

Piling Up: Cargo Paperwork in a Global Port

Hege Høyer Leivestad

Piled up 1: Steel shipping containers stacked in long, neat rows, forming boxed barriers along asphalt streets. Boxes managed by machinery. One box collected, the next put in its place. Deafening noise as metal meets metal. One box rises into the air above orange helmets and heavy trucks. Shifted from ship to shore, from shore to ship and once more out to sea.

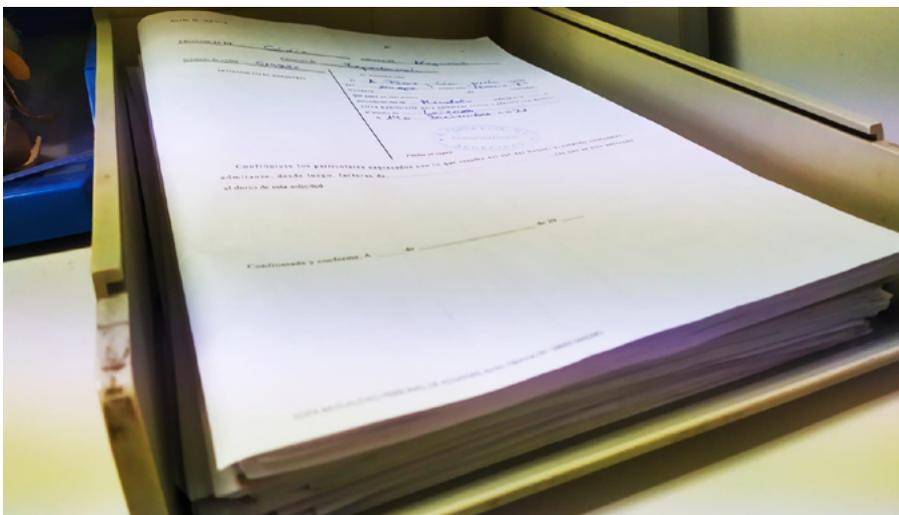
Piled up 2: Another document added to the yellow folder. The remaining papers spread out across the dirty desk. On the screen are lists of container codes. One hundred emails since this morning. Phones ringing. Another ship delay, transfers need to be moved. Terminal management, the custom broker, the warehouse, the transport company. Folder upon folder upon folder.

Introduction: Piling Up

The previous two descriptions offer familiar and unfamiliar images of a port. The first captures colourful shipping containers piled up on the seafront or on the back of massive containerships, a powerful image of global connections and commodity flows.



Piling up at the waterfront.
Photo: Hege Høyer Leivestad. Port of Algeciras Bay, 2019.



Piling up on the desk.
Photo: Hege Høyer Leivestad. Algeciras, 2021.

The second captures the vital backroom work of logistics.

This backroom labour takes place not on the exposed waterfront which comprises the recognizable spectacle of logistics, but behind the walls of logistics offices and

brokering businesses. Both descriptions speak to the logistical processes of temporary accumulation – of containers and paperwork. Although scholars are increasingly looking at data infrastructures and software solutions in order to make sense of supply chains, a parallel material world of papers also performs logistics. ‘Piling up’, as the title of this essay suggests, refers to the interrelated material circulation and accumulation of cargo and papers. From the transshipment port of Algeciras in southern Spain, I reflect upon how logistics mediation is achieved through the logistics document: a material technology often regarded as antiquated but which continues to define labour hierarchies, mediate port temporalities and connect logistics actors through acts of authorization and confirmation.

Agents of Flow

Through the large windows – desperately in need of a clean – one can spot the turquoise gantry cranes of the container terminal, located in downtown Algeciras. On a windy day, the leaves of the palm trees are blown almost horizontal along the heavily congested avenue facing the fenced-off port area. The inside walls of the shipping agency are covered in maritime company calendars, featuring photographs of gigantic containerships and smiling maritime workers. A whiteboard conveys in handwriting the expected arrival times of the ships, with names such as *Hansa Asia* and *Boxy Lady*.

The arrival times reflect the 24-hour operations of a port with only three days of planned closure a year. Victor, in his mid-twenties and holding a degree in maritime logistics from a local college, has just received a ship that was planned to dock at two in the morning but which due to delays did not arrive until eight.



