

Levinson, Marc. *Outside the Box: How Globalization Changed from Moving Stuff to Spreading Ideas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 277 pages. Hardcover, \$26.95. Kindle. Audio Audiobook.

Marc Levinson is an economist and a historian, who has contributed and edited for *The Economist*. His articles appear in *Bloomberg.com*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*. Articles provide snapshots and time bites. His books, including *Outside the Box*, allow Levinson to plumb depths, see what others miss, and weigh consequences. Seldom do high-pressure achievers and big-issue decision-makers have spare leisure to do so. *Outside the Box: How Globalization Changed from Moving Stuff to Spreading Ideas* is reflective, thought provoking, and objective in its revelation of human propensities. Past, contemporary, and emerging events and trends are scope for discerning connections and offering insights. Readers can absorb or shrug according to their own preferred *boxes*, of thought and behavior.

Outside the Box is inherently interdisciplinary, globalizing ideas by example and analogy. It breaks crates and spills pallets of academics' disciplines, courses, "core" requirements—which are administrative ways of containerizing social sciences and grouping students into "majors." It is the genius of Pi Gamma Mu to value economics, history, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology across the board. This *Review* encourages students and their teachers to think outside the box. *The Annals* (American Academy of Political and Social Science) and *Daedalus* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences) have long records of working across disciplines to spread ideas among influential publics. Nevertheless, college recruitment officers and academic advisors pitch "majors." In *Outside the Box* we witness Marc Levinson—a world-class journalist, editor, consultant—amid opened boxes. He synthesizes what he finds to craft a magnetic narrative of epic nonfiction. It inspires readers to revisit their studies of economics, psychology, and history. There are interactions, consequences, and unintended mistakes and

benefits to be perceived. The variables in play are too many to forecast their effects, except to say watch out for the unexpected and be alert for counterintuitive outcomes. We are fortunate to have Marc Levinson—a polymath—in print, kindle, audiobook, online, in newspapers of record, broadcast media.

A significant line in *Outside the Box* is “Never had so many people moved from poverty to prosperity so quickly” (p. 127). This, about China, was already widely bruited whether anecdotally (possibly propaganda) or statistically (if credible). For Levinson, a detached observer with no obvious ax to grind, to say so confirmed what insiders (high and low) and outsiders had been noticing and remarking. What makes it interesting is China’s abstention from global dreams for centuries: after Admiral Zheng He’s expeditions were terminated by regime change in China during early 1430s. China missed five centuries of participation and adaptation of seafaring and globe-trotting. Levinson recapitulates some practitioners: Assyrians, Norse, Venetians, Marco Polo-and-family, slave traders. The Hanseatic League was famous for monopolizing trade for three centuries around the Baltic Sea. Levinson depicts the development of “global dreams” in the vignette of Peter Hasenclever in the 1760s (Chapter I). Merchandise was transported, chiefly spices, silks, and luxury items, along with black death, Buddhism, Islam. Cost and reliability were constraints. “No importer anywhere could count on goods arriving on a particular day, or in a particular month, or at all” (p. 20).

The container era began in April 1956 (p. 61). Converted tankers from World War II and standard-sized aluminum boxes with reinforced steel corners implemented it. Then, trucking magnate Malcolm P. McLean, subject of another vignette, was daunted by regulations and traffic jams along East Coast routes between customers (Chapter 5). So, he put loaded truck trailers on ships to bypass delays. He kept modifying Ideal-X until it became Sea-Land Service and went

global, in time for Vietnam. “Unitized packaging” (AKA containers) made containerization a worldwide phenomenon. It ended traditional “breakbulk” shipping of commodities and manufactured goods. Oil tankers still sailed the seas.

Among major shipping competitors was A. P. Møller-Maersk. In 2006 *Emma Maersk*, the largest ever container ship, was launched. She embodied “gigantism” (p. 188). No longer restricted to small loads by enemy torpedoes, firms imitated Maersk with super-size container ships and tankers. Immense infrastructural projects, supported by governments, deepened harbors, widened canals, heightened bridges, expanded rail yards, enlarged highways. Tax-payers financed those, not the shipping firms. *Emma Maersk*, her siblings, and their rivals soon possessed capacity far in excess of business requirements. Worse, mega-ships were not agile in the water and could not make up the time if delayed. A. P. Møller-Maersk started the race and shared in subsequent corporate financial disaster for all concerned (pp. 194-195).

Sequentially, in the First Globalization, migrants crossed longitudes and latitudes. This was paused 1914-1947 by wars and depression. The Second Globalization featured trade, tourism, cultural exchange, and “brain drain.” Globalization Three had corporations developing supply chains regardless of national borders. *Emma Maersk* was meant to build *value chains*, delivering specialized components of best quality in quantity “just in time” inexpensively, on schedule, for assembly elsewhere into name-branded *stuff*. *Value chains* is the largest entry in the Index. Geological and meteorological events, emulation by competitors, oil crisis, separate governments’ strategies turned effects counterintuitive. Meanwhile, *stuff* was losing ground (p.220), is Levinson’s pronouncement. Gaping income disparities recurred and persisted in the Fourth Globalization, despite China’s astonishing emergence from mass poverty. Compared with Globalization Three, service and information workers were experiencing diminished status.

What's next? With climate change and Covid-19 in the mix, there are no sure bets. Levinson, in parting, says, "Building [a new framework] is likely to prove far more difficult than demolishing the structure of the past" (p. 229).

Outside the Box is an intriguing synergy of social-sciences analysis, a useful aide memoire, a captivating read. Marc Levinson synthesizes well and writes smoothly, with a light touch of irony—very smart non-fiction.

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