

Unpacking ships and containers in Newport and Cardiff

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I began to notice shipping containers when travelling to serve on a jury at Newport Crown Court, in South Wales, in December 2009. 'Containerisation' refers to a faster and cheaper process of global goods-exchange. The shipping container reduces the process to a uniform Fordism, albeit one branded with the different liveries of competing logistics companies. But 'containerisation' is an odd name too, it literally means closing-off, at the same time as it is used to describe a process which is quite un-enclosed. I think it is possible to take the term 'containerised' and apply it to earlier forms of community study, as well as to many visual archives, which are afflicted by a kind of epistemological contained-ness.

People are often trafficked in shipping containers, which can be made airtight. Because of this, tragic accidents have occurred, and worse. An episode of *The Wire* (1) dramatizes this, showing young women brought into Baltimore for sex work, who are killed by a crew member, who shuts off the air supply before they reach the port. Trafficked people are contained within an increasingly mobile, radically un-enclosed modernity. In a similar way, 'transition programme' is another mobility term which is often inappropriately applied to knots of power or refugee camps. The phrase 'all at sea' is supposed to have emerged from times when navigational technologies were unreliable. It means being unable to place oneself in the world, being uncertain, scared. Identity has become fugitive and contingent. Yet Paul Gilroy uses the slave ship in *The Black Atlantic* (2) as a figure for contained-ness, but one which is simultaneously beyond the usual legalities of the nation-state, gradually moving towards new lands. It is bleakly ironic that trafficked people are enclosed within a modernity often described as 'liquid'. Earlier, Gilroy described how race often becomes synonymous with nation. "Race" he said, "is bounded on all sides by the sea" (3).



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I wanted to think more about the concepts of being contained and un-contained. I was enclosed much of the time, in a juror's waiting room where *The Jeremy Kyle Show* seemed to be compulsory viewing. I wasn't quite as contained as the defendant, sat in his glass-fronted booth each day, like a fish in a tank. He will probably never know how he narrowly escaped prison in a trial with barely any evidence. The trial was often interrupted, and on free afternoons I took a walk around a few sites in Newport to examine some conceptual, historical and literal ships and containers.



First, I visited the *Newport Medieval Ship* project on the Maesglas Industrial Estate. The 'Newport Ship', as it is locally known, was a 15th century clinker-built vessel, discovered in the mud of the River Usk, in June 2002, during the construction of an arts centre. Huge concrete posts were already sunk into the hull of the ship when it was discovered (see images 1 and 2). The ship was very nearly left in the Usk and was only saved thanks to the tireless campaigning of a group of volunteers, who now have a partly governing role as 'Friends of the Newport Ship'. During the summer of 2002, these people became rather un-contained, protesting at the site. Taxi drivers congregated to add to the protest, sounding their horns. The ship was excavated by a team of archaeologists and lifted out, timber by timber. It then received a Heritage Lottery grant to conserve it. The plan is to relocate the re-assembled ship into the arts centre which was going to bury it, once both are finished (4).

Two shipping containers have recently been acquired at the Maesglas site to house the remains of two other boats. The Barlands Farm boat dates back to around 300AD and was found on a site which is now under the Tesco Distribution Warehouse at the Europark. Its design is Roman, but its ownership is assumed to be Celtic. The Tredunnoc boat dates back to around 1850 and is thought to have been used to carry coal, iron and bricks along the Monmouthshire canal, probably pulled by a horse (5). There is a simple pragmatism to

the employment of a shipping container to hold these remains of ships in its function as a sealed, controlled environment.

Yet metaphorically, poetically, the idea of 'the container' breaks free from its own confines here. Because we know so little about these vessels, we risk being disconnected from the lives of the people and animals who worked on them. The problem is that very little is in the containers, when archaeologists and conservators at Maesglas talk about the 'Newport Ship', they are referring to tagged and submerged timbers and fragments of metal, rescued ruins. The ship is in pieces which are being chemically stabilised.

One theory suggests that the ship found in the Usk belonged to The Earl of Warwick, 'The Kingmaker', who often favoured Portugese or Spanish boats (6). We don't conclusively know the origin of the 'Newport Ship', but it has certainly been re-named after the city it was found in. It has been conceptually re-contained. This extends further to thinking about community in Newport. Recently, the English Defence League were protesting at Stow Hill church being used as a mosque after years lying empty. They assumed that place and religion ought to be contained in particular ways, by utilising a set of very narrow origin-stories. Various socialist groups in the area turned out to stand-off the EDL rally. Again, tension and becoming un-contained are two seemingly opposing terms, but both apply to events such as this. Just a short walk from the Newport Ship's site of discovery is the Westgate Hotel, scene of the Chartist uprising of 1839, which was violently suppressed, and some of its radically un-contained participants were 'transported' to Australia. Such transportations were usually part of a mixed cargo - the ships carried goods as well as prisoners (7). The global trafficking of women is a marginalised form of capitalism, illegal, but ultimately a part of it, and one which sometimes uses the model of goods circulation used by the retail park and Tesco distribution warehouse. A ship's cargo is not suddenly made 'clean' because its processes have been instrumentalised to the nth degree.

