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Past the canal: An anthropology of maritime passages

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Passages, interrupted

On a normal day, an average of 50+ ships pass through the Suez Canal. The journey through this connecting point between Asia and Europe usually takes a vessel between 12 and 16 h. The 23rd of March 2021, however, would prove to be a day out of the ordinary: the passage of the *Ever Given*, an ultra-large container ship, came to a halt when strong winds steered the vessel sideways, lodging it into the sandy banks of the narrow waterway. Operated by a Taiwanese shipping company, sailing under the Panama flag, and on its way from China to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, the *Ever Given* was amongst the worst contenders for an accident of this kind: with a holding capacity of up to 20,000 twenty foot freight containers (TEUs), it ranks among the world's largest container vessels.

Indeed, despite the massive efforts made by the Canal Authority, the *Ever Given* would not move; with the queue of waiting ships growing to more than 300 by the time the salvage operation finally succeeded after six long days. In the meantime, the unexpected canal obstruction caused an estimated loss of 400 million US Dollars per hour to the world economy (Vlamiš 2021). During the days of the frantic mission to release the ship from the Canal's banks, the vessel had not only brought maritime traffic between Asia and Europe to a temporary halt. It also sparked unprecedented public interest in contemporary maritime transportation and the global histories behind it.

In an effort to steer these conversations into anthropological terrain, we put forward a collection of short essays that focuses on maritime passages, their interruptions, and on the multifaceted figures that accompany them. The *passage*, in its most dominant meaning, refers to a path, movement, or channel, which is often, but not always, of the oceanic kind, as the reflections of Walter Benjamin on the concrete, and land-based urban *Passagen* (that is arcades) also attest to (Benjamin 2002). Secondly, in figurative speech, 'the passage of time' refers to the unstoppable elapsing of minutes, days, and years, which are pictured as gradually flowing away from us. This temporal dimension of 'passage' is equally as relevant to our argument around the Suez Canal's temporary closure. And finally, a passage can refer to a brief composition, both of a written and musical nature – a condensed genre which we also aspire towards in the short interventions presented.

The Canal's obstruction, and the global public attention it received, represents an extraordinary accident-turned-spectacle. While most maritime accidents occur outside

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of the spotlight, they nevertheless are a frequent feature of the shipping industry. The spectacular nature of the events unfolding in March 2021 arguably speaks both to its timing, occurring amidst Covid-19-lockdowns, and to the unacknowledged role that containers and container ships play for the global supply chains that we all depend upon. It was therefore also an 'event' in the sense proposed by Sahlins (2005): a critical moment in time that, due to the unexpected attention it received, involved a structural-cum-symbolic amplification that laid bare the hidden forces it was embedded in.

The events in the Suez Canal also allow us to tap into how the factor of time is perceived inside the world of shipping. It alerts us to our dependency on the just-in-time-delivery model that the technologies of modern logistics have enabled and lifted up as a world standard. Instead of warehousing goods, in this new regime of transportation that emerged since the 1950s and 1960s, products are only delivered when they are needed – a system which, in hindsight, may have put too much faith in frictionless movement as the new normal. Laura Bear has recently alerted us to how capitalism involves 'abstract time-reckoning' (2014a) of the kind built into the 'just-in-time' mode, which may come into conflict with concrete experiences of time. This she exemplifies with the case of 'Ajeet's accident' (2014b) – a river pilot who accidentally ran aground a container ship inside the Hooghly River.

Globalization and flow are two notions that, in the heyday of first analytical writings on the global in the 1990s and early 2000s, were thought of as nearly synonymous. The occasional stoppages, the routine, the chokepoints (Carse et al. 2020), and the disruptions occurring in and around them were categories that emerged at a later point in time. This insertion of both the accidental stoppage and the incommensurate temporal horizons it can create are crucial when it comes to understanding the Suez closure.

Maritime histories, anthropological currents

The Suez Canal is one of the vital arteries of global maritime trade, providing the shortest shipping route between the countries of the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and Europe. The Canal's decade-long construction started in the 1860s and was made possible through the forced labour of tens and thousands of peasants. Chua (2021) refers to the Suez Canal as 'a colonial engineer's fantasy – a celebration of the mastery of European man over the landscape of colonized Egypt'. Laleh Khalili has uncovered the Canal's centrality for imperial powers, but also for the transformation of the petroleum industry and 'the expansion of extractive industries in Asia and Africa' (2020, 31). The temporary closure of the Suez Canal in 1956 and from 1967 to 1975 played a crucial role in the move toward constructing bigger ships. Shipping companies that had to take the detour around the Cape of Good Hope decided to invest in larger tankers to lower their costs. By the early 1970s, Khalili notes, ultra-large crude carriers were dominating the market, setting a precedent for the development of supersized ships that would affect container shipping decades later.

The geopolitical history of the Suez Canal, a colonial-turned-global enterprise quite similar to that of the Panama Canal (Carse 2014), is an important backdrop to the workings of contemporary shipping. In 2015, the Egyptian government finalized the project of expanding the Canal in order to increase capacity and accommodate the ever-larger container ships passing through it. From its early start in the 1950s, 'containerisation'

eventually made it possible to significantly lower the costs of transoceanic trade (Levinson 2006). Containers can be carried on board larger ships that make fewer stops – a logic that has led to shipping companies' investments in increasingly larger containerships, with major consequences for labour, infrastructure, and environment (see Leivestad and Schober 2021).

