

Antipode

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Manufacturing Banality

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Four days after the bombing of the Boston Marathon and two days after the horrific explosion of the West [Texas] Fertilizer Company, I, along with thousands of others from around the world, was glued to twitter and an audio feed of the Boston Police Scanner, following what seemed to be a made-for-news-media spectacle. The events of that week in Boston had all the makings of a big-budget Michael Bay movie – explosions, indiscriminate violence, car chases, shootouts, likely heroes, ethnically-othered bad guys, and the wholesale closure of a major US city. Meanwhile in West, Texas, where the damage to people and infrastructure was also dramatic, no such blockbuster narrative emerged. Instead, the media were producing a steady trickle of depressing, and depressingly predictable, regulatory facts about the factory’s long history of safety infractions and resultant slaps on the wrist (Loftis 2013). In terms of visual affect and the footage available, one could argue that the West, Texas, disaster was the more spectacular of the two, and the widespread video of the child asking her father to drive away was as gut wrenching a representation of any traumatic event in the United States in recent years. And yet, Boston, with its dramatic uncertainties, grainy department store footage of the bombers, and exasperated news anchors received massively more coverage than West’s mushroom cloud and played-out story of failed oversight and lax safety.

The key to ascertaining what binds these events together, per Raju’s initial provocation, lies precisely in the differences of their representation, and what those representations can tell us about the importance of the agro-industrial and counter-terror complexes to the political

economy of the post-financial crisis US. At first glance, the situations in West and Boston didn't seem to have a whole lot to do with one another, apart from their temporal proximity and the fact of their being deadly explosions. I would suggest that the material circumstances of both disasters and their attendant representations (or absence) in the 24-hour news cycle is illustrative of how the national-state maintains a certain kind of security-centric accumulation and a particular sort of agro-industrial organization. These two important circuits of capital are reproduced through crisis in the case of Boston and in spite of crisis in the case of West. The organization of US national political economy around intensive financialization, long term military-Keynesianism that has found a comfortable discursive hearth in the guise of modern counterterrorism, and food systems that effectively rely on high-explosives is the same formation that gave rise to, and profits from, the popular news media that informs millions as to which crises merit attention. In what follows, I'm going to try not to lapse into crude capital-logic functionalism while teasing out (however briefly) what the constitution and representations of these two crises can tell us about two important spaces of accumulation. Certain kinds of crisis have to be made hyper-visible while others are erased. This is a kind of fetishism of events that silences the ecological-industrial crisis while foregrounding the threat of terrorism, thereby bolstering each industry and naturalizing both the security state and the capitalist agro-industrial food system. We don't have to buy Stiegler's (2009) assertion that 'attention' has taken the place of value in consumer society to recognize that the capture of attention in the form of 24-hour news *qua* infotainment is critical to the ways in which democracies (dis)function. That kind of attention requires the framing of situations as 'events' (e.g. Abu Ghraib, DW Horizon, Newtown) in accordance with those forms of attention (Badiou 2007), and then fashioning these events into a worldview that is copacetic with the reproduction of the revanchist neoliberal state form – a state that has grown coincident to the 24-hour media that is critical in securing consent for the conjoined projects of capital accumulation and new state power manifest in Boston and Texas.

The mediated events of Boston and West reflect this political economic logic in no uncertain terms. As to West, I don't think the relative dearth of media attention is simply attributable to the fact that it occurred in the southern US or that it was an industrial accident in a rural area or that to any casual observer of the news over the last 15 years it would be depressingly predictable that the plant hadn't been inspected in decades. Each of these factors

and many others contributed to and overdetermined the sparse media coverage. For me, another very compelling reason is that the explosion itself was an exclamation point on a slow burning agro-industrial crisis in a similar way that super-storm Sandy served to punctuate arguments about the climate crisis. The fertilizer produced in West is a key component in the US agro-industrial complex that is generative of, and leads to, an astonishing number of negative social, environmental, and economic impacts, as well as amazing amounts of money for vertically integrated agribusinesses and commodities speculators. The speculator's interest isn't directly tethered to a specific material quantum of corn, but more so to the idea of corn and the prices it commands across exchanges. The speculator still requires that massive amounts of agricultural surplus be generated in order for speculative capital to circulate, which requires the poisonous types of fertilizers that exploded in central Texas. As Moore (2011: 39) says, "Wall Street is a way of organizing nature"; West was only one node in a web of agricultural commodity dumping abroad, US farm subsidies, electronic commodity trading terminals, and innumerable other extensions of that particular assemblage. But if the 24-hour news media was largely unwilling to reflect on the causes of super-storm Sandy, which brought the world's financial capital to a halt, it was not likely to use the explosion in West to explore banal processes like massive soil degradation of Dust Bowl magnitude, hypoxic dead zones in the Gulf, or the potentially catastrophic aquifer depletion throughout the American Midwest. Further, the explosion did not prompt any widespread discussion about Texas's hideous track record of union busting or the profound lack of zoning laws that significantly exacerbated the explosion's impact. This might create a discussion of who could lose out, financially, if the practices that are causing these slow-burning crises were to be confronted with the same level of investigation as a terrorist plot. There was certainly no media outcry for a manhunt for Daniel Adair, owner of Adair Grain Co, the parent company of West Fertilizer Co, or much speculation about where he and his cronies might be hiding or how he had become so hostile toward health and safety regulations.

