipping industry we refer to here includes sectors such as shipbuilding, shipping of cargo and raw materials, shipbreaking, ports, and cargo handling activities, as well as a range of logistics operations that form part of the global circulation of goods. Maritime shipping is a multi-billion dollar industry, facilitated by speculative financial risk-taking. It is an industry nurtured by private-public partnerships, with massive infra-

structures funded by ample state-provided and private capital, and maintained by a mobile and undervalued workforce (see Schober, this issue). It is this complex of “seaborne capitalism” we explore through the concept of “container economies.”

In this issue, we set out our stall for an anthropology of global cargo circulation by thinking through the relationship between contemporary capitalism and the maritime shipping industry. We do this by offering articles that engage ethnographically with the mobile labor of the maritime logistics sector as well as the infrastructures of seaborne cargo mobility, such as ports, ships, and shipyards. In foregrounding the social aspects of container economies that often remain understudied, we reflect upon the volatile dynamics of capital accumulation through cargo circulation, its exploitation of labor, which provides the basis for profit-making during times of crises, and its reliance on uneasy public–private convergences. Furthermore, we explore how container economies depend on the exploitation of existing kinship structures, gendered hierarchies, local moralities, and exchange systems. Finally, we emphasize the structural processes beyond the control of individuals in this sector through which the seemingly endless cycle of growth has slowed down, been brought to a halt, or even reversed during recent times.

Container economies

“Container economies” refer to the maritime global circulation of cargo that is sustained by a mobile and disposable labor force, dependent on volatile logistics infrastructures, and nurtured by speculative and asymmetrical geographies. With “container economies” we refer to the ways in which capital is constituted, moved, and destroyed through particular logics of circulation and value accumulation in maritime shipping. These logics are made and shaped by containerization, a technological invention that has been central to what some call the “logistics revolution” (c.f. Bonacich and Wilson 2008;

Cowen 2014), but which we in this issue take to mean a much broader set of transformations that by far exceeds its technical definitions.

The Hanjin bankruptcy mentioned at the beginning of this introduction brings us directly to the center of container economies and their logic of keeping “value in motion” (Harvey 2019) at all costs. Container economies, we show, entails the circulation not only of goods but also of capital. Marx described the transport of commodities as “on one hand an independent branch of production and hence a particular sphere for the investment of productive capital, and on the other hand it is distinguished by its appearance as the continuation of a production process within the circulation process and for the circulation process” (Marx 1978: 229; see also Cowen 2014; Sibilia 2019). It is by extending Marx’s argument, through what David Harvey describes as “keeping the flow of capital in motion” (2019: 219) that we can begin to understand what a focus on global cargo circulation brings to the anthropological study of capitalism. In this theme section, we argue that capital accumulation in container economies is produced by adding, moving, and destroying value through the maritime supply chain.

Surplus value and capital accumulation in container economies is produced through multiple cycles and scales of circulation, which Elizabeth Sibilia has described as “global cycles of oceanic accumulation and overproduction” (2019: 481). Maritime shipping and the global economy are so closely entwined that shipping indexes such as the Baltic Dry Index are considered some of the most accurate bellwethers of change in the global economy. Movements in the Baltic Index “tend to precede movements in global stock markets” (Gross 2003). Shipping cycles are economic cycles that reflect supply and demand, are steered by changes in freight rates, and are characterized by extreme volatility and enormous fluctuations between growth and depression. These shipping cycles are mitigated through various strategies and practices of transferring value, such as investments in larger ships, or specialized technologies of ships

in times of growth, and company mergers, the “laying up” of ships, selling of ships for scrap, or the reflagging of vessels to “open registers,” better known as Flags of Convenience, to save on labor costs, in times of contraction.

The lifecycle of the ships is one example of what we refer to as the logic of adding, moving, and destroying of value in container economies. On shipping routes, they are means of production that generate value through producing a “change in location” of the goods they transport. As ships are built, rebuilt, bought, sold, resold, chartered, flagged out, operated, maintained, and finally broken up, they transform value, either by generating profit for their owners or charterers or by losing value through their devaluation. Once operating costs exceed the profitability potential of ships, companies might lay up their ships or sell them to be broken up in order to release their value as “fixed capital” (Sibilia 2019).¹

By taking container economies as our analytic concept and ethnographic lens, we draw attention to the ways in which the shipping industry and the maritime transport of commodities is deeply transformed by, and entangled with, the logistical invention known as “containerization” (see Levinson 2016). The shipping container has become the central category for illustrating global connectivity and for measuring production. Hege Leivestad (this issue) argues that the container is actually the global currency of the shipping industry. By taking a cue from the notion of “value in motion,” Leivestad shows how the circulation of capital depends on the labor of making cargo physically move. The shipping container is in itself a powerful symbol of global trade and the circulating capital of the logistics industry, but in Leivestad’s article, we see how the movements of containers form their own economy of value and profit in the port, regardless of what the containers themselves hold inside.

