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A Political Economy of Distraction: The Boston Marathon Bombings and their Relation to the Fertilizer Facility Explosion in West, Texas

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The Boston Marathon bombings and the explosion of a West, Texas fertilizer facility appear at first glance to be unrelated. In Boston two men packed small pressure cookers with explosives and shrapnel and snuck them into the downtown crowd to cause casualties. Two days later, in rural Texas, hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate exploded after a fire started in the warehouse where it was stored. The apparent difference between these explosive events is intent. On the one hand, two young men plotted and carried out a sophisticated attack. On the other, an explosion was the end result of a seemingly random series of occurrences not fully understood at the time of this writing. The results of these terrible incidents are not so different, however. Three people tragically lost their lives in downtown Boston that afternoon and dozens more were injured. In Texas the result was similar but more intense as fifteen people died, hundreds were injured, and severe property damage occurred to dozens of surrounding homes, schools, and other structures.

Both of these explosions are obviously abhorrent given the numbers of people harmed. However, it quickly became apparent that these events were treated very differently despite their mutually gruesome outcomes. Authorities immediately described the bombings in Boston as ‘acts of terrorism’ while no such label was assigned to the West, Texas incident. The media scrutinized the Boston Marathon bombings intensively while more-or-less ignoring the happenings in Texas. Meanwhile, the subsequent pursuit of one of the bombing suspects in

nearby Watertown prompted authorities to lock down the city of Boston - paralyzing the daily routines of nearly a million people. No such edicts in the name of public safety were declared in the multitude of US communities home to fertilizer facilities storing explosive ammonium nitrate.

The political ramifications of these events are as differentiated as the immediate reactions described above. The Boston Marathon bombings caused a massive state mobilization on domestic soil, perhaps the largest since 9/11. Demands for better coordination between federal and state law enforcement agencies are happening as it is now evident the FBI investigated one of the bombing suspects years before the attack but failed to communicate information to any other relevant agencies. Big city mayors promise heightened surveillance while making their downtowns police states - especially during sporting events. Regarding the explosion in Texas, however, the story could not be more different.

Several federal and state level agencies failed to adequately regulate the West Fertilizer Company. In the wake of the Texas explosion no significant coordination is occurring between regulatory agencies to surveil and share information about fertilizer facilities. Instead, Texas legislators continue to speak out against what they believe are burdensome regulations on industry in their state (Urbina *et al.* 2013). This begs the question, why do the Boston Marathon bombings garner more reaction by state authorities than the West, Texas explosion, despite the fact that the latter was arguably more harmful than the former?

I argue both events are differentiated examples of the normative role that expectations of violence play in our daily lives within capitalist society. In other words, violence perpetrated by ‘terrorist others’ in Boston is widely constructed as an external threat to the existence of the state while violence intrinsic to its productive basis in Texas is largely construed as an unavoidable consequence of securing economic hegemony. I therefore go on to argue that the Boston Marathon bombings and the events of 9/11, while terrible, articulate a political economy of distraction that obfuscates the recurring violence requisite to profitable capitalism as exemplified in the West, Texas explosion.

The Explosions in Boston and Texas and their Normative Relationships to Capital Accumulation

Following the Boston Marathon bombings it became evident that two brothers reportedly of Chechen descent used \$20 pressure cookers to accomplish what multiple state agencies in the US spent hundreds of billions of dollars trying to prevent (for more on the extraordinary costs of homeland security, see Mueller and Stewart 2011). Authorities and the media quickly focused on the suspects' assumed connections to Dagestan and their resulting 'radicalization'. Soon the dominant conversation on the airwaves turned to the threat of the immigrant-turned-domestic terrorist and what might be done about them. Pundits called for intensifying the collection and scrutiny of information concerning immigrants to the US from hotspots in the Islamic world. Literally overnight, then, the Caucasus region was further enjoined to the geography of terror as a poorly understood source of enemy combatants against the US.

