

Perspectives

Guns and Violence

February 20
All,

Some form of high school (and perhaps middle school) student movement may be taking shape. Word at our school is that there will be a nationwide student walkout sometime soon (which our school will support). Whether this upsurge will be but a temporary blip, or have some greater staying power, remains to be seen.

In the possibility that something with some legs develops, it seems worth talking about. Without question, calls for gun control in one form or another will be part of this movement. Regardless of individual views within our milieu on the topic, it seems to me that it would be a grave error not to relate positively to such a movement. Young people are the most likely segment of our society to look at the deeper issues involved in gun violence/school shootings. Comments from high school students that I have heard to date frequently raise questions about society's values, the apparent dysfunction, if not corruption, of government officials, the fact that young people are not afforded a meaningful voice, etc.



As a discussion starter (if the discussion winds up being worth having), I am advocating that we find a way to be in solidarity with such a movement. Our message would be that we have a culture of violence and injustice because we have a system that is inherently

violent and unjust. That gun control is not the answer is part of this message. (Again, regardless of views on any specific gun 'control' issue, I doubt anyone in our milieu believes that more background checks, curbing the most deadly weapons and suchlike would change the culture of perpetual violence, mass incarceration, drug addiction, crime, including rape and assaults on women and gays, poverty, injustice, etc.

In short, I think it would be a mistake to allow the gun control issue to cut us off from being in solidarity with a youth movement, were it to develop. I welcome others' thoughts.

Rod

February 20

All,

I agree we should support and begin by going to the root. That is, why are almost all mass shootings in the U.S.? What's with the obsession with guns? I think the answer is fear and lies in the origins of the U.S.: fear of counterattacks by the people whose land was being stolen, fear of slave revolts, and later fear of organized workers and the rightful gains of Black and brown people, women, LGBTQ, &c. There is a strong correlation between 'gun culture' and racism and heteropatriarchy. I am against gun culture while at the same time I oppose the state deciding firearm ownership among working class and oppressed people. As to the students, it seems there is a strong undercurrent that the dinosaurs and their friends who control the state just won't listen to them; guns are only the tip of an iceberg that also includes inequality, racism, heteropatriarchy, injustice and the prospect of living precarious lives. Therefore, I've thought of a few maximal slogans: 'Down With Gun Culture! Down With Patriarchy and White Supremacy!'; 'Liberation, Not Annihilation!'; and 'Organize! The Government Won't Protect Us!'

Peace,
Bill

February 22

Everybody,

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether we can and should intervene in the current student movement and how we might do so, I wish to indicate my disagreement with Bill's analysis of and attitude toward what he calls "gun culture." I think the term paints with much too broad a brush and plays into the hands of those who call for drastically limiting people's right to own weapons, including the rising chorus of voices who are calling for the outright repeal of the Second Amendment.



Is it wrong for someone who lives in a rural area (or anybody else, for that matter) to take a rifle or a shotgun and go traipsing through the woods to shoot some game, as long as the killing isn't wanton or wasteful (that is, people eat what they kill) and doesn't threaten any endangered species? Is it wrong for someone who owns a weapon to take it periodically to a shooting range for target practice? Is it wrong for Black people, Latinos, and other ethnic minorities to possess weapons in order to protect themselves from racist assaults? Is it wrong for people who live in high-crime areas to own weapons to protect themselves and their families from burglars and others, such as kidnapers and serial killers, who might try to invade their homes (especially when calling the police may well mean being shot by trigger-happy cops)? Is it wrong for women, LGBT people, and others vulnerable to being raped or otherwise assaulted on the street to carry weapons to protect themselves? And is it really so terrible if some friends wish to go out into the countryside and engage in mock guerrilla warfare? Is all this simply to be denounced as participating in and promoting something repulsive called "gun culture?"



I see no reason why these and other activities involving weapons should be indiscriminately dismissed as politically and morally unacceptable and all those who engage in them written off as right-wing fanatics hell bent on defending American imperialism, white supremacy, and the hetero-patriarchy. As I see it, this is what focusing our attention on and opposition to "gun culture" really means. This is how the anti-gun liberals pose the issue, and it is an attitude I do not share. Even on narrow pragmatic grounds, how can one hope to unite the working class in order to overthrow capitalism (as far-fetched as this may seem right now) while promoting such a position?

It may difficult to do so in the current political climate, but I think we need to find ways to differentiate between the legal ownership and use of weapons, on the one hand, and the grotesque and gratuitous violence of those who carry out the horrible massacres we have recently been witnessing. It is not "gun culture" that we should be analyzing and denouncing but the interrelated cults of violence, status, success, and celebrity, along with the implied notion that the worst thing to happen to someone in life is to be a "loser," that are promoted and worshipped by contemporary US society. We should be talking about the concrete circumstances in which so many working-class people find themselves in, struggling merely to survive and to get some minor pleasures in life, while the rich and powerful continue to enjoy their wealth and exercise their power, while refusing to accept any blame for what happens. In my opinion, it is very unfortunate that the vast majority of the left has capitulated to the liberal gun-control advocates on this issue, while

leaving the defense of legitimate gun ownership and use to the NRA and other right-wing organizations.



