

Beyond Suez. Escalating Ship Sizes and their Consequences

Via [LeftEast](#)

Stuck

At the height of this pandemic's third wave, with many of us sitting in what by now feels like an eternal lockdown, images of a gigantic ship stuck inside the Suez Canal seem to have provided more than just a welcome distraction. The vessel, unable to move one way or another, proved to be immensely relatable, if endless memes flooding the ether over the last few days are any indication at all. With the ship now figuring as a stand-in for every dilemma under the sun, cartoonist Guy Venables, in [his work](#) for Metro Newspaper UK, perhaps best summed up the phenomenon with a drawing of the stuck ship that has a voice emerging from the vessel saying, "This is terrible! We're going to be used as a metaphor for everything!"

The popular fascination with the Suez blockage is not surprising. Ships, if we can be excused for anthropomorphizing them for a moment, are as charismatic as human-made objects can ever be. Standing next to a container ship of the dimensions of the *Ever Given* is an experience that is hard to shrug off, so massive and overwhelming to the human size are these new ultra-large vessels. At the same time, having over recent years done research among workers involved in producing, operating, maintaining and (un-)loading these ships, we found ourselves rather unsurprised by the events unfolding in the Suez. Among some maritime industry experts, the fact that container ships have gotten too big has been an open secret for quite a while (e.g. see Lim 1998; Merk 2015; Weisenthal and Alloway 2021). Laleh Khalili, for instance, has recently shown how the Suez Canal ironically played a key role

in the acceleration of ship growth, when oil tankers rose in size as a response to the Suez crisis in the 1950s (e.g. 2021; see also Khalili 2020). The temporary cardiac arrest that the *Ever Given* has caused inside the Suez Canal, Khalili's work and that of other excellent critical logistics scholars has shown (for an overview, see Charmaine Chua's valuable [list here](#)), may only be the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the damage that ultra-large container ships are causing.



Image 1: “Transiting through the Suez Canal.” Photo: Johanna Markkula.

But first of all – to the hard facts on the ground: For nearly a week, a 400-meter-long container ship has been stuck in the southern part of the Suez Canal, blocking all traffic, and causing an estimated loss of [400 Million US Dollars per hour](#) to the global economy. On her way from Yantian in China to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and with room for 20,000 twenty-foot freight containers (TEUs) when fully loaded, on the morning of 23 March *Ever Given* was surprised by strong desert winds in shallow waters. Like the Straits of Malacca, the Panama Canal and the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal –

built partially by forced laborers from 1859-1869 – is a vital vein in the bloodstream of trade. This is the shortest route between Asia and Europe. An average of 52 ships pass through the Suez Canal every day; 12% of international ship traffic and as much as 30% of global container traffic is routed via this narrow chokepoint. For ships that during the past week have been diverted around the Cape of Good Hope, a significantly longer journey awaits. As the queue of waiting ships grew to more than 300 by March 28, deliveries to Europe and beyond have suffered severe delays, while the currently cut-off ports are bracing themselves for a true onslaught of ships that will clog up their waterways once the blockage has been resolved. In a nutshell, this colossal mess will certainly take a while to sort out, even once the ship has become unstuck.

Container Economies on Overdrive

As we have recently summarized in a theme section of *Focaal* (“Container Economies”, [Leivestad and Markkula 2021](#)), global shipping is built on intricate logistical systems, systems that have come into place with the invention of the modern day intermodal shipping container, and where “Just in time” principles govern everything. With the development of new shipping systems and technological solutions from the 1950s onwards, it became cost-effective to transport goods and raw materials between continents, primarily from large production countries in Asia to markets in Europe and the US (see Levinson 2006). Container ships today transport 24% of all the world’s dry goods, and building ever larger ships seemed to be the obvious, cost-effective strategy to embrace. From the mid-2000s onwards, more and more shipping companies have begun to expand their fleets with larger ships. The world’s largest shipping company, the Danish Mærsk, proved to be a leader in this development, and the Asian-owned shipping companies – many of them state-controlled – followed suit over recent years. Between 2005 and 2015,

container vessels doubled in size. Since 2017 alone, 77 additional mega-container vessels with a capacity of over 20,000 containers [have been brought into use](#).