The parallel systems of value accumulation described by Leivestad remind us that the *economies* we refer to in “container economies” are not reducible to the idea of one single mar-

ket economy and capitalist financial system of growth and decline. Container economies holistically include the “constellations of social relations and cultural dispositions that make the fabric of everyday life” (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: 54–55). We insist here on an understanding of “the economy” that puts social relations, cultural values, and meaning-making practices front and center in studying the production and reproduction of global capitalism. We agree with Susana Narotzky and Nico Besnier that “the economy” needs to include also the collective processes of “making a living,” in the broad sense of the term, and that it needs to be attentive to different and coexisting regimes of value (2014: 56). Container economies are thus also “intimate,” as Ara Wilson (2004) puts it, and on whose insights Elisabeth Schober draws in her article for this issue. Container economies are produced through the “interactions between economic systems and social life,” such as kinship, gender, class, and ethnicity (Wilson 2004: 11).

For example, in Mannov’s and Markkula’s contributions to this issue, both of which focus on the lives of seafarers, we see how intimate household economies are part of the forces of production of the multi-scalar container economies. In container economies, geographical and economic inequalities are mobilized to generate global capitalism. Cultural diversity in how local household economies are structured forms a foundational pillar of the profitability of inequality of maritime shipping. Key to this issue is how kinship relations form an integral part of not only capitalist production (MacKinnon and Cannell 2013) but also of distribution (Bear et. al 2015; Yanagisako 2002). In Schober’s case, we see how a global shipping conglomerate rises and falls through family relations and kinship entanglements. Mannov starts at the other end of the power spectrum of the maritime supply chain, as we follow three Indian seafarers in their negotiations to package and sell their productive labor to both shipping companies and their families at home. As they sail in piracy areas in order to support their kin at home, they

“containerize” their labor by concealing the risks they take from their families to be able to keep on sailing. This strategy also exemplifies deep-rooted masculinity ideals and the heteronormative identities that are so central to the shipping industry and its male-dominated workforce, where hyper-masculine gender norms are the rule both at a managerial and manual labor level.

Maritime logistics and containerization

The standardized intermodal shipping container and the supply chain system supporting its mobility have been referred to by Harvey as “one of the great innovations without which we would not have had globalization” (Harvey cited in Buchloh et al. 2011). In technical terms, containerization is a standardized system of freight transport based on the intermodal shipping container that can be moved across different modes of transport. While sea transport traditionally was dependent on so-called break-bulk operations, where cargo was loaded onto pallets and stowed manually onboard the ship, a unified container system increased the speed of cargo mobility and made it more cost-efficient.

This technological innovation has been credited to Malcolm McLean, an American owner of a trucking company who would become the founder of the shipping company Sea-Land. Under his leadership, in 1966 (a year often referred to as the start of international containerization) the shipping container made its first international journey from Newark to Rotterdam (Bonacich and Wilson 2008: 51). But Sea-Land’s centrality for supporting the American supply chain during the Vietnam War also reveals the shipping container’s role as a military technology.

While Harvey’s statement about the shipping container certainly can be debated, it does point to the particular moments and changes that were brought about by the container. Maritime shipping, of course, is much more than containerized shipping: 30 percent of all maritime cargo is crude oil carried in tankers; and of dry cargo, only 24 percent is carried in containers.

The rest is bulk cargo, such as coal, iron, sand, and grain (UNCTAD 2019). While containers constitute only a minor part of the world’s maritime cargo shipments in volume, in value, however, containerized goods make up as much as 70 percent of all world cargo (Khalili 2020: 1).