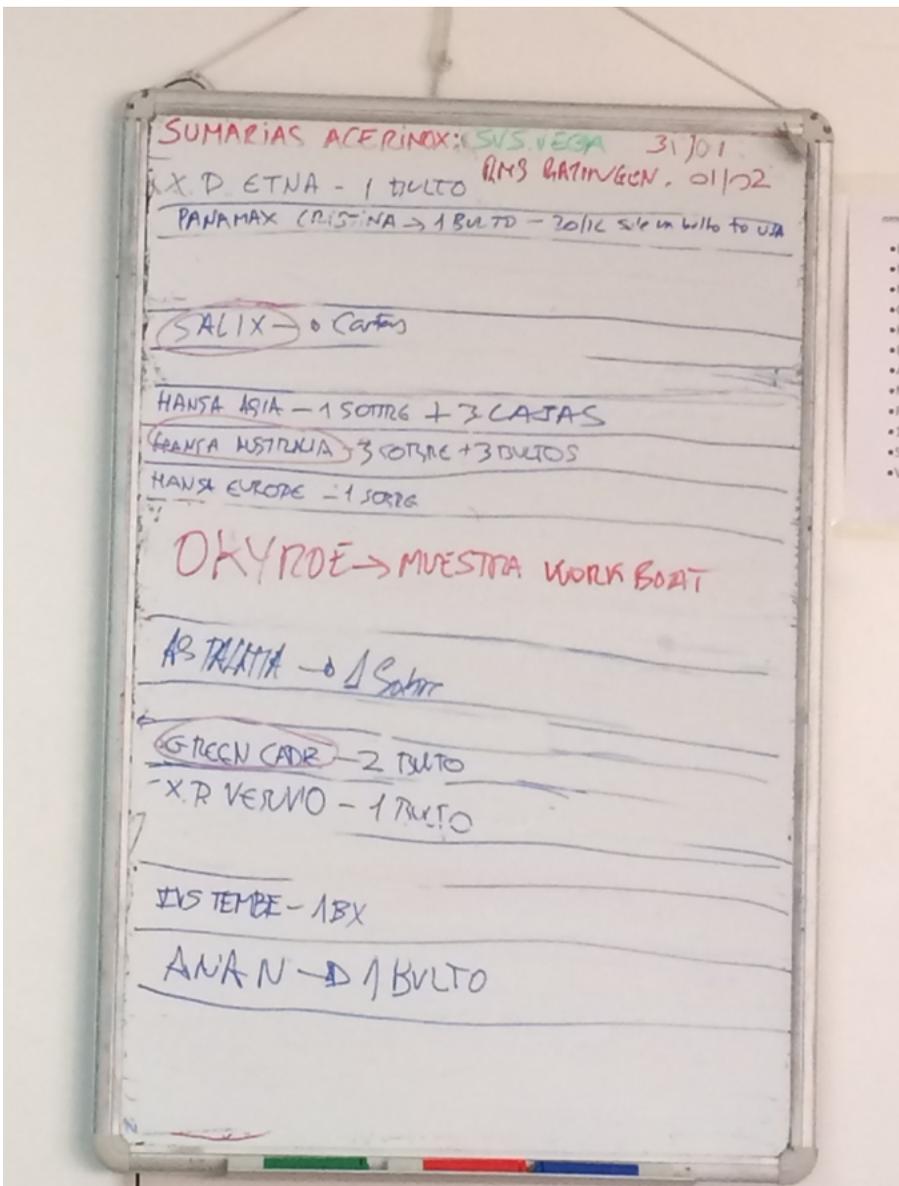
Office views.

Photo: Hege Høyer
Leivestad. Algeciras, 2018.

The work-intensive logic of global trade involves a wide range of logistics brokers (Schubert 2021). Shipping agencies, responsible for handling shipments and cargo on behalf of their clients, are the local experts and the ship owners' or charterers' representatives in the port. Victor and his colleagues take care of everything – from arranging a berth with the terminals and the port authority, to legal clearing of the ship with the authorities, attending to the requirements of the captain and crew, and releasing or receiving cargo.

That means a lot of paperwork.

