Blockages

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The health of the capitalist world-system is typically measured by the degree to which capital flows without impediment. As blockages coursed through global supply chains in the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns, for instance, corporate executives and financial journalists repeated the doxa that unimpeded flow is a natural logistical state that must be reinstated for life to return to normal (Handfield and Linton 2022). Globalisation is frequently said to prize seamless circulation, yet international trade requires all manner of blockages to guarantee capital flows according to particular interests. While natural disasters, maritime accidents, and worker strikes count among the possible causes for blockage, governments and corporations tend more frequently to be the culprit. To limit supply and bolster prices, oil firms – to take but one example – are notorious for sabotaging production, stockpiling inventory, and rerouting tankers (Jones 2018). Likewise, border checks, tariffs, and military interventions could all be mistaken as supply chain obstacles, but they are more accurately understood as being the rubber to the road of international commerce. 'Friction', so Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing puts it, 'is required to keep global power in motion' (Tsing 2005, 7). For as much as capitalist ideology touts an ideal of freely flowing goods, the reality is more Newtonian. Simply stated, without blockages the global circulation of capital would shudder to a halt.

Nevertheless, fears of blockage abound – used to justify myriad technocratic and militaristic measures for enhancing infrastructural resilience and ensuring flow. Today, the conviction that flow is something 'unremittingly positive' and blockage is best avoided extends beyond the realm of commerce, saturating culture and political thought (Cresswell 2006, 25). Both the rise of globalisation and the fall of the Iron Curtain set loose the fantasy that frictionless motion is a panacea for social ills of all kinds. People, ideas, and art – everything is said to be better off if it can move without encumbrance. From *The Communist Manifesto* to more recent theories of 'liquid modernity', even avowed anti-capitalist critics have fostered the myth that capitalism not only aspires to seamless circulation but has even come close to ridding the world of blockage (Bauman 2012). When it comes to the planetary supply chains that are the foundation for much of what we know as globalisation, however, such assumptions could not be further from the truth.

In keeping with the concept of 'dis:connectivity' outlined in this volume, what follows insists that blockages should be understood not as obstacles to the flows of globalisation, but rather as vital components in them. I begin by showing how blockage operates as a fundamental principle in supply management theories of

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control, before turning to several of the ways that blockages – including those that have recently disrupted the Suez Canal – have informed the building of capital's logistical infrastructure over the past half century. While blockages play an essential role in the operations of supply chain capitalism, they also figure prominently in ongoing struggles to contest this system's dispossessive dynamics. The final section of this essay switches perspectives to consider the privileged place of blockage in recent counterlogistical thought and struggle. Here, through focus on the resurgence of tactics like blockades and sabotage, I contend that blockages must be treated as a means rather than an end of struggle, providing the conditions for reproducing collective modes of action.

Blockages and logistics

The idea that blockages are essential and not hostile to capitalism is the very epistemological cornerstone undergirding supply chain management theory today. Although blockage may be presumed to be the opposite of flow, both concepts entered logistical thought tethered together. Consider, for instance, Jay Wright Forrester's influential *Industrial Dynamics* from 1961, in which 'flow' was theorized as the suture that unites the otherwise discrete domains of production and distribution. Before 'continuous flow' became a shibboleth of supply chain thought and 'just-in-time' manufacturing (Ohno 1988, 4), Forrester and his research team at MIT's Sloan School of Management coined the term to describe the kinds of incessant adjustments and even deliberate blockages that maintaining any given flow of products requires. Flow, by this definition, is not an ideal state to be achieved but rather a heuristic for gauging how a lack of friction could generate a mismatch between procurement and demand, thus causing a disruptive bullwhip effect that cascades blockage disastrously through the 'supply pipeline' (Forrester 2013, 65). As tens of thousands of students enrolled on business and management degrees learn each year when playing the 'Beer Distribution Game' that Forrester developed to illustrate his 'bullwhip' model, blockages are not to be feared but controlled. Blockage, in other words, is a fundamental tool of supply chain management.

The managerial theory that blockages can be deployed strategically to control a flow of goods might seem to run at odds with infrastructural reality. There are few better illustrations of this than the highly publicized blockages that have hampered the Suez Canal in recent years, from the grounding of *Ever Given* in March 2021 to the ongoing attacks of Houthi rebels on merchant vessels in solidarity with Palestine. In the case of *Ever Given*, the week this ultra-large container ship spent blocking the primary sea-link between Asia and Europe appeared to many as evidence of capitalism's Achilles' heel. 'The sorry saga underlines the frailty of world trade,' wrote a columnist in *Wired*. 'It took just one gust of wind to bring the whole thing to its

knees' (Christian 2021). But instead of bringing us the end of capitalism, *Ever Given* delivered a deceptive portrait of how easily global trade can be disrupted. While the short-term effects on the supply lines of manufacturers were nothing to sneeze at, the many analogies comparing the Suez Canal to a blocked artery drastically overstated the level of damage a single stopped ship could inflict on the world economy.

Logistical infrastructures, be it the Suez Canal or the planetary system of containerization, are literally engineered to accommodate blockages. The very construction of these infrastructures has been shaped through having to deal with such blockages. The six days that *Ever Given* obstructed maritime traffic and the intermittent disruptions caused by Houthi hijackings pale in comparison to the stretches of time that this trade conduit has previously been blocked. Following Israel's invasion of neighbouring territories during the Six-Day War in 1967, for instance, Egypt shuttered the canal for eight years. While the devastating effects on the global energy supply need no recounting here, less well-known is how formative this blockage was for establishing the titanic infrastructure through which planetary supply chains operate today. The extended closure forced oil tankers heading to Europe from the Arabian Peninsula to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, adding at least three weeks to the journey. The extra time and increased fuel costs prompted carriers to order enormous new vessels, in the hopes they could offset expenses by taking advantage of economies of scale. With the canal closed, the size of tankers swelled beyond imagination, paving the way for massive container ships like *Ever Given* (Khalili 2020).