But the importance of container shipping extends even beyond these spectacular numbers. Its systemic logic of efficiency, standardization, infrastructure, and labor has transformed global trade and the entire maritime supply chain. Similarly, even if the shipping container as an industrial object has been depicted as a protagonist in the logistical revolution and has come to stand in as a symbol for supply chain capitalism (Tsing 2009), it is the system of standardization enabled by the box, rather than the box itself, that has revolutionized global trade (Levinson 2016).

The shipping container, in addition to the productive powers it holds, also contains potencies of destruction. For example, the dehumanizing aspects of its anonymity are brutally brought to the foreground in discussions about human smuggling, when people are packed like goods into tiny spaces, revealed on x-rays at the borders, or discovered dead upon arrival (Chu 2016). Similarly, as Markkula discusses in her contribution, behind the steel walls of the container ships themselves, crews of sailors live and work and are occasionally held hostage to ensure the continued movement of goods. Many ships operate under obscure structures of ownership and have equally complex regulatory frameworks to comply with. For instance, a ship may be owned in one country, chartered by a company in another, registered and flagged in yet another, and crewed by sailors from ten different countries whose recruitment and contracts are managed by satellite manning agencies in as many places. And this is to say nothing of the international and national waters through which the ship sails, where it was built, the ports it sails to, or the origins and destinations of the cargo it carries.

In this theme issue, we focus on what the dynamics and processes linked to containerization

as a mode of organizing global trade have entailed. Containerization changed the very logic of shipping (Bonacich and Wilson 2008: 52). From being based upon comparatively small ships that made many port stops, containers could cost-efficiently be handled with much bigger ships (Bonacich and Wilson 2008). The new generation of containerships are seagoing giants that can carry more than twenty thousand TEUs onboard (TEU being the international reference for twenty-foot-container units and used as a measure of capacity). The building of larger and larger ships has not only necessitated the transformation of relatively fixed infrastructures such as canals (see Carse 2014) and ports but also dramatically increased the carrying capacity of ships, and therefore also the possibilities for surplus value. In Schober's article we learn how these ever-growing ships are tied into an ever more volatile economic system of boom and bust.

The ports that we read about in some of this issue's articles (Leivestad, Schubert, Markkula) are today equipped with large gantry cranes used to lift heavy containers on and off ships in speedy operations. The adoption of the container as a key technology in shipping required massive investments in transforming ports the world over. Many ports disappeared while new ones emerged to accommodate the need for more spacious container infrastructures—often located at the outskirts of traditional port towns. This dislocation of port infrastructures has had both social and spatial consequences, some of which we learn about in Markkula's contribution to this issue. In this theme section we also see what the increase in container ship sizes has meant for ports where the seabed is being dredged in order to accommodate the constantly growing ships, for the labor force working onboard them who hardly ever see land, and for the dockworkers whose handling of cargo on the ground has changed. With shipping today run via big containerships, it has become economical to operate with fewer stops, bringing ports such as those studied by Schubert and Leivestad into fierce competition.

The operations and logics of container economies are monitored and mediated by what both the industry and the social scientific literature about it refer to as logistics. There has been a surge of scholarship in other disciplines, especially in critical geography, that focuses precisely on logistics and that uses it as a means to criticize contemporary capitalism (c.f. Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Chua et al. 2018; Cowen 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson 2015; Neilson et al. 2018; Toscano 2011; see also Birtchnell et al. 2015). The ways in which logistics has managed to appear as an apolitical model, stripped of its military history, power ideologies, and surveillance strategies, has preoccupied geographers and other scholars alike.

This growing body of work has focused on debunking the myth of frictionless flow in global logistics systems, looking for the interruptions and inconsistencies of cargo mobility and the hidden politics embedded in logistical systems (see Chua et al. 2018; Cowen 2014; Khalili 2020; Neilson et al. 2018). Among the contributions to this theme section, it is Jon Schubert's analysis from Angola and the state introduction of UNCTAD's Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) that most explicitly engages with this logistics literature. By looking at how customs brokers and food importers in the Atlantic port of Lobito deal with state-led customs regimes (see also Chalfin 2007, 2010) in times of commodity-crisis, Schubert disentangles "the fantasy of frictionless" trade through the "intensive work" it takes to produce it.