From Maesglas I walk into the centre of Newport, past the retail park, with its shops resembling warehouses, to the site of Town Dock, which was opened in 1842, against this context of labour activism and The Chartists. The Alexandra Dock was one of several later expansions. Monmouthshire industrialists became frustrated by the lack of port facilities and so an act was passed in 1865 to allow a new dock to be built (8). Working conditions were dangerous. The 'Newport Dock Disaster' was the burying of 46 men when a trench collapsed, in 1909. A decade later, ports in South Wales became the spaces of race riots:

"The anti-black riots that spread through British ports that spring were associated with the demobilisation of the armed forces after the first world war, a period of economic crisis in which black populations became the scapegoats. In Newport on June 6th white mobs wrecked so many properties that, according to the South Wales Argus, the city looked as if it had suffered an air raid. The riots were at their most virulent in Cardiff. By June 11th they had developed into a series of organised attacks in the centre of the city and, in particular, on Bute Town, where most of the black population lived. Hotels and lodging houses were besieged by mobs led by 'colonial' (Australian) soldiers armed with rifles, who presented themselves as leaders of the action" (9).

The failure to aim protests at the complexities of capitalism and economic crisis, and instead to move onto the perennial, simplistic, barbaric and unreal terrain of race hatred, is not just a historical fact, but a contemporary problem. The failure of colonial Australian soldiers to see the illogic of violently policing race and nation, the harsh irony of it, can be mapped on to the present too (10). In Bute Town, Cardiff, we also see the transformation of old money and power into the new industrial setting. The Third Marquis of Bute, who owned the Cardiff docks, was the richest man in Britain in 1868, at the age of 21, and is often cited as the richest man in the world (11).

Tristram Hunt is concerned about the lack of remembrance for radical history, but this risks hinting at a conspiracy theory, when we need a complicity theory. For instance, the matter-of-factness of a simple postcard such as this conceals as much as it gives, a key phenomenon of photographic representation:

"The viewer of standard pictorial histories loses any ground in the present from which to make critical evaluations. In retrieving a loose succession of fragmentary glimpses of the past, the spectator is flung into a condition of imaginary temporal and geographical mobility. In this dislocated and disoriented state, the only coherence offered is that provided by the constantly shifting position of the camera, which provides the spectator with a kind of powerless omniscience. Thus the spectator comes to identify with the technical apparatus, with the authoritative institution of photography. In the face of this authority, all other forms of telling and remembering begin to fade" (12).

The inclusion and exclusion of cultural memory is crucial, what is in or out of the container. Although Cardiff and Newport's cultural industries pay lip-service to a hybrid population, flashpoints such as the dock riots are usually absent from these narratives, despite playing a crucial role in the formation of multi-cultural Britain. But the photograph or monograph's form is contained, and this is

an inescapable part of the problem.

It is possible to go further and think through docks as containers of certain kinds of life, real life, as well as certain kinds of myths and stories, imaginary economies. The 'mythical' episode of *The Wire* portraying sex workers can be mapped back on to Newport and Cardiff's docks. The attempt to gentrify these spaces contained an urge to sanitise, to disinfect certain kinds of night-time economy, particularly prostitution. This process continued in Cardiff's Tiger Bay across the millennium (13). In the gendered, patriarchal stigmatising of the 'fallen' or 'dirty' woman it is possible to detect urges which can be tracked back to nineteenth century spatial discourses around the racial and classed city. Prostitution is a form of work with an often highly elaborate schema of making oneself visible or invisible in particular ways (14).

In the 1980s a Jamaica Dock opened at Newport, its name acknowledging the direct relationship between Britain and the colonies. Our current moment is framed in a similarly global way, a reality still often accompanied by negative, one-sided versions of the complexities. Attempting to think through the conceptual and real containers, and the way the social world can become radically un-contained in different periods is important. The specificities of any historical moment are crucial to thinking through social events, but there is also a strong lineage to be traced across eras, of the global, spatial policing of bodies and objects, and therefore subjectivities (15).

But we need to think carefully about what kind of historicism is at play in each moment. First, the social container needs to be unpacked. We need to identify its limits and what it previously held, as well as what were beyond its steel walls. To ask what the container held is not the same thing as asking what a particular community, in, say, 1976 held, or what one holds in 2010. The container is epistemological, it is books, papers, films and photographs, conference lectures, and although all of them have some indexical relationship with reality, this is always partial. Alan Sekula talks of an 'imaginary economy' of images.