If Cold War wrangling over trade conduits like the Suez Canal catalysed the growth of maritime vessels and the landside infrastructure to accommodate them, we might do well to expect similar lessons from recent blockages. For example, industry insiders believe that *Ever Given*'s grounding could lead to an overdue reckoning with the 'shipping arms race' among carriers that has plagued the sector with chronic overcapacity (Levinson 2021, 149). Likewise, the Houthi strikes in the Red Sea have reinvigorated plans for a 'land-bridge' connecting Dubai with Haifa, in which cargo from Asia would be offloaded onto trucks tasked with trekking them across the peninsula (Khalili 2024). On the other side of the world, recurring droughts that have lowered water levels in the Panama Canal have set plans for similar terrestrial solutions in motion. If a half century's worth of logistical thought and infrastructural experience can teach us anything about blockages, it is this: blockages are opportunities for enhancing capitalist control over global supply chains.

Blockages and Counterlogistical Struggle

Just as supply chain capitalism learns from and uses blockages for the purpose of controlling capital flows, so too must its antagonists. This has been true throughout the history of capitalism, yet the stakes today are even higher given the extent to

which social life and capitalist production are shaped by the imperatives of circulation. In a world spun by supply chains, it should come as little surprise that tactics oriented to generating blockage have become central to repertoires of counterlogistical struggle across the planet (Clover 2016).

In recent years, the tactical form of blockading has experienced a 'contemporary resurgence', exemplified by the land defenders who held their ground in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux to stop construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (Chua and Bosworth 2023, 1303). Meanwhile, the tactic has also been adopted by the Far Right, deployed in 2022 by the likes of the vaccine-sceptical 'Freedom Convoy' in Ottawa as well as supporters of Jair Bolsonaro who set up roadblocks across Brazil after his election defeat. Such examples prove the ideological flexibility of this tactical form, something the blockade's history confirms: as both a tactic and a term, the blockade has military origins that date back at least to seventeenth-century naval cordons.

The transideological appeal of blockades suits a political economic terrain that prioritizes logistical flows above all else, in which the circulation and distribution of goods has come to govern production itself (Clover 2022). As proof, some scholars and activists point to the workers at ports and inside logistics-oriented companies around the world leveraging their strategic position within supply chain chokepoints to secure contract gains and intervene in issues beyond the workplace. Consider, for example, the dockworkers globally who, at the time of writing in 2024, are refusing to handle ships carrying materiel that could be used to support Israel's scorched earth campaign in Gaza. In an age of supply chain capitalism, the blockade appears as a tactical form fit for many occasions.

The fact that supply chain capitalism regularly displays not just resilience to blockage but also a dependence on it should be enough to temper any belief that blockage-generating tactics like the blockade are a 'magic bullet solution' (Chua and Bosworth 2023, 1306). As Alberto Toscano has warned, social movements must take care to avoid making a 'fetish out of rupture' (Toscano 2011). Be they blockades or riots, occupations or acts of sabotage, tactics geared to blockage should not be confused with a desired political horizon. If blockage is to be of any use in contesting supply chain capitalism, it must be as a means rather than an end of counterlogistical struggle.

This aspiration for blockage as a means of struggle, useful for reproducing the conditions of collective action, has been expressed poignantly in several recent depictions of sabotage and blockading. Take, as a first example, Daniel Goldhaber's 2023 film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, based loosely on Andreas Malm's polemic of the same name (Malm 2021). Whereas Malm's book is a work of political theory, Goldhaber's fictional film follows a motley group of activists as they sabotage an oil pipeline in West Texas. As reviewers and Goldhaber himself have noted, the

film's use of the genre conventions of a heist film allows it to eschew focus on a singular hero and instead track the formation of a collective revolutionary subject, composed of individuals with varied motivations but united by the effort required to perform an exceptional political deed (Bernes 2023). While a heist film typically concludes with the objective achieved, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* upends such closure by showing this single act of sabotage to be the start of something bigger. The film ends not with the pipeline's total destruction but the prospect that from this first attempt the struggle will expand.

For a second example, we can turn from film to dance. In 2015, on the twentieth anniversary of her father's execution by Nigeria's Abacha military regime, Zina Saro-Wiwa created the dance video *Karikpo Pipeline.* In it, a group of Ogoni dancers perform a traditional masquerade atop pipelines, wellheads, and flow stations that once belonged to Shell. Over two decades earlier, her father – the acclaimed writer Ken Saro-Wiwa – helped lead a successful campaign of civil disobedience and sabotage that shut down this extractive infrastructure, which had long been polluting Ogoni water. *Karikpo Pipeline* is not simply a document of blockage, but, as a site-specific performance, it showcases what grew from this blockage. However quixotically, Saro-Wiwa presents Ogoniland as a verdant landscape where life flourishes atop the ruins of logistical infrastructure.

How to Blow Up a Pipeline and *Karikpo Pipeline* give a sense of the collective lifeworlds that can sprout from blockages. In them, sabotage and blockading become opportunities for fostering conditions of further struggle. Both are, to borrow a phrase, representations of blockage as a 'generative refusal' – this being the term that the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson coined to describe struggles like those of the Wet'suwet'en blockades that swept through Canada in 2020 (Simpson 2021, 10). For Simpson, tactics that generate blockage should perform the dual function of refusing existing infrastructures of oppression for the purpose of building the conditions for new modes of living. In much the same way that capital is learning and building from blockage, so too will its antagonists.

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