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The Social Location of Industrial Disasters: West, Texas in a Wider Perspective

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When we examine the world from a place perspective and dialectically, we see relations of similarity and difference. That is, we see that different things happen in different places, and that there is an underlying process that not only binds together what happens in the different places in question, but also connects these places to the system of which they are a part.

In a single week in April 2013, two places in the US experienced similar events: both places were rocked by deadly explosions that killed, maimed, and traumatized people. Both places were transformed into, or looked like, war zones. The state responded differently to each event, however.

On April 15, bombs at the world-famous Boston Marathon killed three people and injured 170 in a city of more than a million. The historic and liberal-minded city was forced into a 24-hour lockdown by a combined force of over 9,000 security personnel, imposing a martial-law-like condition. Workers went without pay or services. Homes were raided without warrants. What was in place was what Agamben (2005) would call a 'state of exception'.

Just two days later, another explosion happened. It was at a fertilizer plant in West, Texas - a small town with less than 3,000 people. 14 people were killed and over 200 injured. Numerous homes and buildings were destroyed or damaged.

Both places suffered terrible tragedies, but there are differences. The extent of the damage, including the number of people killed or maimed, is much greater in West than in

Boston, both in absolute terms and relative to their populations. Yet the state apparatus did not raid the home of the fertilizer plant's owner, nor did it attempt to arrest him. This is despite the fact that the plant's bosses have committed criminal negligence. Why? Whereas politicians grilled top intelligence officials about possible information-sharing failures in the Boston case, similar soul-searching did not happen in the Texas case (see Elk 2013), nor did the media, which behaved as an important ideological arm of the state, pay as much attention to the Texas case as they did to Boston. Why? Why this discrepancy in the use of state power to discipline and punish? What does this discrepancy reveal and hide? And what do these places within the US reveal about what the state does outside its formal borders? That is, what do these places reveal about a state that seeks to annihilate space—namely, the distance between itself and its enemy-others—by using its power both to kill and to know about others?

The Texas Explosion: Its Broader Historical-Geographical Context

Let us first recap a few details about the Texas explosion, based on what little information the media have made available. The plant illegally stored a large amount of liquid and granular fertilizers (anhydrous ammonia and ammonium nitrate), which, under certain conditions (e.g. when set on fire), can cause explosions (Fountain 2013). The blast at the plant shook the earth, punctuating the 'timeless' calm of the idyllic 'West-comma-Texas'. A huge fireball rolled through the town of West, showering burning debris and shrapnel over a five-block radius (Carroll 2013). The intensity of the blast was comparable to an earthquake of 2.1 on the Richter scale, creating a crater more than 10 feet deep and 90 feet wide. Some people thought that "a nuclear bomb went off" (*ibid.*). As many as 75 homes and buildings were destroyed, including the local high school and a 50-unit apartment complex. The poorer residents may become homeless. The surviving members of the community are suffering from not only physical injuries but also emotional ones. According to estimates by the Insurance Council of Texas, the explosion caused more than \$100 million in damage (Robbins and Lederman 2013).

The Texas industrial disaster is one of thousands of such 'accidents' that take place annually in the US, and indeed worldwideⁱ. In this blessed country of opportunity, every year, on average, over 4,500 workers are slaughtered in industrial accidents and nearly 4 million people are injured at work. As many as 13 US workers leave home for work every day and do not return (see [here](#)).

Why Did Texas Happen? Why, Indeed, Do Industrial Disasters Happen?

The Texas incident was overdetermined, like any event. There are *multiple* reasons for it and similar industrial disasters, but these reasons, as discussed below, are not merely different from one another. There is, in fact, a hierarchy of reasons. It is the reason at the top of this hierarchy (the class character of the system, including its profit motive), which is discussed last, that bathes and colors the other reasons.

The Company's Negligence

The company lied. The plant had on site 2,700 tonnes of ammonium nitrate. The town itself, you may recall, had a population of 2,700; that's one tonne per person! This was 100 times the amount of chemical fertilizer used in the Oklahoma City bombing in another April, in the year 1995. The total amount is 1,350 times the amount that would require a facility to report its stockpile to the Department of Homeland Security (Goodman 2013). The company willfully suppressed this information. This is a criminal offence. Unaware of the substances they were dealing with, the firemen sprayed water, which in this case only exacerbated the fires. If the company had reported what chemicals were there, evacuation would have been easier, better, and faster.