By focusing on how labor politics has been transformed under supply chain capitalism, critical logistics scholars have interrogated both the vulnerabilities of the logistics workforce and the revolutionary potential of logistics labor (Chua et al. 2018; Cowen 2014). What distinguishes our approach within this debate is our assertion that logistics is only productive—and destructive—in as far as it is also operating within wider networks of dependency. In this issue, we show that an anthropology of maritime logistics and labor pays attention not only to spatial and organizational power and vio-

lence but also to the social and cultural issues that continue to underpin the ways in which global trade works in practice. While the critical logistics literature has focused on the inherent systemic friction and violence embedded in the “chain,” our assertion is that maritime logistics can only be produced, sustained, and interrupted by engaging with diverse life worlds and moralities, kinship relations, and local exchange practices (see Schouten et al. 2019).

Life and labor under seaborne capitalism

The maritime industry has been referred to as “invisible” (George 2013), and the sea as a “forgotten space,” “out of sight, out of mind” (Sekula and Burch 2010). Marx and Marxist scholars have located capitalism’s origins as well as its global expansion through imperialism mainly by focusing on land-based events, such as the original land grab and the creation of industry (Marx 1967; Wood 1999). In the meantime, others have pointed to the importance of hidden maritime connections in these same projects (see Braudel 1972; Fulcher 2004; Sloterdijk 2013; Steinberg 2001). Fernand Braudel’s view of capitalism, for instance, differed in important ways from that of Marx (Wallerstein 1991) when he put long-distance networks at the center of his analysis. He distinguished “capitalism” from economic life and “the market” and viewed the former as only concerning “the unusual, the very special, or the very long-distance connection” (Wallerstein 1991: 355).

While Polanyi (2001) argued that the market itself emerged out of long-distance trade and not from local barter as it was portrayed by classical economics, similarly, historian James Fulcher (2004) also gives weight to speculation and long-distance trade as the origin of merchant capitalism. Fulcher describes how the overseas ventures of the East India Companies entailed high-risk investment with a return of profit that was delayed several years. In order to mitigate risk, people invested jointly in a fleet to disperse risk with the expectation that some ships would

never return, while others would. These accumulated profits could then be reinvested in domestic production, thus contributing to the industrial capitalism described by Marx. With these longer histories of a seaborne capitalism in mind, this issue contributes to an emerging anthropology of maritime trade and labor that looks at how the relationship between capitalism at large and the maritime industries plays out (see Bear 2015; Carse 2014; Chalfin 2010; Dua 2019).²

The issue of labor is central to our understanding of container economies.³ In this issue, we draw on the realities of seafarers, dockworkers, shipyard workers, and logistics intermediaries, such as customs brokers. From the early 1960s onward, technological advances such as containerization and standardization of global trade, as well as the financial restructuring of the shipping sector, reduced the number of workers onboard ships, in yards, and in ports. One of the central value-adding strategies of a competitive shipping industry continues to be the often brutal cutting of labor costs. The loss of jobs in former maritime nations of the West is part of a larger shift in gravity in maritime shipping where both financial power and the expansion of labor has moved eastward to low-cost nations in South, East, and South-East Asia.

These wider transformations from Fordist modes of work organization to a rapidly growing precariat can be seen in many domains but are particularly strongly articulated in the shipping industry and in the logistics sector. This move from “living labor” to “dead labor” (Cowen 2014: 100; Sibilila 2019: 475), and the profound consequences it has had for labor politics, has been amply discussed in the critical logistics literature (see Chua et al. 2018; Neilson et al. 2018). Central to these discussions is also how labor action has become centered on the interruption of commodity flows or “thwart a system’s operation,” as Nicole Starolsieski (2018: 7) puts it. In anthropology, a number of scholars have analyzed the unmaking and re-making of labor relationships and politics under troublesome globalization transitions (Carrier

and Kalb 2015; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Mollona 2009). In this theme section, we approach labor not only as an individual capacity to work but also as reliant on wider social and cultural networks and formations. Capital, as Penny Harvey and Christian Krohn-Hansen put it, “does not circulate as an abstract force, but has to accommodate to the specific social and cultural formations that both facilitate and limit the possibilities for accumulation” (2018: 10). Labor, then, is not only about making a living but also about making life “worth living” (Narotzky and Besnier 2014).

By following Indian seafarers, Mannov describes in her contribution to this issue how such labor-networks of dependence are shaped. She argues that a “containerization” of labor is forming through processes of standardization and packaging of “the male seafarer.” This seafarer is only produced, she argues, through wider moral and kinship engagements taking place “at home.” Her article illustrates one of Keir Martin’s (2018) points, when he problematizes the category of labor by arguing that “labour is a capacity of the person that can be partially detached from the person and put into relations with the outside world” (2018: 99). Container economies conceptually capture the ways in which work inside the shipping industry, through technologies and techniques involving the “containing” of other aspects of life, is performing such separations of “labor as a property” from the rest of the person (Martin 2018).

