

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Committing Geography

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Exhaustive news media coverage of the April 15 Boston Marathon bombings, to the point of farce in the case of CNN's desperate search for 'breaking news', overshadowed a much larger explosion that occurred at a fertilizer plant in the small town of West, Texas, just two days later. The latter killed 14 people and injured at least 200 more, causing widespread damage to buildings around the plant, including several dozen homes, a school, and a nursing home. The discussion on the leftgeog listserv that sparked this forum originally asked, why did one explosion (in Boston) receive so much more attention in the media and from officials than the other (in Texas)? The primary argument I want to make is that events in Boston and Texas must be understood in relation to state power and the public good. In turn, state power and the public good (and the public itself) must be understood as structured and exercised dialectically and in relation to both political and economic forces and processes. These cannot and should not be divorced from one another in favor of depoliticized arguments about the benefits of more or less regulation and state intervention, or political arguments that cede economic decision making to capital and technocrats in favor of building localized but parallel systems and economies. While I expand on my own initial contribution to the online discussion in more detail below, I first discuss events that unfolded in Canada shortly after those in Boston and Texas.

On April 22, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) held a press conference in which they announced [the arrests of Chiheb Esseghaier and Raed Jaser](#). The RCMP alleges the two men, both immigrants with legal status in Canada, were involved in an al-Qaeda linked

terrorist plot targeting Canada's national passenger rail service, VIA Rail, and planned to derail a train traveling between New York and Toronto. Little was said in the media coverage of the arrests and subsequent official discussion about why terrorists would want to attack Canadian targets, but much was made of the strong and cooperative relationship the RCMP and other Canadian security and intelligence agencies have built with Muslim communities and religious leaders in Canada. Many of these community and religious leaders were briefed prior to the RCMP press conference announcing the arrests, and attended the press conference itself. It was even noted that [important tips leading to the arrests](#) came from members of the Canadian Muslim community.

The timing of the arrests and their announcement, following shortly after the dramatic killing of one Boston bombing suspect and the apprehension of the other, belied the much longer process of surveillance and evidence gathering that went into the RCMP's arrests of Esseghaier and Jaser. American intelligence officials had supposedly requested more than once that their Canadian counterparts hold off on making any arrests to allow for more information to be gathered and shared, in the hope that delays would unveil more potential plots, suspects, and organizational details of jihadist terrorist groups working in North America. The RCMP's extensive work with domestic Muslim leaders and other non-majority communities is part of efforts by state authorities, in Canada at least, to make the complex transnational connections and social fabric of these communities legible through both intensive surveillance and policing and attempts to build understanding, trust, and collaboration. This did not, however, stop Prime Minister Stephen Harper from stating in an April 25 press conference that attempts to understand the "root causes" of terrorism were unnecessary and naive. More specifically, Harper argued that "[this is not a time to commit sociology](#)...These things are serious threats, global terrorist attacks, people who have agendas of violence that are deep and abiding threats to all the values our society stands for...".

Yet 'committing sociology' is in fact what the Canadian state's security apparatus appears to be doing - and is one means of restructuring state territoriality around globalized security threats, perceived and real. In this sense, the RCMP was not just committing sociology but also (to steal a phrase that [Steven Tufts](#) used on facebook and twitter) *committing geography*. In this context we should ask, as was posed to the leftgeog listserv, what connects Boston and West, Texas, as well as Toronto, Montreal, Chechnya, Pakistan, Iran, and numerous other places

across a variety of scales, all implicated in the web of connections traced backward in time and space from the discrete events that make fodder for headline news? In my reply to the original leftgeog post and subsequent comments, I argued that the economic question of how public and worker safety can best (i.e. most effectively and most justly) be won, enforced, and broadened through more democratic control of the workplace and the economy cannot be divorced from the political question of how, for whom, and to what ends state power is organized and used.

In the West fertilizer plant explosion, for example, a full scale OSHA inspection had not been undertaken since 1985, while other inspections by local, state, and federal officials, and complaints by workers and neighbors, pointed to serious problems and safety violations at the plant. Such violations routinely netted only small fines, however, ranging from \$1,000 to as low as \$30. Whether any specific and previously reported violation led directly to the deadly explosion on April 17 ([this remains to be definitively proven by investigators](#)), it is nonetheless clear that local, state, and national officials and the chemical industry are willing to tolerate both serious accidents and the daily violence and injustice of asymmetrical exposure to environmental and health harms. An army of actuaries, accountants, and lawyers have no doubt calculated and mapped out precisely the physical, legal, and financial costs of such events for the plant's owners. The apparent randomness of disasters like the explosion of April 17 is often plausibly if incorrectly attributed to 'accidental' causes rather than criminal negligence, but creating the conditions for such industrial catastrophes is part and parcel of the neoliberal race-to-the-bottom that draws so many places and peoples together in vicious competition dictated by the economic logic of global capitalism. Texas Governor Rick Perry, for example, has been leading an ad campaign in Illinois to lure biotech companies based in that state to Texas, telling Illinois-based business owners "you need to get out while there's still time. The escape route leads straight to Texas, where [limited government, low taxes, and a pro-business environment](#) are creating more jobs than any other state". This is in part why industrial catastrophes like those in West fail to produce the same kind of monumental effort by the state on behalf of public and worker safety and the common good as terrorist acts like those in Boston and Ontario. *They are not meant to*, as such catastrophes are acceptable by-products of a deregulated environment catering to the demands of capital while defusing and deflecting more contentious and potentially radical arguments about the public good, political and economic power, and democratic accountability. This stands in stark contrast to the massive security response the Boston marathon bombings

produced, and the extensive reach of the state security and policing apparatus evinced by the RCMP arrests. [Senator Lindsey Graham](#) even opined that the Boston bombings were “Exhibit A of why the homeland is the battlefield”, and that “It sure would be nice to have a drone up there” to track suspects, or, it should be assumed, to preempt them, as has happened in the expanding drone war prosecuted in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

In ‘committing geography’, then, we must understand and interrogate specifically the geographies of state power, and how it can and should be used to produce and defend versions of the public and the public good. To put a finer point on it, we should develop and expand those mechanisms and instances in which state power can reverse and prevent the kind of criminal but taken-for-granted injustice that results in incidents like the one that destroyed so many lives in West, but which can also undo the circumstances and conditions that contribute to the root causes of terrorist attacks like those in Boston. State power is exercised through policing, surveillance, and the categorization of threats to established order. It can also be exercised to produce, extend, and maintain necessary and beneficial social and physical infrastructure that benefits a wider diverse public. I ride VIA Rail between Toronto and Windsor, Ontario almost every week during the academic year. Like many commuters in southern Ontario, I am far more concerned about the potential safety hazards and service impacts posed by [the Harper government’s proposed \\$300 million cuts to VIA’s budget](#) than I am about terrorist attacks. These cuts, made in the name of austerity and supposedly to the benefit of the public purse, stress an already sorely underfunded infrastructure and leave those who depend on such public sector services scrambling to fight rearguard actions. Leaving debate over such decisions and public infrastructure in the realm of the economic - can we afford this train? that drone? these safety inspections? - and relying on anti-statist arguments cedes the political to proponents of austerity and securitization. These are not simply questions of how to make the public more ‘safe’ or how to produce cost-effective budgets in difficult economic times, but rather about how more democratic control of the economy and the state can be built and exercised in tandem, and how the demands of publics hammered by austerity, divided by discrimination, and exploited by capital can be synthesized and scaled up. Events like those in Boston, Texas, and Ontario give us the chance and the responsibility to ‘commit geography’ in this way.

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