Not only did the company lie, it also cut corners, putting the safety of the workers and the community at risk. It “avoided spending the money for safety mechanisms, and the fire department didn't train their employees properly, or have the right equipment” (Mitchell 2013). The plant has indeed been known for several violations of existing laws; for example, its ammonia tanks were not properly labeled (Dart and Luscombe 2013).

Inadequate Law and Inadequate Law Enforcement

It is not enough to say that the company lied or cut corners. One must also ask what conditions allowed it to do what it did. We are talking about the *US* state, not an ordinary state. If the US state wants to know or do something, it does. Anything, anywhere, with respect to anyone. Or almost. It is ignorant to say that the state merely *happened* to be ignorant about the negligence of this plant and other, similar plants. What companies such as the one in West, Texas do cannot be isolated from [i] what the state does and how, or [ii] what it prefers not to do, [i] and [ii] being

two sides of the same coin. In other words, what the company did cannot be isolated from the two facts of weak laws and their inadequate enforcement.

Let us deal with the weak law enforcement: the relevant state apparatuses that can discipline and punish companies are ill-funded and ill-staffed. This is a time-worn strategy of capital. It was true about Marx's England (which he talks about in *Capital, Vol. I*) as it is now - in poor and rich countries alike. The strategy: to set up an institution to look after the workers in order to appear responsible, but not to provide adequate funding to it.

Consider the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Like many similar organizations, it was established partly in response to working-class struggles and with some support from the then Democratic party (see Harvey 1996:338-339), and thanks to the hard work of many of its employees, it has saved the lives of more than 451,000 workers. However, this organization has been sapped of its energy. OSHA's last visit to the Texas plant was in 1985. Why so few inspections? The agencies such as OSHA have too much work to do and are understaffed and under-funded.

Some 4,500 are killed each year in industrial accidents in the US, and the state spends \$550 million a year on workplace safety (Clinton 2013) - half as much as it spends protecting fish and wildlife. Do humans have the same moral and material worth as these non-humans, or are we to obliterate such a binary?

Under the current funding cut proposals, OSHA will have its budget cut by 8.2%, amounting to about \$50m. This is under Obama, who blocked a bill in 2006 to make chemical plants safer - the Obama who, many people think, can be pushed to do more for workers and the environmentⁱⁱ. OSHA covers 7-8 million workplaces in the US but has only between 2,000 and 2,200 inspectors nationwide. It can inspect a given plant once every 129 to 131 years. In Texas, which has even fewer inspectors than the national average, it might take even longer for federal inspectors to visit every workplace.

As the following data show (see [here](#)), while the rate of safety-related workplace incidents increased between 2010 and 2012, the number of investigations has decreased. Hence, the percentage of incidents that are investigated (shown in brackets) has also decreased. It would appear that businesses have virtual impunity.

	2010	2011	2012
Reported incidents	162	282	334
Investigations	17 (10.5%)	14 (4.96%)	14 (4.19%)

Let us locate the Texas disaster in a wider perspective, outside of which it cannot be understood properly. The democratically elected US governments of both the big business parties illegally kill and maim innocent people *abroad*, largely to create favorable long-term conditions for big businesses, and they often do this on the basis of lies. Take, for example, the lie that this or that government is hiding weapons of mass destruction. Hence, there is a political climate of lies in which those who control the economic lever of society (i.e. companies) also lie and in which governments have limited moral legitimacy to challenge such lies. The US governments of different times have been and are complicit in thousands of workers being killed *at home*, including those killed due to unsafe working conditions (recall that the number is 13 every day). What the US does abroad and what it does at home are similar. They are also connected. Consider this: “Although Americans were 270 times more likely to die a workplace accident than a terrorist attack in 2011, the Department of Homeland Security’s budget that year was \$47 billion, while OSHA’s budget was only \$558 million” (Elk 2013). Illegal, incessant, and imperialist wars deplete the coffers. The state’s priorities are clear, and they contradict those of ordinary citizens, who need economic security, decent jobs, healthcare, etc.

