

# THE CONTAINER PRINCIPLE

How a Box Changes  
the Way We Think

Alexander Klose



## **The Container Principle**

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# **The Container Principle**

How a Box Changes the Way We Think

Alexander Klose

Translated by Charles Marcrum II

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## Preface to the English Edition

*Washington D.C., August 2007, post-9/11 America:* The U.S. Senate passes Public Law 110–53 to enhance the security of international container shipping and to protect the American homeland. Associated Press journalist Jim Abrams, paraphrasing the famous opening line of *The Communist Manifesto*, said it was the “specter of a nuclear bomb, hidden in a cargo container” that “prompted Congress to require 100 percent screening of U.S. bound ships at their more than 600 foreign starting points.”<sup>1</sup>

The new screening law is part of the Container Security Initiative (CSI), a subdivision of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. CSI was founded in early 2002 during the high pitch of federal homeland security activism. The official CSI website’s argument for the necessity of drastic security measures for cargo transport reads as follows: “Imagine if a weapon of mass destruction sitting in a container within the sea cargo environment were detonated.”<sup>2</sup>

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, it is no longer the specter of communism—at least for the time being—that haunts the minds of U.S. security agencies. The “imagination of disaster”<sup>3</sup> focuses on the driving force of U.S. economic success and

supremacy. The security of the (Western) world, as the image of smuggled weapons of mass destruction suggests, is threatened by precisely the ubiquitous transport medium that enabled the economic growth and welfare of the last decades. These very same boxes were sent into worldwide circulation for a long period, unhindered as much as possible by trade barriers and complicated bureaucratic procedures, thus establishing today's global production and supply chains. Under the new regulations, they would have to be controlled and inspected again.

*Germany, spring 2009, financial crisis:* The front page of the May 20, 2009, issue of *Die Zeit*, one of the leading German newspapers, shows a reproduction of the digitally altered painting *Tower of Babel* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The headline reads "Will It Work without Growth?" The tower is being reconstructed; it is now perforated and encircled by railroad tracks and highways transporting an unending chain of containers. The standard steel stacked boxes drive the tower higher into the sky. Babel, the biblical city on many waters, is located by the sea. Container ships can be seen coming across the vast ocean. Supplies for the tower are piled up on the wharf. As this picture suggests, the hubris of modern global society is built on containers. And the way out of the permanent crisis of capitalism lies in ending the race for the most boxes.

What the two scenarios described above show is that the former black boxes of globalization have turned into thoroughly ambivalent objects. Pandora's steel boxes are not only carrying the world's cargo trade but are also depicting everything that is bad or problematic about globalization. During the last decade or two, transport containers have become critical objects; they have become visible, an opportune revelation for researchers and media archaeologists of the present time. Infrastructures,

when working smoothly, tend to vanish under the threshold of visibility.

Much more urgent today than the problem of confused tongues traditionally associated with the story of the Tower of Babel is the problem of diversified and interwoven circumstances of production negotiated under the term *globalization*. The wealth of nations and their employment opportunities are significantly dependent on the continued prosperity of such global supply chains. This is evident in the performance of the core element of logistics: the container transport system and its microeconomic logic that has gripped the whole world.

Containers are not simply the most, if not the only, important means of transport for the vast majority of the goods we deal with every day. Perhaps because of their simple, clear, expressive power, containers have become the symbol of globalization—and also of many phenomena associated with this development. Containers represent the impressive dynamics of modern capitalism and its fundamental optimism in the face of every crisis. At the same time, they represent the fears of and objections to these dynamics when logistics are organized purely for optimization, forcibly converging and aligning formerly remote parts of the world through an exponential increase in transport and communication processes.

The basic material quality of containers, the fact that they can be emptied just as easily as they can be filled, also seems to reveal an effect on the semantic level of stories and images. Thus, one finds containers not only in the business sections of newspapers and television broadcasts but also in films, plays, and novels. Because of their versatility as modular spaces and because they can be assembled and disassembled comparatively easily, containers have also been nearly ubiquitous in residential

areas for many years: as temporary accommodations and storage for people and materials, as business or office spaces, and as kindergartens or kiosks.

The omnipresence of containers and the surprising fact that I found very little that attempted to explain this omnipresence was my starting point as I made the voyage from Hamburg to Hong Kong in the summer of 2001 as a member of a film team. I approached the journey on the container ship as the water-travel portion of a kind of Grand Tour of globalization, to get a sense for myself of how containers affect the global economy.

