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The Minneapolis Interstate 35W Bridge: Some Notes

By Will Barnes

Re-posting this brief and astringent analysis of the recent collapsed bridge from a mailing list thread exploring the relationship between spiralling fictitious capital and crumbling real assets. Given the 50,000 other such bridges in the US and the state of the US current account deficit (not to mention the ongoing credit crunch) this piece draws out the barbaric calculus implicit in non-replacement of infrastructure as one of capital's final 'solutions' to unbalanceable books.

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1. I relocated to metropolitan St. Paul in 1996. The population of the Twin Cities has not grown since that time (i.e., it has increased less than 1% overall over the past ten years). In other words, it is highly improbable that the traffic over the I-35W has increased significantly in that period...

What clearly has emerged in the aftermath of the bridge collapse in interviews with engineers honest enough to speak frankly about it is that a determination of the fitness of steel (welds, girders, trestles) that support and hold together a bridge subject to the wear and tear of passage of 141,000 vehicles on average daily [day in, day out, for at least the past ten years] is beyond the possible calculations of structural engineers. It is this understanding that leads to a specific conceptual production, "structural deficiency."

2. The National Transportation and Safety Board defines structural deficiency in these terms: Bridges are said to be structurally deficient in those cases where bridge improvements are not made as new techniques and materials become available, and thus where new safety concerns develop. In the United States, there are 80,000 bridges (1,000 of them in Minnesota) that are structurally deficient, 70,000 of which are rated worst the I-35W bridge that collapsed. In a specific sense, then, there is an element in this determination that transcends the framework of capitalist social relations:

In a comprehensively rational society, one beyond the auto-oil economy, new techniques and new materials of construction would provoke discussion of the usefulness of the bridge. If there was no longer need for it, it would be taken down. If there was, as a matter of course it would be rebuilt.

3. It is important to note that structural (not merely cosmetic, here resurfacing) repairs in the end, it seems, were a matter of funding...

Unlike most of the United States, the industrial base of the Northern Plains economy (i.e., Minnesota which largely comes down to the metropolitan Twin Cities) grew all through the eighties, the nineties, and did not falter to the downturn that began in 2000. Since that time it has joined most of the rest of the country, that is, de-industrialization has hammered the Twin Cities-based regional economy as up to 50,000 jobs, benefited and paying well above national averages have been permanently lost.

In this context, for the past four years the two parties of capital have bickered in the state legislature over funding formulas to subsidize Department of Transportation renewal and repair programs. And yes, a Republican governor, with his eyes set on the second position on a national Presidential ticket regardless of the lead candidate, has held up the funding in order to prove he will not "raise taxes." But it doesn't matter. Had the funding been available, that bridge would have never undergone structural repair.

The major projects that have been partially funded at best, or not funded at all, one and all are aimed at improving, creating or extending high speed thoroughfares ever deeper into the ever more distant suburbs. ...Recall, if you will, remarks that Loren Goldner recently made on Pacifica's "Guns and Butter Program" and, in so doing, keep that figure of 80,000 "structurally deficient" bridges in mind:

Careful to suggest these numbers might not even be up-to-date, Loren indicated that the latest figures he had seen concerning the costs of infrastructure renewal in the United States ran to 4-5 trillion dollars... Capital has its priorities and infrastructural renewal is not one of them.

4. In a morbid sense, it has been fascinating to hear the politicians (governor, two U.S. senators, a U.S. House representative) who rushed to the site of the bridge collapse.

Underlying everything spoken yet itself never explicitly stated, is an effort to remind every listener that, “Our lives are inseparably tied to the course of capitalist development. We, all of us, accept or must accept the instrumentalist rationality at its heart. And while we cannot say this openly, our lives are merely another quantifiable, computable variable in the economic calculus of capital, and, in that calculus, the costs of structural repair far outweigh the risks those lives are subject to. ... This is an unchangeable reality: You are merely labor for capital, a calculable variable, and everyday you take myriad risks like those associating with crossing a structurally deficient bridge.” These minions of capital work overtime, so to speak, to insure the veil of reifications cast over organization of society is not pierced. Their remarks and their implications reverberate in my mind, “The bridge collapse was a huge tragedy, but one that was unavoidable. A new world is not possible, don’t even think about it.”

Will