

Antipode

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West, TX Through the Damage Mirror: The Enabling Contradictions of Preparedness

Leigh Johnson

Department of Geography

University of Zurich

leigh.johnson@geo.uzh.ch

Schadenspiegel is the title of an extraordinary biannual meditation on damage and loss published by the German reinsurance giant Munich Re. The magazine, intended for an audience of insurance claims managers, painstakingly chronicles underestimated or unexpected sources of losses emerging in the industry and suggests how to stem the tide. Its topics are remarkable precisely because they are often *not* particularly spectacular; [recent issues](#) have detailed mounting pharmaceutical product liability, the hindrances that photovoltaic installations pose to firefighting, the potential liabilities arising from web-initiated mass gatherings such as Facebook parties and flashmobs, and the risks of industrial plant explosions caused by use of ‘gas blows’ to purge pipe debris. Spectacular events such as the Deepwater Horizon find their way in as well, but their page count is overshadowed by events of a far less sensational – one might crudely say banal – variety.

The name *Schadenspiegel* – which remains untranslated even in the English version of the publication – is a dual referent. Translated literally, it would refer to a level or index of damages; yet the spirit of the text undoubtedly plays on the double meaning of ‘Spiegel’ as both an index and a mirror. The properties of such a mirror not only reflect information about events – as in a newspaper titled *The Mirror* – they also project the possibility of similar loss events into future times and spaces.¹ The modus operandi of such a Damage Mirror, then, is to invite claims managers and insurance executives to imagine the ramifications of heretofore neglected yet

foreseeable events on their own portfolios. Unusually for a reinsurance publication, its message is *not* about the urgency of ‘thinking the unthinkable’, cultivating resilient responses to Rumsfeldian ‘unknown unknowns’, or even the inevitability of Perrow’s ‘normal accidents’ in complex technological systems; rather, it is concerned with the relatively ‘ordinary’, banal, and unremarked-upon risks that characterize capitalism’s contemporary moment.

I was immediately reminded of *Schadenspiegel* when reading that West Fertilizer Co. self-reported to the EPA in 2011 that it posed no risk of fire or explosion, and that the [worst conceivable emergency scenario](#) would be “a 10-minute release of ammonia gas that would kill or injure no one”. The obvious absurdity of this claim – particularly given that the company had [elsewhere reported](#) storing 270 tons of ammonium nitrate on site – is not just a testament to failure of neoliberal self-regulation, reckless profit-seeking, or the social and environmental externalities of industrial agriculture. The preposterousness of the self-reported ‘worst case scenario’ highlights the occlusions and willful neglect that are enabling contradictions within the post-9/11 paradigms of preparedness, risk management, and the “[politics of possibility](#)”.

Sites like West disclose the necessary lacunae in the anticipatory politics of preparedness. These are not spaces in which the rubric of risk management has yielded a calculated decision on the part of the state or capital to ‘let die’ per se; they are spaces in which the organization of power and the accumulation of capital rather demand willful neglect and obfuscation of danger for their realization in the first place. Or as local officials in Texas have retorted to their inquisitors, ‘This is just the way things are done around here’. As Senate investigations into unregulated stores of ammonium nitrate nationwide will doubtless reveal (and environmental justice scholars can testify so well), these lacunae are numerous enough that the U.S. environmental regulatory landscape might be better described as a cratered moonscape.

So what is perhaps more puzzling than the explosion and ensuing deaths of 14 people in West is the disbelief expressed by so many public figures and commentators. In a present apparently saturated with risk assessments, emergency response exercises, CCTV, biometrics, detentions, and watch lists, commentators have ritually professed their bafflement that such a hazardous facility could have been hidden in plain sight adjacent to a middle school, nursing home, and apartment complex. This disbelief has multiplied as pundits and security hawks [have crowded](#) over the unregistered plant storing more than a thousand times the minimum volume of ammonium nitrate requiring oversight by the Department of Homeland Security, and now over a

[new report](#) of regular thefts of anhydrous ammonia from the plant for methamphetamine production.

But of course none of this is as shocking as politicians have professed, and this is where we can turn our own Damage Mirror on the foreseeable, preventable, and banal disasters that have become the accepted collateral damage of a high-energy, high-growth regime of accumulation. This mirror reflects the long legacy of industrial safety violations and remind us that, thanks to workplace accidents, [every day](#) 12 Americans – four times the number of people killed in the Boston bombings – leave for work and never come home. It foregrounds the staggeringly higher tolls on labor in the countries on which [globalized supply-chain](#) capitalism has come to depend, as gruesomely demonstrated in the April 24 collapse of the Bangladeshi garment factory that killed over 1,000 people, making it one of the worst industrial accidents in history. It is undoubtedly our remit to hold a mirror to the decisions and negligence that expose people to such dangers (following Luhmann’s distinction between risk and dangers, where dangers are potential hazards that individuals have not consciously chosen to accept).

But as the knee-jerk political reactions to the Boston bombings alert us, simply calling for more regulation, coordination, and federal intervention can cut both ways. A response to the West explosions that calls for heightened safety codes, more transparency in hazardous materials reporting, and inter-agency regulatory coordination must also articulate how this response is fundamentally different from immigration hawks’ reactionary demands for tighter visa and citizenship rules, more stringent surveillance of domestic threats, and coordination of inter-organizational information sharing. If we are to avoid falling down a rabbit hole of threat quantification and anticipatory preemption, it is not enough to simply demand stronger action by the regulatory state, if such a coherent entity can even be said to exist. The processes and forms of environmental monitoring, hazard assessment, and decision-making themselves must be opened up as topics for debate: a publicⁱⁱ and participatory Damage Mirror that lays bare the brutal, ‘ordinary’, unremarked-upon dangers that characterize capitalism’s contemporary moment – the banality of disaster.

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ⁱ Thanks to Pascal Goeke and Karin Schwiter for help in making my way through this thicket of meanings; any errors of representation are my own.

ⁱⁱ Here, the [Public Laboratory for Open Technology and Science](#) has generated some exciting examples of citizen science for monitoring community environmental health.