Lost in the discussion of threats by 'radicalized' immigrants are the microscopic odds that Americans will be hurt by a terrorist originating from anywhere. Numbers vary by source, but all are in agreement that the odds an American will be killed by lightning are far greater than the odds of being killed by a terrorist domestic or foreign (Plumer 2013). The odds of falling victim to any kind of terrorism are literally tens of millions to one. We thus need to look further to understand why this kind of infrequent violence garners so much attention and action relative to its potential to harm us. One major reason is that these kinds of violent events are detrimental to certain modes of capital accumulation. The 9/11 attacks in New York had a particularly chilling effect on the financial sector as major investment losses were recorded in the days following the collapse of the Twin Towers. Like 9/11, the Boston Marathon bombings also created anxiety among the consumer public that hinders revenues generated from tourism and major sporting events (Polland 2013). Given this, we should acknowledge that the securitization of cities like New York and Boston is not so much about protecting people, but rather securing their consumer and investor confidence and by extension the associated kinds of capital accumulation most vulnerable to these attacks. We should also not forget that securitization is a lucrative industry that benefits greatly from public hysteria. But while securitization from the kind of violence that happened in Boston is good for capital accumulation, policing the kind of incident that occurred in West, Texas evidently is not.

Certainly the Texas explosion is costly to clean up and repair, but its occurrence among many similar incidents (see Urbina *et al.* 2013) is evidence that occasional industrial disasters are a relatively small price to pay for little state interference in ongoing processes of capital

accumulation. Several federal and state agencies were responsible for oversight of the West Fertilizer Company but refused to anticipate this event and therefore failed to prevent it. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration reportedly last inspected the plant in 1985. The Department of Homeland Security was not aware that the facility stored 270 tons of ammonium nitrate, something they were required by law to monitor (Smith 2013). Unlike immigrants-turned-terrorists, however, danger-laden industrial capitalism is as American as apple pie. Firms that create and maintain jobs in the post-Great Recession era are considered reverential by the state and public; this is especially the case in a conservative and pro-market place like Texas. Thus the public remains much more paranoid about immigrants moving in next door than the threats posed by the structural violence inherent to the industries operating in their backyards and next to their schools.

Of course, this situation is possible because the American state is wedded to capital, and in a Gramscian sense the public provides its consent to the marriage. This is not surprising to many radical geographers. But what is important to note here is that because of this relationship, the explosion in West, Texas should NOT be considered an accident. As Rajan (2001) reminds us concerning the gas disaster in Bhopal, India, cozy relations between the state and capital virtually guarantee violent industrial incidents occur regularly and go largely unpunished. Back in the US, the public tacitly supports this cozy relationship that results in an industrial ‘Wild West’ where anything goes in the name of ‘job growth’. But just exactly how is it possible that the public allows its state to perpetuate the on-going structural violence inherent to its political economy, but demands swift action when terrorists infrequently attack?

Terrorist Violence and the Political Economy of Distraction

There is no doubt that Americans have given up much of their privacy and many of their civil liberties in the wake of 9/11 and will probably give up more after Boston; much has already been written about this process (Chang 2002; Sidel 2007). It is important to remember that these incursions by the security state into our lives are purposefully taken to reinforce our paranoia of the supposed existential threats posed by certain categories of violent actors. Making people fear for their lives is a convenient way to get them to support aggressive initiatives that ultimately benefit accumulation (Harvey 2005). Terrorist actions (or just the threats thereof) in Boston therefore enable a political economy of distraction whereby the public is overly focused on

miniscule threats posed by alien Others while corporations profitably pollute and detonate neighborhoods behind the scene. The political economy of distraction is a highly effective mode of regulation because the neoliberal state legitimates capital accumulation through securitization and deregulation at the same time. Subsequently the task for the securitized neoliberal state is not to stop violence, but to manage it. It does so in ways that get the public to support securitization while accepting as inevitable the structural violence that kills and maims people by the thousands every year in industrial accidents and through long-term exposure to toxic chemicals. Ultimately one form of violence is portrayed as a dire threat to the American way while the other is constructed as the American way itself. Both kinds of violence are of course profitable if managed properly.

The political economy of distraction is based on a pernicious politics that allow the state to subsidize capital accumulation while also suppressing dissent. George W. Bush's declaration that "you are either with us or against us in the war on terror" is illustrative of how it is dangerous to speak out against the political economy of distraction and its basis in the security state. A cursory web search suggests a relatively small number of people openly acknowledge the contradiction in expending so much effort on the Boston Marathon bombings while ignoring the much larger threat posed to our wellbeing by corporate and regulatory malfeasance in places like West, Texas. All of this of course means that the radical Left has its work cut out for it in trying to expose this ridiculous, yet profitable, contradiction deeply engrained in the political economy of distraction. But we must work together to create a new common sense about human security entirely decoupled from capital accumulation. How we go about this task should be central to our conversations going forward. Our lives are at stake.

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