

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## Connecting the Dots in a Political Economy of Violence

Stephanie Simon

Department of Politics

University of Amsterdam

S.J.Simon@uva.nl

One of the insights to be drawn from the responses to the Boston Marathon bombings and the West Fertilizer plant explosion two days later are the fundamentally different approaches to causality and preventability that they reveal. The sheer quantity of coverage of Boston dwarfed that of West, but there are also crucial qualitative differences in the underlying logics, which offer a stark glimpse into US security politics and response priorities that have very little to do with causality or prevention in any meaningful sense. One constant across US climate, terror, and economic crisis politics is that the regulation of effects is always put over and above the treatment, or even acknowledgment, of causes.

In Boston, the very public cause-hunt is focused on identifying events in the life histories of the Tsarnaev brothers that might explain the actions that left three dead and more than 20 injured. Intimate details of the brothers' lives are being speculatively scrutinised for 'root causes' that must have been 'missed' by law enforcement. This obsessive search for causes rooted in the individual, to 'connect the dots' retrospectively, is being carried out often in the *absence of credible information*. By contrast, the muted treatment of the West, Texas explosion that left 14 dead and injured more than 200 others, has seen meek and insufficient probes of the *wealth of information* about warning signs and safety regulation enforcement failures at a site containing critically dangerous materials. The frenzied focus on the Tsarnaev brothers' pasts and the underwhelming treatment of the plant explosion reveals the degree to which violence given the

‘terror’ label is subject to an intimate scrutiny that we could only hope for in the far more frequent violence of industrial and workplace tragedies around the world.

The Boston case also reveals to degree to which the roots of violence are deflected onto individuals rather than engaging in any meaningful discussion of history, political economy, or structural violence. In the post-Boston frenzy to connect the dots of anti-American violence, some big dots have not been drawn in. One week after the bombing, for example, [a Yemeni man testified in a Senate subcommittee](#) about the impact that drone strikes have had on Yemeni sentiments toward the US. He stated that he felt many friends and neighbours previously had positive ideas about the US, but “[n]ow, however, when they think of America they think of the terror they feel from the drones that hover over their heads ready to fire missiles at any time...What radicals had previously failed to achieve in my village, one drone strike accomplished in an instant: there is now an intense anger and growing hatred of America”.

In the highly political delineation of causes, these big dots are looked over in favour of individual traits and loose associations. This goes by the name of ‘countering radicalisation’. The idea behind radicalisation is that individuals go through a process of becoming capable of violence, which has been reductively modeled in various ways by psychologists and security professionals. It is thought that moments in ‘the radicalising process’ can be intervened upon and violence averted at ‘the earliest possible stage’ with the right assemblage of actors supplied with the right data, before the fact. What this looks like in practice varies quite a bit, but it often involves efforts to ‘look out for’ signs of radicalisation in everyday life. The term became popular following the London and Madrid train bombings because the perpetrators had no known links to Al Qaeda (and were British in the former case), and thus attention turned to the motivations of ‘homegrown’ terrorism. This has become a priority in the US counter-terrorism agenda where people like Rep. Peter King promote a kind of preemptive, everyday vigilance, particularly amongst Muslim communities. Belén Fernández has called this “[co-ethnic condemnation](#)” where part of being a ‘good Muslim’ in America revolves around proving oneself through the ceaseless censure of a very small minority and complete openness to cooperating with law enforcement.

What is now playing out in Boston is a *retrospective* reading of the brothers’ lives used to justify the notion that it could have been possible to foresee the event. Since ‘radicalisation’ is simplistically understood as a process with intervenable points, attention is focused on

uncovering signs uses that must have been missed. Any event labelled as terrorism now sees the same retrospective reading (for a remarkable example, see the 7/7 inquests). These hindsight readings give voice to the idea that what individuals *were* thinking and feeling could have been construed before the fact. The possible dots are many, disputed, and often contradictory in the Boston case. We have heard about the mother who held radical ideas and was a shoplifter, the teacher that was looked up to, the influence of Chechen radicals, that the elder was radicalised at a mosque in Dagestan, that they are religious fundamentalists, that they are secularists, that their father was hard on them and they sought his approval, that the older brother was not well-integrated and was very influential over the younger. The question that we must ask is how any of these deeply personal things, like feeling alienated from a distant father or the adoration of an older brother, could possibly be made visible to a security apparatus or construed as elements building up to an explosion? As a target of governmental intervention, 'radicalisation' invokes the most intimate kind of causality. Effectively what happens is that it places loosely associated elements and things that occur inside into relation with a war apparatus at the same time that it ignores the role of the war apparatus itself.

If we can accept that it is very difficult to foresee the explosivity of two young men full of feelings and ideas, in contrast, we can identify some things that are certainly explosive, like ammonium nitrate. Returning to West, hazardous material and workplace safety regulations have a similar goal of being able to identify potential hazards and reduce the ability of hazards to turn into events like explosions. In contrast to the sheer amount and depth of speculative attention given to the brothers' histories, though, there has been very little attention paid to the wealth of information about warning signs surrounding the plant. To identify just some of this information: the plant did not report its stockpile of ammonium nitrate to DHS even though they were storing hundreds of times more than the threshold for reporting; the Department of State Health Services also did not report the stockpile; the plant was found to have improper permits for its anhydrous ammonia tanks; it was fined by the EPA for failing to update its risk management plan and for having poor records of employee training, maintenance, and hazard documentation; and the plant had generally lax site security based on a history of break-ins and thefts. Also, glaringly, the plant had not been inspected by OSHA since 1985, which has shed light on the underfunding of US worker safety. The agency now has 2,200 inspectors for 8 million workplaces - half of what

it had in 1980. With resources spread thin, inspections are largely driven by employee complaints, and complaints are far less common in non-union facilities like West Fertilizer.

By focusing on causality, it is not meant that there is an easily identifiable cause in either of these cases. Rather, it is to say that causality is being politicized in highly problematic ways. Two keywords have become political nodal points: in Boston, information-sharing; in West, regulation. The information-sharing push calls for a dynamic counter-terrorism system-of-systems that can seamlessly integrate and draw together vast amounts of disparate data, which might enable preemptive radicalisation interventions. Acknowledgment of the routine failures of this practice - like the fact that the elder Tsarnaev brother and mother were added to the US 'terrorism database' 18 months prior to the bombing - does not lead to a rethinking but to a *ramping up* of information-sharing and the surveillance programmes that populate watch lists with 'tsunamis' of data. This push is only enabled by retrospective readings, which use hindsight to falsely construe a sense of possible foresight. To say simply that this event very well may not have been preventable is actually a radical thing to do.

Public discourse surrounding West, on the other hand, has not focused on what we should have acted on before the fact, even in the face of glaring regulatory sidesteps by plant owners and the dearth of worker safety mechanisms. Rather than the fast-acting, flashy priority of counter-terrorism information-sharing, out of the West case we see milquetoast mumblings about regulation; with some even *questioning the need* for regulation. This disparity in responses is made even more stark by the very different knowledge bases surrounding these events. We do not yet know precisely what lit the fire in West, but we do know of definitively dangerous things that contributed. I would submit that we will *never* know if elements of Tamerlan Tsarnaev's life reveal anything at all about future events. The incredibly weak causality that gets forged in the radicalisation frame is being used to mobilize and valorise a security apparatus. It is defining what it is possible to foresee and intervene upon. The treatment of these events reveals differential valuations in contemporary security priorities, where a critically flawed hindsight upon individual traits is able to mobilize a quick, intense response over and above even the most basic protections against the many industrial catastrophe surely in the making.

*May 2013*