Anthropology, until recently, took little note of these major transformations in maritime transportation. Despite traditionally working on islands, and looking at forms of livelihoods, rituals, and social practices that were shaped by encounters with the sea, a fully-fledged maritime anthropology only emerged since the 1970s. A new agenda was set that first involved an emphasis on ecological issues, and then expanded into research of fishing practices amidst industrialized and economically contested sea spaces (Roszko 2021). Arguably today, the interest in maritime spaces is divided among those exploring the seas as more-than-human terrains (for example Helmreich 2009), and those who view the oceans as spaces for human connectivity and opportunity that are increasingly coming under pressure by capitalist forces (for example Dua 2019).

Figures of the sea

The Suez-event took its spectators past the 193 km long Canal, revealing an intricate network of maritime routes. At the heart of the occurrence, we could spot interconnected human, economic and infrastructural formations, central to the everyday making of global shipping: the seafarers stuck on board the ships; the dredge attempting to release the *Ever Given*; ports suffering container shipment delays; and insurance brokers speculating on the consequences of the blockade. In this collection, we approach some of these formations (the ship, the dredger, the shipping container, and the broker) as *figures* participating in maritime passages.

'Figures' are not new to social analysis; just think of Benjamin's 'Flaneur', enjoying the Parisian *Passagen*. Anthropologists have more recently articulated the analytical value of paying attention to 'key-figures' that represent something more than themselves. In *Figures of Southeast Asian Modernity* (2014), Joshua Barker, Eric Harms, and Johan Lindquist, make a case for the study of key figures that involves bridging the particular and general. The 'figure' here, is 'someone who others recognize as standing out, and who encourages reflexive contemplation about the world in which the figure lives' (2014, 3). Figures thus become 'embodied symbols' that make sense against particular backgrounds (2014, 3). In a similar fashion, Salazar (2017) shows how figures of mobile people have had a longstanding importance in conceptualizations of self and other, thus also forming analytic debates. Salazar demonstrates how figures of mobility, from Deleuze and Guattari's *Nomad* to Bauman's *Pilgrim* have shaped scholarly theorizations of mobility (see also Bastos, Novoa, and Salazar 2021; Markkula 2021).

In our conversation around maritime passages, we approach figures as human and material constellations that bridge the particular and the general in the maritime realm. The figures we identify and engage with are thus not only human beings, but also part of infrastructural formations. What makes *the dredger* or *the insurance broker* approachable as figures, we argue, are their peculiar positions as reference points in a world of global shipping. As such, they are figures that are part and parcel of the economic, social, and historical systems that we refer to as *seaborne capitalism*.

The essays in this collection

At the centre of the Suez event of 2021 stood the *Ever Given*, but also the queue of other ships waiting for the Canal to re-open. By re-visiting past maritime blockages, Johanna Markkula brings us closer to the figure of *the ship*. Analysed both as ‘a prison and a technology of evasion and escape’, as Markkula puts it, the ship has been productive for social theory, but also for localized anthropological experience and knowledge production. Via the Great Bitter Lakes, where fourteen ships got stuck for eight years due to the Israel-Egypt war, and to the coast of Lagos, where Markkula’s father was on board a ship in 1974, she teases out the social constellations emerging from the ship during moments of blockages.

The prolonged interruption of flow in the Suez Canal caused global concern, not least amongst the insurance brokers located in London, whose main task it is to safeguard maritime trade through creating systems of protection for cargo and crew. In his contribution to this collection, Jatin Dua explores the figure of *the insurance broker* through ‘interrupted itineraries’. Insurance contracts have been historically central to the making of long-distance maritime trade, and Dua shows how shipping is made possible by ‘moving risk’. For figures such as the broker, interruptions entail ‘both perils and possibilities’, he argues.

On the deck of the *Ever Given* were thousands of shipping containers, filled with goods destined for factories and consumers. In Hege Høyer Leivestad’s contribution, she traces the figure of the container, from its contemporary usage as an analytical category, to the on-the-ground work inside a port. The container has become a common sight in social theory, evoking associations with concealment and release. But has this focus on the container as a quasi-theoretical category made us overlook the multiple scales upon which *containers at work* operate? By exploring containers inside a port, Leivestad teases out the ways in which they function on multiple scales.

While the ship was *the* protagonist of the Suez spectacle, a dredger called the *Mashour* trying to release the giant from the muddy banks soon became a worthy contender for our attention (together with those tiny-looking excavators working hard from the coastline, of course). ‘The Dredger’ can refer to both the person doing the dredging and the technology itself, a semantic blurring that Ashley Carse uses to interrogate this figure as human/machine. Dredging, Carse shows, has been a central technological and political tool in land reclamations, but also for colonial and imperialist expansions, and megaprojects of the Suez kind. Carse invites us to think about the figure of the dredger through what he terms ‘problems of geomorphological agency’: rather than traversing the boundary between land and water, this type of vessel attempts to alter what it finds.

Incidentally, close to a year after the *Ever Given* was freed, another large container ship owned by the same company, the *Ever Forward*, got stuck in muddy waters outside of Baltimore. After three weeks of near-endless dredging, the vessel will now have its container load removed in a costly operation that is meant to refloat the ship. While the *Ever Forward* is not blocking the passages of other vessels due to its accidental location in a rather wide bay, the ship’s spectacular stuckness serves as yet another reminder of how seemingly smooth maritime trade flows are in fact always the outcome of complex labour processes behind the scenes.

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