It is not as though the popular media does not have the capacity or the willingness to interrogate how some types of crisis fit together, or how politically tenable solutions might be found. This is amply demonstrated by the case in Boston. The media felt immediately comfortable speculating about the cause of the Boston explosion and the identity of the perpetrators, theorizing the linkages of events on the evening of the biggest manhunt in Boston history, and having their current discussions about potential collaborators and inept platitudes

about some kind of essential ‘Chechen-ness’. It was precisely in ignoring, or in some cases silencing, discussions about the causes of the West explosion that the media had so much time for speculating about the mental health of the bombers’ mother or why refugees had enough money to travel internationally. Through that endless coverage, speculating, and purporting to advance objective news reading, another major sector of US political economy was given a much-needed boost - the counterterrorism industry and the forms of sovereign action made possible through the deployment of new technologies, increased personnel, and the logics of domestic counterterrorism.

Based upon my observations, no one questioned why the Boston Police Department had an armored personnel carrier, or why their SWAT officers were dressed like Robocop. Instead, we have the chief of Boston PD pledging that the marathon will take place next under the unblinking eye of a drone (RT.com 2013). Even as the media repeatedly reminds us of how ‘war weary’ the US population is, and how the popular appetite for foreign intervention is almost exhausted (always in relation to Syria), the wall-to-wall coverage of Boston demonstrated how vigilant the state and population have to be in light of US interventionist escapades. That vigilance doesn’t come cheap, in treasure or rights. Setting aside the disturbing habeas corpus implications of how Dzhokhar Tsarnaev has been handled so far, the monetary cost to the US of its ‘war on terror’ is more than \$4 trillion dollars over the last 12 years (see <http://costsofwar.org/>). Structurally, this isn’t a problem per se: military equipment and weaponry is one of the few sectors of manufacturing that the US continues to compete globally and which serves as a minor counterbalance to the overaccumulation-prone financial services industry. Arms don’t seem likely to create a market bubble anytime soon, and military and contractor salaries pay for all sorts of non-war goods and services. Agricultural exports remain important too. But in terms of direct state discretionary outlays, defense spending - especially counterterrorism - rules the roost. The security state is more expensive than the New Deal or TARP. Meanwhile, those agencies that might have some ability to curb the processes of which West is emblematic are vilified as job-destroying regulators - it’s as though problems that cannot be solved with a Northrop-Grumman product are not legible as problems at all. These twin crises are what martial neoliberalization has wrought. Through making West invisible and naturalized as tragic deaths of disposable people in a peripheral space, increased state power to intercept and kill is fortified with expensive new weaponry and personnel. Until West types of industrial-

agricultural disaster create an eminent crisis of underaccumulation (maybe for the counter-terrorism industry specifically), it's unlikely they'll be subjected to a similar level of breathless speculation as the terrorist events are, even when they are more 'spectacular'.

How people decide if problems are legible as such, and if they are problems, then solvable problems, has a good deal to do with the sorts of narrative in which they are couched in the initial reporting and the types of information we have grown accustomed to receiving from the 24-hour news cycle. CNN does not speculate about the deeper causes or effects of ecological-industrial calamity from the perspective of the beleaguered, underfunded federal inspectors, the criminally negligent lack of zoning or safety regulations in Texas, or the massive industrial food system West Fertilizer Co represents. Meanwhile CNN *does* speculate endlessly (as well as recklessly and naively) about the causes and effects of terrorism, and the state will mobilize, to the tune of never-ending defense spending and the formal creation of a police state. It's only by making one event hyper-visible and the other all but invisible that the entrenched sectors of capital can remain so. West must be made to look banal and unavoidable, while Boston must be made out to be the exception - literally in the case of the performance of naked sovereignty it elicited. In this way, the accident and the act of terrorism can each contribute to the reproduction of the broader circuits of capital accumulation that made them possible in the first place, along with the violence each entails, be it spectacular or banal.

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