The yellow folder dedicated to the intermediary handling of a ship grows thicker and thicker with each operation. This folder is the desk-based accumulation of paperwork,



Ship logistics.
Photo: Hege Høyer
Leivestad. Algeciras, 2018.

filled with logistics documents that perform their roles as travelling objects of information. The piling up of tasks at the agency necessitates constant coordination between official actors and private companies. It also requires non-stop availability, or as Ignacio, a young agency worker, remarked one day after an intensive period of work and five hundred emails in thirty-six hours: “I don’t think I will get to forty-five like this.” Ignacio had not even reached his twenty-fifth birthday.

Victor, Ignacio and their colleagues are all used to mediating between the different temporal regimes that coexist in the Spanish port, where public offices do not always operate at all hours like the world of global trade.¹ When bad weather affects operations, ships lose their time-slots and bookings need to be postponed, sometimes for as much as twenty-four hours. In a state of constant readiness, and through intensive remedial work, employees at the shipping agency attempt to protect the chain and secure the flow of goods.

Mobile Documents

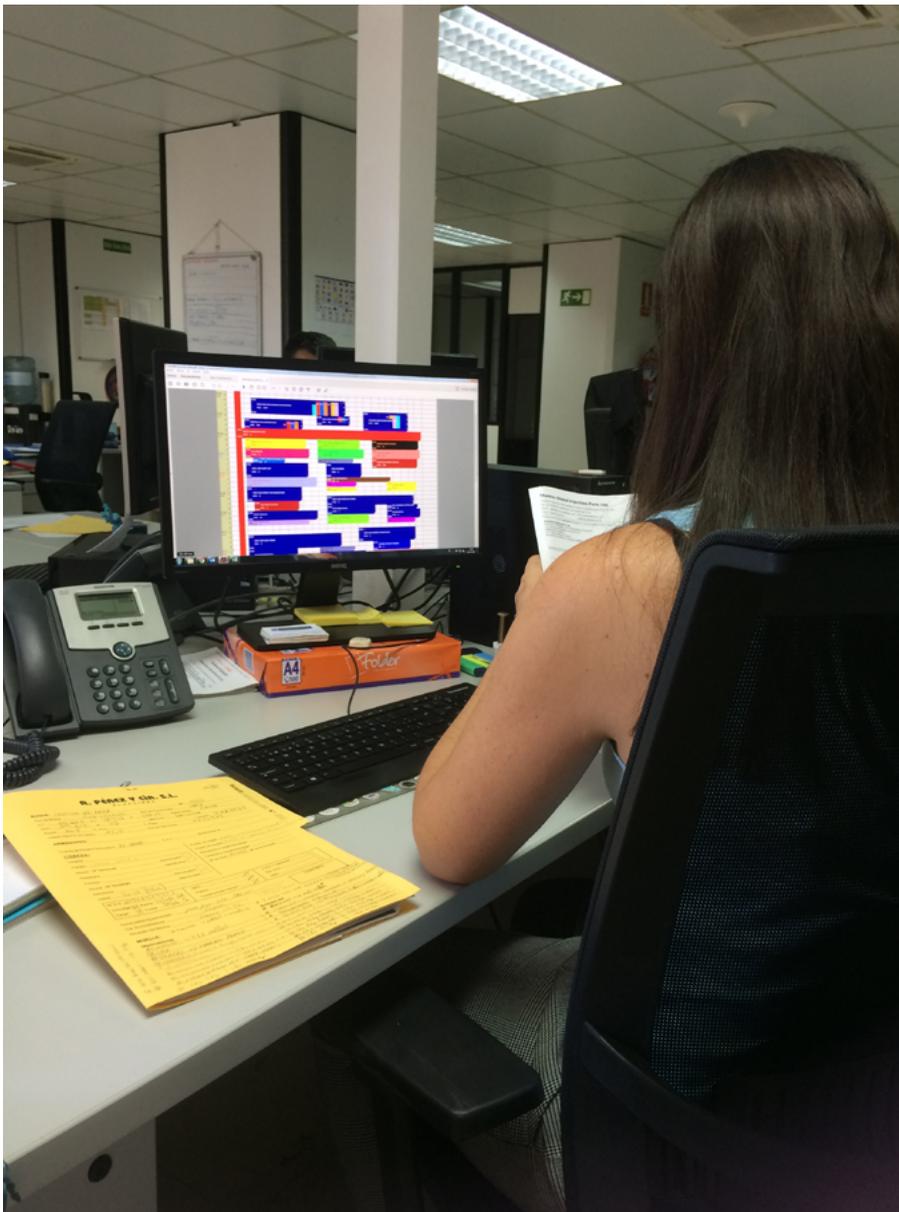
Victor and Ignacio’s work reveals the port to be a constellation of different critical points of encounter where papers are taken, signed, stamped and returned to the office. The physical movement of papers through state port bureaucracy and private companies uncovers the multiple temporal schemes and rhythms of commerce that coexist in port infrastructures (Bear 2015: 133). While logistical operations are ultimately based on calculations for being “on time” (Anand 2017: 100), securing logistics time is an ongoing achievement (Carse 2014: 11).