We need to advance to a new kind of epistemological approach which is open and mobile, attentive to the hybrid nature of community and place, without becoming ignorant of the way the steel walls of the container previously structured the subject, and still structure the assumptions of some people and groups within communities, as well as those of some sociologists. The figure of 'the container' doesn't just apply to the extremes of people trafficking, but to community generally. Gilroy's use of the slave ship serves as a starting point to think

more widely about the moving containers of community, which are not so slow these days, much like the vessels and processes of modern shipping.

Our task both is and is not to re-assemble, timber by timber, like the remains of ships at Maesglas. It is about finding the fragments where they lie. The Barlands Farm boat lying in the mud at the point when Tesco wish to build a distribution centre over it is more interesting, more 'telling', than its literally contained version, which will be re-assembled in a museum.

Over in Chepstow, workers at a Tesco Distribution Centre are faced with relocation, with a large effective decrease in earnings and loss of union recognition (16). The 'distribution centre' is a box surrounded by fences, not a series of routes to other places. The Barlands Farm boat would have carried over four and a half tons of cargo, we know it is a hybrid of Roman and Celtic building techniques, as it differs from the remains of similar vessels found in the Mediterranean regions. The Newport Ship remains yielded traces of seals which identify individual merchants, to a man. One was Robert Baron who imported Spanish iron, cloth and dyed hair from Ireland. This information comes from customs records in Bristol (17). Medieval Newport was a walled city, a container. To link across the centuries like this is massively overly-ambitious, risky, the territory of contemporary psychogeography, but details like this, about everyday life, do begin to open out the epistemological container.

There is a proposal to re-construct and display the Newport Ship 'as it would have sailed'. Re-assembly risks containment, but it has to happen, otherwise how do we cognitivise at all?

As sociological metaphors, we can think through the contents of our containers, our subjects. They should hold real, live humans, negotiating the world, struggling, trying to make a better life. But sometimes when we open the containers, we find only skeletons. A set of statistics

relating to any community are a sort of skeleton, one part of the functioning whole. Like a nervous system, but of course if one lifts this out of the whole, it dies, and the only function left for it is to go on display for academics, officials, students, or a curious public.

Benjamin wrote about the constantly collapsing present (18), the eternal moment of catastrophe and re-building which characterise his understanding of historical materialism, not the 'as it really was' of the imaginary past of the Newport Ship, re-assembled in the future, in the arts centre which was going to cover it, but the flash of the remains of the Newport Ship, shot through with concrete pillars, after it was discovered, along with the atonal music of taxi horns. Those flashes and sounds, connections and disconnections, can illuminate, in their 'moment of danger', a much fuller moment of now, in ruins, with all its disconnections and tensions. The un-contained world, illogical, contradictory, may be impossible to reconcile, but it can electrify, in what Homi Bhabha once called 'a reflux of astonishment' (19).

Notes

- (1) *The Wire*: Complete HBO Season 2, Warner DVD [originally broadcast 2003]
- (2) Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic*, Harvard
- (3) Gilroy, P. (1987) *Ain't No Black In The Union Jack*, London: Hutchinson p.46
- (4) S.O.S newsletter No.7. Newport: CADW
- (5) S.O.S newsletter No.11. Newport: CADW
- (6) S.O.S newsletter No.13. Newport: CADW
- (7) Chase, M. (2007) *Chartism: a new history*, Manchester University Press
- (8) *Newport Council* (2010) 'The Alexandra Docks' at <http://www.opac.newport.gov.uk/opac/newportnotes/alexandradock/index.htm> [accessed 22/01/10]
- (9) Hunt, T. (2006) 'Lest We Forget' in *The Guardian*, July 24, 2006
- (10) Siddique, H. (2009) 'Sikh campaigner for BNP set to become party's first non-white member' in *The Guardian*, November 20, 2009
- (11) University of Glasgow website (2010) 'Biography of John Patrick Crichton-Stuart 3rd Marquess of Bute', <http://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/biography/?id=WH0023&type=P> [accessed 06/03/10]
- (12) Sekula, A. (in eds., Evans & Hall, 1999 [1986]) 'Reading an Archive - Photography between labour and capital', in *Visual Culture: A Reader*. London: Sage
- (13) Williams, J. (2003) 'Spare a thought for the pimp of Tiger Bay', *The Independent*, June 1, 2003
- (14) Wolkowitz, C. (2006) *Bodies at Work*, London: Sage
- (15) If Foucault were alive today, I swear he would be working on either the history of logistics, or the history of health and safety, volumes 1-3.
- (16) *Socialist Worker* (2009) 'Tesco distribution workers reject poor offer' <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=18803> [accessed 06/03/10]
- (17) S.O.S newsletter No.13. Newport: CADW
- (18) Benjamin, W. (1999 [1940]) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico
- (19) Bhabha, H. (1994) "'Race", time and the revision of modernity' in *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, pp.236-256