At the same time, however, I was almost more interested in the containers ashore—especially since I already viewed the container ship itself as essentially a huge floating parking lot. All the container-shaped things that I encountered in the most diverse fields of society were constantly spreading, as it seemed to me—from physical storage systems to spatial organizational metaphors—and I became more and more convinced that containerization is more than the transformation of freight traffic to shipment in standard containers. What it is, in fact, is a grand movement comparable to mechanization in the breadth of its applications—a change in the fundamental order of thinking and things that may be spoken of as a principle, the material core of which is the standardized container, by which it became fully visible but in which it hardly exhausts itself.

I dedicated more than five years of research to the emergence of this principle, its prehistory, and its spread. The results of my visits to the various “container worlds”—to trade shows and harbors, to the offices of logistics experts and architects, in assorted scientific fields, in the fine arts, in films and novels, and in philosophy—form the content of this book. In light of the fact that my research was based at a German university, but also as

a reaction to my finding that most publications tell the history and principles of containerization almost exclusively from the American perspective, this book often emphasizes the European (and particularly the German) side of the historical developments; this may be a bit surprising, but I hope it is also rewarding to the American reader.

If my theory of the ubiquity of the container principle is right, then it is impossible to treat the subject definitively at the present time. At best, one can propose theories and attempt to trace tendencies. Thus, the chapters of this book concentrate on “container situations” associated with certain historical and systemic conditions, such as the history of logistics or the idea of the standardized modular compartment. Each chapter undertakes a journey around the world and into the depths of history. Reflecting its particular subject, each chapter can also be read as a separate unit. The book contains eight—by no means standardized—reading modules (chapters), and it is not necessary to read them in sequence.



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Accident of MSC *Napoli* container ship in January 2007. Credit: PA Images. Used with permission.

## Introduction: The Accident

On the morning of January 18, 2007, nearly 50 miles south of the headlands of Cornwall, a container ship sailing under the British flag in the English Channel was in distress. MSC *Napoli* was at the very beginning of its journey from Belgium to South Africa via the Portuguese city of Sines when it crossed the destructive path of Hurricane Kyrill. Amid 40-foot-high waves and a 70-mile-per-hour wind, the 26 members of the crew were successfully rescued by helicopter. The disabled freighter was initially supposed to be towed to the nearest harbor, but instead it was put aground off the coast of Cornwall because it was threatening to break apart.

As a result of the continuing poor weather and an alarming starboard tilt of 35 degrees, 116 containers spilled into the sea. The remaining 846 containers stacked on the deck were able to be unloaded by March 9 with the help of a floating pontoon. The recovery of the approximately 1,300 containers stacked below the deck dragged out for months. Of the steel boxes that had gone overboard, 73 washed up along the coast and 11 were spotted on the sea floor. The rest were considered missing.

With a capacity of 4,419 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units—the internationally determined designation for 20-foot standard

transport containers), *MSC Napoli* was a midsize container ship. When it was launched in 1991, under the name *CMA CGM Normandie*, it was the first fully rigged post-Panamax container ship—that is, the first container ship that was too large (902 feet long and 122 feet wide) to cross the Panama Canal.

A comparison with the dimensions of today's largest container ships reveals the monstrous growth that remains nearly unchecked in the transport sector, compared to any other industry, despite oil crises, collapses in the capital market, warming climate, and shipwrecks. The French shipping company CMA CGM's *Marco Polo* loads up to 16,000 TEUs and measures nearly 1,300 by 180 feet. Produced on order from the world's largest shipping carrier, the Danish firm A. P. Møller Maersk, the new Triple E Class ships, 1,312 feet long and 194 feet wide and with a loading capacity of up to 18,000 TEUs, set sail in 2013. What will happen if a ship of such proportions loses even a fraction of its payload?

The wreck of *MSC Napoli* off the coast of Cornwall in 2007 caused a state of emergency. In earlier times the area was notorious as a home for wreckers, who lured their victims into the shallow coastal waters with false beacons to then plunder the ships run aground. When a few dozen containers washed ashore on the beach of the small, quiet, coastal town of Branscombe, inhabited primarily by wealthy retirees, thousands of people traveled from across England to grab a bit of loot. They besieged the beach. The narrow village street was blocked, with parked cars stretching for miles from the site. The collectors and looters weren't stopped by warnings that the containers could be carrying dangerous cargo.

Media from around the world reported extensively on the "Night of the Treasure Hunters." "Hundreds of Beachcombers



Beachcombers in Branscombe. © picture-alliance/dpa—Report.

Pounce on Cargo,” “Scavengers in the Hunt for Booty,” and “Dreams Run Aground” read the headlines of German daily papers. The “self-service party” and “late Christmas” were topics of discussion. The beach was said to be transformed into a “supermarket,” littered with gears, steering wheels, and other spare car parts, along with wine barrels, cookie tins, first-aid kits, perfume bottles, sneakers, diapers from Arabia, shoes from Cyprus, empty French barrels meant for South African wine, dog food, clothing, household appliances, and toys. Even a tractor washed up.