The order of port logistics is reliant on myriad papers moving through nodes of company offices and port bureaucracy. Forms, cargo lists, clearances and invoices circulate in a hunt for human authorizations (Hull 2012: 17). Victor, for instance, regularly leaves the office with a backpack, eventually returning to the agency with papers signed by the ship’s captain. Other operations are less straightforward. The lack of a signature or an official stamp can slow down a ship and its cargo, causing problems for crew changes and generating awful amounts of stress for agency employees. To facilitate the transit of ships involving a so-called third country – i.e. a country outside the European Union – Ignacio is constantly under time pressure to get the authorizing stamp from the Spanish Guardia Civil. Because the state office is open only on weekdays and only until 3pm, attaining official status through a physical stamp is often a race against the clock. In order for cargo to be temporarily stored in a warehouse, authorization must be granted by the public office where shipping agency employees claim to be ignored by lazy public officials when appearing with their documents: the customs (*la aduana*).

One of the key functions of the logistics document is confirmation of receipt of information. Such paper-based authorization and confirmation operates alongside the electronic forms and systems implemented by some public port entities. Young workers at the agency, like Ignacio, refer to the Port of Algeciras as “archaic” (*arcaico*), lagging behind other ports in what they see as an unavoidable digitalization process. Agency employees are, however, also witnesses to the multiplicity of different digital

systems controlling port logistics, many of which are not joined up and thus require a huge amount of desk work for intermediaries such as themselves.

Thrown into a material mediation between state bureaucracy and the demands of global shipping, logistics brokers often find themselves trapped among the port's coexisting and conflicting regimes. A given document is instantiated as a tool, revealing the central role of the state (Mathew 2016: 143) in making logistics happen through infrastructures of private–public constellations. Pieces of paper physically carried around not only document mundane movement, such as the changes of location of cargo and containers within the port; through circulation and acts of authorization and confirmation, these travelling documents also become materials of hierarchical



Logistics mediation.

Photo: Hege Høyer
Leivestad. Algeciras, 2019.

relations through which different regimes of port work are evaluated and contested. As vehicles of information, logistics documents connect a wide range of actors, such as ‘the public official’, ‘the logistics mediator’ and ‘the captain’, through processes of receipt and confirmation. But mobile documents also distribute responsibility and take agency operatives out of the office, bringing them inside port facilities and thus instating them physically as indispensable workers for the port.

Materializing Logistics

Folders on the agency desk. Pieces of paper moving in and out of port offices in the hands of overworked intermediaries. Signatures and stamps. The movement of cargo depends on a parallel circulation of papers.

In a paperless era we have become accustomed to the hype around digital solutions for commodities on the move. In global supply chains new digital technological systems are regarded as being able to improve and optimize logistical operations, with the aim also of getting rid of human error and corruption in data management. But what about the material power of paperwork? In times of digital transition, paper documents continue to be central mediators between different and sometimes incompatible public and private regimes in the port. Paper’s enduring importance might lie in the ways in which paperwork is not only a tool of bureaucratic control but also how it distributes authority and trust through its material circulation. What we see at Algeciras is the contours of a political economy of port paperwork.²

While logistics is shaped and made through the digital, cargo mobility is simultaneously anchored in the analogue.

This is the reality of backroom logistics.

Notes:

¹ But see Chu (2018: 205) on Chinese ports.

² See Hull 2012.

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Cite as: Leivestad, Hege Høyer. 2022. "Piling Up: Cargo Paperwork in a Global Port." *Roadsides* 7: 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202200705>

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ISSN 2624-9081

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