The contributions

In this issue, we explore seaborne capitalism through a comparative and ethnographically grounded bottom-up perspective that centers on the people whose aspirations are set in motion by—and are dependent upon—container economies. Geographically, the contributions move between South Korea, the Philippines, Italy, India, Spain, Angola, and out at sea. This geographical spread is important, as it also provides a much-needed correction to the largely US-centric scholarship on the history of containerization

and its implications (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Levinson 2016). Schober’s article is particularly telling in this regard, as her stories of big finance and kinship-run capitalism is set in the Asian region that has in the meantime become the center of the global shipping industry but whose importance has been largely overlooked in the academic literature (but see Neilson et al. 2018; Schouten et al. 2019 for important exceptions).

Schober begins this theme issue by taking us to South Korea where she introduces us to a complex family saga that forms the background to the Hanjin Shipping bankruptcy with which we started this introduction. She adds to the picture the lesser known, but interconnected, bankruptcy of the Korean conglomerate’s shipbuilding branch that took place a few years after Hanjin Shipping went under. As a tragicomic family history plays out, Schober’s text brings together an anthropological interest in kinship with a preoccupation with global capitalism and the plight of labor in the shipping industry and its adjacent sectors.

A focus on maritime labor reappears in the contribution by Johanna Markkula, but this time from inside the container ships themselves. As the goods travel faster and more smoothly, the mobility of sailors has become an inconvenience and a disturbance to the movement of things, ships, and capital. Markkula terms this “containing mobilities” and points out that as labor, seafarers are mobile, with crew members being drawn from a variety of countries, depending on where the best quality or price rapport is found. However, as traveling persons, the mobility of seafarers has been increasingly constrained.

In Adrienne Mannov’s article, we remain among the global seafarers. By looking more specifically at how Indian seafarers negotiate the risks of their profession and perform silences in relation to their family, Mannov teases out how sustaining a maritime labor force is dependent upon kinship-based loyalties and masculinity norms. The title of her contribution—“Nowhere near Somalia, Mom”—captures this relationship between labor, risk, and intimate care in a striking manner. By employing the “container” metaphorically, Mannov shows how personal

characteristics and elements are both contained and standardized through processes of human “containerization.”

With the contribution by Hege Høyer Leivestad, we move on to other aspects of containerization in order to interrogate how container-value is questioned and negotiated in a Spanish transshipment port. Leivestad sheds ethnographic light on the more abstract idea of “capital in motion,” arguing that it is when containers are physically moved inside the port that the value of capital is realized. In Leivestad’s article, the concept of “container economies” is further expanded as she ethnographically teases out how the shipping container—by resembling money—operates as a currency for measuring and quantifying labor and as abstractions of heterogeneous use value through which moral evaluations are channeled.

Finally, Jon Schubert approaches the fantasy of frictionless commodity flow by disentangling how transnational instruments such as ASYCUDA are being implemented with the promise of easing the flow of goods. The context for Schubert’s article is the Angolan port of Lobito, where the drop in world oil prices has led to a drastic diminishing of imports and a situation of standstill around this foreign-funded transport infrastructure. More specifically, Schubert shows in his article how food importers and customs agents at the port relate to the situation of failure and transnational disconnection in their daily work. What Schubert’s contribution so powerfully illustrates is how container economies are linked intrinsically to the rises and falls of national economies and state politics. By navigating through the ships, the shipyards, and the ports, the articles in this theme section advance a maritime anthropology of cargo circulation that adds to our understanding of the workings of contemporary capitalism.

Acknowledgments

This material is based upon work supported by the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2017-00367) and the Research Council of Nor-

way (grant number 275204). The idea for this theme section emerged from a session at the EASA conference in Stockholm in August 2018 and was followed up by a workshop in Oslo in September 2019. Funding for the latter event was provided by the project (Dis-)Assembling the lifecycle of container ships, led by Elisabeth Schober and funded by the Research Council of Norway. We are grateful to Gustav Peebles, who served as a discussant during the session in Stockholm, and to Keir Martin, who generously read, commented on, and discussed all the drafts with us in the Oslo workshop. We wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided excellent comments and critique on the introduction.