As we (Leivestad and Schober) also describe in an upcoming article in *Anthropology Today*, some maritime experts have long been skeptical about how sustainable these ultra-large box ships actually are – a debate that has certainly flared up again [recently](#). Before the pandemic hit the world economy last year, shipping prices had temporarily fallen to a record low, which was partly due to the overcapacity created by nearly all major shipping companies simultaneously betting on the introduction of ultra-large container vessels. The spectacular 2016 collapse of Hanjin Shipping ([see Schober 2021](#)), then among the top 10 of shipping companies in the world, is often attributed as a direct outcome of this over-capacity. In our piece in AT, we discuss how the language of “Economies of Scale” used to justify these ships is more than just of a performative nature. It is, one can argue, part of a false economy in the sense that these ships mark a real redistribution of wealth from public funds to corporate elites, rather than the creation of new wealth that is their ostensible justification.

Size Matters

Through our research in one of Europe’s largest container ports in southern Spain, around South Korean and Philippine shipyards, and on board of various container ships, we have come across other negative effects that ultra-large container ships have caused over recent years. When not clogging up the Suez Canal, these increasingly larger ships are often causing new problems for maritime infrastructure, the environment, and negatively affect people’s working conditions. Fewer and fewer ports can actually accommodate the new ships. For those ports that can – of which many are struggling to survive in a highly competitive industry – major investments are required to build

ever higher cranes, longer docks and larger container warehouses. Port work must be adapted to the megaships' routes and schedules, and workers both at sea and on land fear that the growing ship sizes, together with ever smaller crew sizes on board, eventually will lead to serious accidents. The environmental aspects of shipping in general are significant. For instance, sea beds must be dredged at regular intervals, with major consequences for the marine environment above and below water (e.g. Carse and Lewis 2020).

Although the *Ever Given* is now about to be released from the canal, the drama is far from over. In many ports, maritime workers fear chaotic conditions when all waiting ships resume traffic – at a time when the pandemic has already caused much havoc across the industry. Hopefully, the incident in the Suez Canal will be a wake-up call. Escalating ship sizes have serious consequences, and large parts of the infrastructure that has enabled the megaship growth are financed by tax payer money. The price for the *Ever Given*, and the many ships of its kind that will continue to sail the oceans, may ultimately have to be paid by all of us.

References

Carse, Ashley and Joshua A. Lewis. 2020. "New horizons for dredging research." In *WIREs Water*. Vol.7, issue 6 (November/December). <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1485>

Merk, Olaf. 2015. "The Impact of Mega-ships. Case Specific Policy Analysis. International Transport Forum." https://www.itf-oecd.org/sites/default/files/docs/15cs_pa_mega-ships.pdf

Khalili, Laleh. 2020. *Sinews of war and trade: Shipping and capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*. London: Verso.

Khalili, Laleh. 2021. "Big ships were created to avoid relying on the Suez Canal. Ironically, a big ship is now blocking it." In *Washington Post*. March

26. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/03/26/big-ships-were-created-avoid-relying-suez-canal-ironically-big-ship-is-now-blocking-it/>

Leivestad, Hege Høyer and Johanna Markkula. 2021. "Inside Container Economies". Focaal. 89: 1-11.

Levinson, Marc. 2006. The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lim, Seok-Min. 1998. 'Economies of scale in container shipping', Maritime Policy & Management 25 (4): 361-373.

Schober, Elisabeth. 2021. "Building ships while breaking apart." Focaal. 89: 12-24.

Weisenthal, Joe and Tracy Alloway. 2021. 'Shippers saw a need for bigger vessels. They built them too big'. Bloomberg. 23 January

2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-23/shippers-saw-a-need-for-bigger-boats-they-built-them-too-big>