

The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger. By Marc Levinson. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006. xii + 376 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables. Cloth, \$24.95. ISBN: 0-691-12324-1.

Reviewed by Shane Hamilton

What drove late-twentieth-century globalization? Information technology, transformations in international capital flow, multinational firms' dogged search for low-wage labor in developing countries? Those transformations in global capitalism, according to Marc Levinson, were secondary to the adoption of containerized shipping in the 1970s, which slashed the cost of transporting goods around the globe. With transportation expenses no longer constraining manufacturers' choices of location, firms constructed global supply chains. Cheap Taiwanese transistor radios and computers flooded the U.S. market, while Japanese consumers became accustomed to Wyoming beef. The container, in short, revolutionized international commerce by annihilating time and space on a global scale.

Drawing on extensive archival research, oral histories, periodicals, and government and business documents, Levinson (formerly an editor at the *Economist*) offers an absorbing historical analysis of this world-changing technological system. As the first published general history of containerized shipping, *The Box* is a valuable contribution to a crucial, though understudied, topic of business history. It is also a fantastic read. The book's strong narrative drive, however, relies on blunt statements of technological determinism like this one: "The logic of shipping freight in containers was so compelling, the cost savings so enormous, that the container took the world by storm" (pp. 276–77). The container revolution did not unfold according to some internal logic of efficiency, though; in fact, as Levinson acknowledges, the most remarkable aspect of the container revolution may be that it even occurred at all.

Longshoremen, who understood the threat containerization posed to their livelihoods, fought hardest against the new technology. Militant rank-and-filers demanding steady work and decent pay built the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) into

two of the most powerful unions in America at mid-century. Before containerization, “breakbulk” vessels carried thousands of different items of varying shapes, sizes, and weights. Each item had to be loaded and unloaded separately by hand, essentially guaranteeing jobs for thousands of dockworkers. According to Levinson, the men who performed this labor were ignorant, hunchbacked, racist, drunken, thieving, hard-working brutes—brutes who relied on their fists and on corrupt union leaders and mobsters to block managements’ efforts to streamline the loading process. The container provided an “obvious” solution to the “high cost of freight handling” (p. 29), since shipping freight in large boxes would allow a single crane operator to do the work of dozens of hand-loaders, while the enclosed box would keep thieving hands away from kegs of imported whiskey. Only in the mid-1960s, after intense struggles to keep the breakbulk system in place, did the ILA and the ILWU decide to allow containerization—accepting layoffs in exchange for generous wage increases and benefit packages for the remaining dockworkers.

New York City mayor Robert Wagner Jr. likewise refused to see containerization as an “obvious” path to progress. Wagner knew that New York’s century-old ports required modernization in the 1950s, but he also recognized the value of dockworkers’ votes. Through the mid-1960s, Wagner pumped money into dock improvements but did not fund facilities for container operations. On the other hand, the Port of New York Authority, which oversaw operations in both New York and New Jersey, became intrigued by containers in the mid-1950s; it funded renovations at Newark and constructed a dedicated container port at Elizabeth. By 1970, New Jersey had captured 63 percent of the Port of New York’s cargo, while the “Manhattan docks had no future” (p. 96). Similar fates befell aging ports at London and San Francisco as ships increasingly docked at the ultramodern container ports in Long Beach, Singapore, and Rotterdam. Still, the millions of dollars spent by New York City on breakbulk docks reveal the contingent and politicized nature of containerization.

Two factors, according to Levinson, ultimately upended the status quo: the entrepreneurial drive of Malcom McLean and the Vietnam War. McLean strode into container shipping with a remarkable tolerance for risk. He leveraged buyouts of competitors, cut labor deals, and audaciously expanded operations in his quest for

economies of scale. Others had loaded railroad boxcars on ships since the early twentieth century, decades before McLean sent the jerrybuilt *Ideal-X* on a maiden container voyage in 1956. But Levinson shrugs off such precedents; it was McLean who had the “radical” insight to see “that the shipping industry’s business was moving cargo, not ships” (p. 53) and that doing so profitably would require not only metal boxes but an integrated system of ports, cranes, warehouses, trucks, and trains. McLean—a former trucking magnate—thought outside “the box,” focusing on the systemic nature of containerized shipping.

The Vietnam War made McLean’s pioneering work a commercial reality. Faced with the “logistical mess” (p. 171) of transporting war matériel to a country with only one serviceable port and one railroad, the U.S. Army turned to McLean’s Sea-Land Inc. for help. Echoing the findings of historians of technology Merritt Roe Smith and David Hounshell, Levinson shows how military demands for uniformity and efficiency provided Sea-Land with a guaranteed market and the power to enforce technological standards where none had existed before. The issue of standards was crucial to the container’s development; through the 1960s, private firms and international standards-setting bodies battled over crucial issues such as length, height, positioning of lifting braces and locking devices, and a dozen other concerns. Each choice required a sacrifice either in systemic efficiency or in profits for firms already using a particular standard. The Army’s demands cleared the way for a rapid adoption of containerized shipping in both the Pacific and the Atlantic.

By the late 1970s, containers had made worldwide shipping fast and cheap. No longer would global shipping be defined by the romance of the open sea or the labor conflicts dramatized in the 1954 film *On the Waterfront*. Containerized shipping was faceless and efficient, making Turkish textiles dirt cheap for American consumers and eliminating hunchbacked dockworkers and wandering tramp ships from the global economy. Entire books—one hopes without the taint of technological determinism—wait to be written on the winners and losers in this drama. For both specialists and nonspecialists alike, however, Levinson’s expansive and well-researched book provides the best existing history of containerization.

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