Hege Høyer Leivestad is postdoctoral fellow at Stockholm University, Sweden, and visiting fellow at London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. Her current project, Frontier freight: Maritime logistics at the Strait of Gibraltar, is funded by the Swedish Research Council and deals with port life, labor, and global shipping in southern Spain. Leivestad is author of the monograph *Caravans: Lives on wheels in contemporary Europe* (Bloomsbury 2018) and co-editor of *Ethnographies of conferences and trade fairs* (Palgrave 2017).

E-mail: hege.leivestad@socant.su.se

Johanna Markkula is postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, Norway, where she is part of the research project (Dis-)Assembling the life cycle of container ships: Global ethnographic explorations into maritime working lives. Markkula is a maritime ethnographer with ten years of experience researching the maritime industry and global maritime labor. She holds a PhD from Stanford University and has carried out ethnographic research onboard cargo ships with multinational crews as well as in the Philippines with maritime organizations and businesses ashore. She is currently working on a monograph, *Moving worlds: Maritime work and life on the social ocean*.

E-mail: johanna.markkula@sai.uio.no

Notes

1. Ships are thus both a means of production, as well as constituting forms of capital in themselves (Sibilia 2019).
2. Recently published ethnographies, including contributions to the anthropology of infrastructure, have also included work on water infrastructures such as the Panama Canal (Carse 2014), and maritime chokepoints (Carse et al. 2018, 2020; Dua 2019; Rothenberg 2018).
3. It is important to note that historians have had a longstanding interest in maritime labor, and the transnational politics and solidarities that have emerged in and around ports, ships, and docks (Fink 2011; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). In sub-fields such as transport geography and maritime economics that have long histories of engagement with maritime trade, the focus usually lies on spatial, managerial, and macro-economic aspects of maritime mobility (see Ng et al. 2014).

References

- Bear, Laura. 2015. *Navigating austerity: Currents of debt along a South Asian river*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bear, Laura, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanigasako. 2015. "Gens: A feminist manifesto for the study of capitalism." *Cultural Anthropology*, Editors forum. <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>.
- Birtchnell, Thomas, Satya Savitzky, and John Urry. 2015. "Moving cargos." In *Cargomobilities: Moving materials in a global age*, eds. Thomas Birtchnell, Satya Savitzky, and John Urry, 1–16. New York: Routledge.
- Bonacich, Edna, and Jake B. Wilson. 2008. *Getting the goods. Ports, labor, and the logistics revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Braudel, Fernand. 1972. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, Vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row.
- Buchloh, Benjamin, David Harvey, and Alan Sekula. 2011. "Forgotten spaces: Discussion platform with Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey, and Allan Sekula, at a Screening of 'The Forgotten Space' at The Cooper Union, May 2011." <https://www.newmusicusa.org/profile/marfafounding/> (accessed 4 June 2020).
- Carrier, James, and Don Kalb. 2015. *Anthropologies of class: Power, practice and inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carse, Ashley. 2014. *Beyond the big ditch: Politics, ecology and infrastructure at the Panama Canal*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Carse, Ashley, Jason Cons, and Townsend Middleton. 2018. "Chokepoints." *Limn* 10. <https://limn.it/issues/chokepoints/>.
- Carse, Ashley, Townsend Middleton, Jason Cons, Jatin Dua, Gabriela Valdivia, and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn. 2020. "Chokepoints: Anthropologies of the constricted contemporary." *Ethnos*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1696862>.
- Chalfin, Brenda. 2007. "Customs regimes and the materiality of global mobility: Governing the port of Rotterdam." *American Behavioral Scientist* 50 (12), 1610–1630.
- Chalfin, Brenda. 2010. *Neoliberal frontiers: An ethnography of sovereignty in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chu, Julie. 2016. "Boxed in: Human cargo and the technics of comfort." *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society* 29 (4): 403–421.
- Chua, Charmaine, Martin Danyluk, Deborah Cowen, and Laleh Khalili. 2018. "Introduction. Turbulent circulation: Building a critical engagement with logistics." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (4): 617–629.
- Cowen, Deborah. 2014. *The deadly life of logistics: Mapping violence in global trade*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dua, Jatin. 2019. *Captured at sea: Piracy and protection in the Indian Ocean*. Oakland California: University of California Press.
- Fink, Leon. 2011. *Sweatshops at sea: Merchant seamen in the world's first globalized industry, from 1812 to the present*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Fulcher, James. 2004. *Capitalism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- George, Rose. 2013. *Ninety percent of everything: Inside shipping, the invisible industry that puts clothes on your back, gas in your car, and food on your plate*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Gross, Daniel. 2003. "The shipping news: The best economic indicator you've never heard of." *Slate Magazine*, 2003. <https://slate.com/business/2003/10/why-you-should-care-about-the-baltic-dry-index.html>.