Not only are the relevant law-enforcing apparatuses weak, but the laws themselves are weak. For example, criminal penalties under the OSHA law are very weak. Fines are a pittance, and can be reduced upon bargaining between companies and the state. Paying a little fine here and there is just part of the cost of doing business. When OSHA inspected the Texas plant in 1985, it fined the company for safety violations. And the amount was \$30. Yes, \$30. This is said to be a mere 3% of what it could have fined (Zupnick 2013). Even when a worker dies in a factory, the fines are too small—less than \$10,000—to make companies invest in workers’ safety. Besides, if a few die, there are plenty in the reserve army of laborers, both at the national scale (e.g. in small towns; in the poor neighborhoods of central cities) and globally (e.g. low-cost immigrant workers).

One may ask: why did the workers and the community not do anything?ⁱⁱⁱ Note that OSHA typically inspects a business *only after* it receives a complaint from a worker. Fearing retaliation from employers, workers often do not complain. The situation is worse in non-unionized places and worksites in rural areas, such as the plant in question, which is located in the proud ‘right-to-work state’ (read: ‘right-to-super-exploit state’)—a state that lures businesses from other states with its business-friendly climate.

Politicians will disagree that the amount of oversight is inadequate. Rick Perry, governor of Texas, has said that “[t]hrough their elected officials [people] clearly send the message of their comfort with the amount of oversight”. So democracy protects the people, the ordinary working masses? Perry also recently touted the lax regulatory environment in Texas while trying to lure businesses there from states like California and Illinois (see Goodman 2013). He is not alone. If *state*-level agencies have such a soft attitude to business, it would be futile to ask why zoning in West, Texas was not in place to stop houses and other buildings from being located near a chemical plant. Laws to protect workers and communities are weak or deficient at *all* scales.

Subordinating the Human Need for Safety to Profit

The causes of the disaster are many, but they are not equally important. The bottom line is this: we live in a society where profit subordinates human needs, including the need for safety, to itself. It is this that underlies what given companies do to remain competitive and that also sets limits on what the state does. The criminal negligence of companies such as the one in Texas cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of weak law or weak law enforcement (or indeed in terms of the above-average level of greediness of a given owner). Rather, government policies more or less reflect business interests, especially given the declining influence of working class power. The nature of laws and enforcement may explain why some companies in some places at certain times do what they do. That nature cannot, however, explain why all companies generally pursue profit at the expense of workers’ safety (and, indeed, of the ecological health of our planet), any more than the prices of commodities being high or low can explain the true nature of their production, outside of the theory of value^{iv}. Explaining industrial disasters in terms of neoliberal deregulation is to assume that a better, pro-worker government is possible and that it could adequately and permanently solve the problem at hand—that the interests of ordinary

people and those of capital can be somewhat compatible. It is a massive theoretical and political mistake to treat neoliberalism merely as a *governmental* policy (Das 2012).

The profit motive—that is, the imperative to accumulate at any cost—subordinates the political system to itself, more or less. That is why Obama of the Democratic party could say of Boston that “any responsible individuals, any responsible groups will feel the full weight of justice”. On the other hand, when it came to individuals bearing the full weight of justice for the explosion in Texas, he could say nothing (Mokhiber 2013). Why is there no manhunt when a company is criminally responsible for killing people? Why is it that corporate crimes and violence, both symbolic/affective and material, are not serious enough to meet the ‘full weight of justice’? Why do companies get greeted with non-prosecution agreements and self-reporting clauses? The answer: the state must protect the system of profit-making and the private ownership of society’s resources. This happens at the expense of the right of an ordinary working person to a decent life. As Tom O’Connor, executive director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, has said, “As companies...emphasize profits over safety, workers pay the ultimate price” (quoted in Goodman 2013)

Conclusion: Corporate Terrorism—What Is To Be Done?

