Have the Lessons of Lac-Mégantic Been Learned?
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Inaccountability and ‘Creative Destruction’ in Lac-Mégantic
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Thank you Bruce for organizing this very important event – et merci a mes collegues de Lac-Mégantic pour tout votre travail et pour partager vos vecus avec nous.

The violent train derailment of July 2013 spills far more than its unwelcome murderous content, it brought concentrated toxic exposures of petro-capitalism and neoliberalism in the form of inaccountability and ‘creative destruction’ – a process by which capitalism seizes crisis to reproduce itself. Not only did the tragedy revealed the failure of regulatory institutions allowing for a weak corporate safety culture but it also exposed how all levels of governments are so deeply ingrained in free market strategies that transparency and accountability are rendered impossible.

As it is to be expected, as media, political pageantry and aid announcements, and cleaning crews left town, multiple breaches of public confidence in many institutions were revealed. Questions and lack of confidence first and foremost arose from the ability of the government to ensure public safety of rail transportation of crude oil, the institutional and legal systems capacity to identify responsibility for the tragedy, and finally from the local public management regarding the ongoing decontamination and reconstruction processes.

This presentation focuses on some of the discursive tensions at play in Lac-Mégantic in the aftermath of the tragedy. This is not an exercise of blaming but rather a brief examination of how different discursive strategies and operations, framed by logics of urgency, risk and resilience and a growth ethos, embodied in failing regulatory policies, enabled political legitimations, and led to conflicting discourses.

Benefitting power, attention and credibility, political legitimations have long rested on manipulative discourse to reassert particular ‘truths’ or positions. This is even more so in situations where trauma makes people vulnerable, where information is controlled, and where the lack of accountability seems to spread like a contagious disease from one institutional level to the other.

Initially, the discourse of urgency captured public support and mobilized political legitimation. This mobilization of urgency was most obvious in Bill 57 Act in response to the 6 July 2013 railway disaster in Ville de Lac-Mégantic, an omnibus bill allowing the local government to postpone municipal election, to expedite planning decisions (including expropriation and demolition), and paradoxically “to facilitate a return to normal life.”
Many months later, only expropriation and demolition seem to have normalized in the desolate landscape. For the great majority of people in Lac-Megantic, there is no return to normal life. Normal is up for redefinition.

Yet, narratives of appearance of normalcy — "touj vu bien, tout est sous controle." Such narratives were meant as reassurance during what often appear as improvised decontamination, unanswered corporate negligence, and the resumption of rail transport. With the lack of transparency and accountability came the erosion of trust. But in the face of such an unprecedented scale of tragedy, there was very little place for opposing public and local operations. As public and political sympathy grew, local citizens saw their space to shrink. Dissent was perceived as an affront to collective grief and mourning.

The so-called citizen participation process Reinventer la Ville served to legitimate a (pre-decided) agenda of capital accumulation and "creative destruction" that not only blatantly ignored but also openly discredited citizen input.

Local public officials used the uncertainty of science to legitimize their political decisions. In Bill 57, the town was given the right "to demolish any building... [which] according to an expert's report, is deemed unfit for habitation or for continuing the activities... due to contamination." Yet, disputing legal recommendations and scientific expertise, the City went against their own commissioned soil contamination report (kept confidential of course) and the Minister of the Environment's commitment to continue the rehabilitation of the site until no contamination is found -- in order to justify the demolition of all 36 remaining commercial and residential properties (even though only 9 of those were deemed contaminated by the July 2013 spill.) The Mayor stated that this decision was difficult yet necessary as there cannot be a 100% guarantee of decontamination. The decision was therefore taken, not on what the reports said, but rather "on what reports did not present", a statement that was never explained.

Council defended their duty to manage risk and justified complete demolition as the only responsible outcome to insure complete decontamination. It took a moral stance and "refused that citizens assume the risks associated with doubt and ambiguity" and by doing so apparently chose "the best chance of success for Lac-Megantic future." Demolition is the oldest trick and justification of 'creative destruction' of the built environment: old structures are devalued and destroyed in order to privilege capital ventures and create new profits and tax revenues. Yet, ultimately, displaced residents did absorb the risks so that investors and insurance companies would not have to.

Risk was used to stigmatize private properties, to devalue and condemn properties, and to justify demolition. In a context of depopulation, financial deficit, and limited growth, use value was literally demolished to make place to exchange value and capital accumulation. Emotional attachment was bulldozed in favor of capital investments. For many residents, downtown's demolition was a second tragedy to hit Lac-Megantic. As a citizen stated: "more damage was done [by the local government] to downtown than the 2013 train."
Then the discourse of resilience came in town, about at the same time as buildings were razed and longer train convoy distressingly reappeared on the crime scene despite the unequivocal demand for rerouting and bypassing the defunct downtown. Undeniably, a crisis of this magnitude deeply ravages the social and material fabric of life in a small town. The courage and fortitude of residents having to confront such destruction, day after day, is beyond words. But if resilience is the ability of a system to recover from a shock, to what extent can we romanticize resilience when a large percentage of the population increasingly suffers post traumatic mental health issues? Resilience appears to be the latest discourse to appease and silence demands for accountability and, perhaps more effectively, to rationalize the process of ‘creative destruction’ insuring security and sound investment for investors at the detriment of insecurity and dispossession of residents.

If accountability is the capacity to hold power responsible for their actions and to provide public accounts of their decisions and actions, that train has also derailed… and in a sadly reminiscent domino effect so is institutional innaccountability at different levels and at the service of ‘creative destruction’ and capital accumulation.

Thank you.