- Harvey, David. 2019. *Marx, capital and the madness of economic reason*. London: Profile Books.
- Harvey, Penny, and Christian Krohn-Hansen. 2018. "Dislocating labour: Anthropological reconfigurations." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24 (1): 10–28.
- Kasmir, Sherryn, and August Carbonella. 2014. *Blood and fire: Toward a global anthropology of labor*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Khalili, Laleh. 2020. *Sinews of war and trade: Shipping and capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*. London: Verso.
- Levinson, Marc. 2016. *The box: How the shipping container made the world smaller and the world economy bigger*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Linebaugh, Peter, and Marcus Rediker. 2000. *The many-headed hydra: Sailors, slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- MacKinnon, Susan, and Fenella Cannell. 2013. *Vital relations: Modernity and the persistent life of kinship*. Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press.
- Martin, Keir. 2018. "Wage-labour and a double separation in Papua New Guinea and beyond." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24 (1): 89–101.
- Marx, Karl. 1967. *Capital: A critique of political economy*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1978. *Capital volume II*. London: Penguin Books.
- McVeigh, Karen. 2020. "Cargo ship sailors press-ganged into keeping the world's trade afloat." *The Guardian*, May 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2020/may/11/cargo-ship-sailors-press-ganged-into-keeping-the-worlds-trade-afloat>.
- Mezzadra, Sandro, and Brett Neilson. 2015. "Operations of capital." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 (1): 1–9.
- Mollona, Mao. 2009. *Made in Sheffield: An ethnography of industrial work and politics*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Narotzky, Susana, and Nico Besnier. 2014. "Crisis, value, and hope: Rethinking the economy." *Current Anthropology* 55 (9): 4–16.
- Neilson, Brett, Ned Rossiter, and Ranabir Samaddar. 2018. *Logistical Asia: The labour of making a world region*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ng, Adolf KG, César Ducruet, Wouter Jacobs, Jason Monios, Theo Notteboom, Jean-Paul Rodrigue, Brian Slack, Kai-chai Tam, and Gordon Wilmsmeier. 2014. "Port geography at the crossroads with human geography: Between flows and spaces." *Journal of Transport Geography* 41: 84–96.
- Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Rothenberg, Janell. 2018. "'World-world' logistics in Tangier, Morocco." *Limn* 10.
- Schouten, Peer, Finn Stepputat, and Jan Bachmann. 2019. "States of circulation: Logistics off the beaten path." *Environment and Planning D Society and Space* 37 (5): 779–773.
- Sekula, Allan, and Noel Burch. 2010. *The forgotten space*. Doc.Eye Film.
- Sibilia, Elizabeth A. 2019. "Oceanic accumulation: Geographies of speculation, overproduction, and crisis in the global shipping economy." *Economy and Space* 51 (2): 467–486.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2013. *In the world interior of capital: Towards a philosophical theory of globalization*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Starolsieski, Nicole. 2018. "Strangling the internet." *Chokepoints, Limn* 10: 4–7.
- Steinberg, Philip E. 2001. *The social construction of the ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toscano, Alberto. 2011. "Logistics and opposition." *Mute*. 9 August. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-opposition> (accessed 25 May 2020).
- Tsing, Anna. 2009. "Supply chains and the human condition: Rethinking Marxism." *Journal of Economics, Culture, and Society* 21 (2): 148–76.
- UNCTAD. 2019. *Review of maritime transport 2019*. New York; Geneva: United Nations.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1991. "Braudel on capitalism, or everything upside down." *The Journal of Modern History* 63 (2): 354–361.
- Wilson, Ara. 2004. *The intimate economies of Bangkok*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 1999. *The origin of capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Yanagisako, Sylvia. 2002. *Producing culture and capital: Family firms in Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.