The bosses at the West plant—and at all plants where such disasters happen—deserve the blame for the ‘accident’ and the resulting loss of life, as do politicians and officials obsessed with the deregulation of business. And the system, which subordinates people’s lives to the profit imperative, is to be blamed as well. It is the imperative to reduce costs and increase profits that the state must defend, at any cost. The disaster in Texas has to be located on a broader imaginative/conceptual map.

Both the inaction in Texas and the over-action in Boston are expressions of one thing: the capitalistic—and indeed imperialistic—character of the American state. The Texas and Boston cases must be seen in their wider international context. Businesses have the right to exploit, and this the state must respect and defend. Ordinary citizens have the right to fulfilling and safe working (and living) conditions. Between these two equal rights, it is the force that decides. Domestically, it is, ultimately, the force of the state. Internationally, it is the force of the imperialist states such as the US. The US state as a ‘super-imperialist’ state reinforces conditions for businesses making (super-)profits in the global periphery, and it has to make sure other states

—those in the periphery—do not deviate from the true path of salvation (see Wood 2003). This is behind America's imperialist wars. Ideologically, it would be difficult for it to protect workers' rights at home while crushing these same rights abroad. Having spent billions on imperialist wars in the ultimate interest of big businesses and having given said businesses tax and other concessions, the US is in any case 'short of' money to fund regulatory agencies at home. Also, the businesses at home have to obey the law of value (the law of competition) increasingly operating internationally. If the cost of doing business is raised in Texas or in America due to effective regulation, will Texan and American businesses, whom the state must generally protect, not go bankrupt or move to another place with less regulation?

It is not surprising that a huge amount of money is spent on the so-called fight against terror. Some of the effect of that spending was seen in the huge mobilization of forces and weapons in Boston. As the anger against austerity and unemployment in cities and rural towns in the US grows, and as the consequences of the business-state alliance are played out as they were in West, the state is compelled to reveal to its own citizens its naked strength. The Boston spectacle of the state of exception was indeed just that. Can one believe that the safety of the people was the reason for the state having taken action in Boston, when it does not care to prevent the thousands of workplace deaths, such as those in Texas, that happen every year? Ordinary people face the terror of profit more often and more intensely than the terror of some people fighting imperialism and militarism in misguided ways. And the fight against terror is really a fight against anyone who is fundamentally opposed to profit-making. *Where* that 'anyone' is located, whether in the US or abroad, is ultimately immaterial.

So, *what is to be done?* The answer lies in the multi-tiered explanation of disasters such as the one in West, Texas. Action for changing the situation is necessary at every level of the explanatory interpretation offered here of these disasters. Such action must include a democratically organized intellectual-political struggle of the masses through parties and popular workers' councils in workplaces and communities. These organized groups must hold accountable politicians and companies who commit crimes against ordinary working people, and must push for better wages, for better regulation of work-places, and for the workers' right to see business accounts—including in rural places like West. Because there are severe limits to what can be achieved merely through such struggles^v, such struggles for reforms must be a part of—and must happen with the overall theoretical-political perspective of—a much broader multi-

scalar class-struggle to establish democracy in the workplace and in every other part of society. That would be a socio-ecologically just society, where human needs and nature would not be subordinated to profit-making and imperialist aggression, nor to bureaucratism ruling in the name of the people.

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ⁱ As I write these lines, Bangladesh has experienced one of its—and one of the world's—worst industrial disasters: a building that housed five garment factories that supplied cheap products to western markets collapsed, killing more than 350, many of them women. Not only this, but the terrible tragedy in a chemical plant owned by an American company in India's Bhopal is still in our collective memory.

ⁱⁱ In 1977, OSHA had 37 inspectors for every million workers. Today it has only 22, a reduction of more than 40 percent. As a result, OSHA has all but abandoned regular inspections of work sites (see <http://wsws.org/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ A local resident actually complained about the smell of chemicals, which prompted an investigation.

^{iv} Note that the imperative to produce more at lower cost and to make a profit is creating a need for chemicals used in farming, and the explosion in the West, Texas chemical fertilizer plant cannot be considered in isolation from this fact.

^v These limits exist because of the private ownership of property, capitalist competition and the class-character of the state.