I do not know whether it will be possible to intervene in the current movement among high school students, given the fact that it already seems fully committed to the program of the gun-control advocates, beyond issuing maximal statements that attempt to put the shooting in the context of a sick social system. Like so many of the other mass shootings we've experienced, the recent massacre could likely have been prevented had existing laws and procedures actually been followed and some basic security measures taken. At least one person had called the FBI before the Parkland shooting and notified them that the shooter might be a danger to himself and to others. I believe the local sheriff's department had also been warned about him, not once but many times, and we know that a social worker interviewed the shooter but decided he was not a threat. The FBI and police have large numbers of people under surveillance at any given time. Would it have been so hard to have this individual watched? Were the surrogate parents even notified that something was amiss with their charge? Also, how did someone openly carrying a rifle walk on to a high school campus without being seen or stopped? Were there no security guards present? Tactically speaking, I would be willing to support a call for expanding background checks, streamlining and professionalizing the entire procedure, and instituting waiting periods, in order to be able to unite with the movement, even though I doubt that any of that would have prevented this shooting from occurring.

Ron

February 22

I agree Ron. And the best of the students should understand the need for self-defense among a huge part of the population. It would be interesting to see what the Redneck group has to say about all this.

Roni

February 27

All,

I have a couple of comments on the " gun culture ", recent high school student reaction "movement " discussion on our list, plus another point or two.

I was disturbed with the one-dimensional characterization of the prominent place of the question of firearms in our society as rising solely (that's how it reads) from the US's slave holding colonial settler past. The unstated logic of such a remark implies that the overwhelming numbers of those who oppose so called gun control are either overtly or in a de facto fashion racist. I do not deny that this dark side of our past is a tributary/ influence and part of the present mix but there are other traditions and present concerns heavily in the mix as well. I will not run through a list here but one could characterize such unidimensional thinking as Eurocentric and at root liberal to my mind. I fear some of us have no feel /experience of the wide range of diversity and positions in the wider movement(s) and amongst individuals passionately holding to and practicing the right to bear arms.



My reaction to the student movement arising from the Fla. killings is less enthusiastic and somewhat troubled by its naively calling on the state to take simplistic measures to "save" us". An understandable response to some degree but more troubling as part of wider movements among sections of youth demanding of authorities protection, censorship etc. around a range of issues that are important but much less terrifying than acts of mass gun violence. While these are very young folks I am a bit leery of their somewhat constant self-characterization of themselves as "children" not young adults. Beyond the conservative liberalism of this I can also see potential seeds of state capitalist solutions.

Sharply restricting or closing off access to firearms especially semi-autos as a solution is delusional. There are currently 300 million out there, at least 3million assault rifles. Yes many politically problematical types have their hands on a lot of these. But also a good number that could prove to be future allies. Should we arrive at a point where racist, right wing or state forces cohere as a truly weighty threat lots of decent people wanting to obtain serious tools for defense will be hard put to acquire them. Short of this a restricted state of affairs will only ensure a black market in arms in and around which criminal and politically dangerous elements will generate an ongoing lower level but continuous stream of frightening occurrences and loss of innocent life. These innocents left to largely rely on an overstretched, inept or indifferent array of police forces.



In I believe 1892 Ida Wells wrote something like: Every Black family should give a place of pride in the home to a Winchester rifle.

She did not say a shotgun but a Winchester, which could be said to be analogous to an AR-15 today.

Mike

March 1
Everyone,

I think Ron's recent short document on gun control represents an advance. This is because it recognizes that mass shootings in publicly accessible places (schools, nightclubs, movies, concerts) are a real and alarming social problem. The advance comes most specifically at the end, where Ron mentions several points on which he'd be willing to act in a united front with gun control advocates (even though he rightly notes how limited the results might be) and, more generally, simply in recognizing the existence of a real problem. In the past, Ron has generally seemed to suggest that the problem lies in the fact that people are proposing gun control, rather than in real violence going on in the world.

Unfortunately I think Mike's more recent post is a step backward, toward a denialist position. Except for a couple of phrases, Mike's whole emphasis is that the only real problem is that some people think there is a problem (and that he doesn't like some of the rhetoric current activists are using). One problem with this position is that people who think there's a real problem, but see the antistatists basically denying this, will of course look to the state for solutions.

I am not at all against guns or gun owners. In upstate NY, where I used to spend weekends and still manage to get away for a month each summer, just about everyone owns some firearms. People might have a general utility handgun plus a shotgun and/or a long gun for hunting. One anecdote here concerns the former caretaker



of the place where I rented. There were five feral cats in the barn, whom he fed every day, and one of them got badly torn up by some larger animal and needed to be put down. The caretaker came with his pistol, but couldn't bring himself to shoot, and called his father, who came down and did the job. So I certainly agree that 90 percent of the people who own guns are just plain people, and the problem is the other 10 percent, or even 1 percent of the 10 percent.

That said, I personally feel the existence of risk, even though I'm fairly sheltered from it--I don't live in a dangerous neighborhood, for example. In the college where I teach, I had a student several years ago who had major authority issues combined with some mental-processing difficulties that left him unable to write clearly phrased papers, etc. He would blow up frequently. I finally spoke to the relevant dean, even while worrying that doing so would itself set the student off. Fortunately this ended well--after being called in by the dean and offered some therapy references, etc., the student felt grateful that I had been concerned for him. But it could have been the other way around. And of course I, as an older male, don't face some of the authority challenges that young female professors do.

I don't have a program or solution to offer. But I don't think we can be living after Columbine, Sandy Hook, Aurora, Orlando, and so many more and not pay some attention to a real social problem, so I think we should begin to discuss this issue seriously. I am happy that Ron's document takes a step toward doing so, and hope the group follows up.

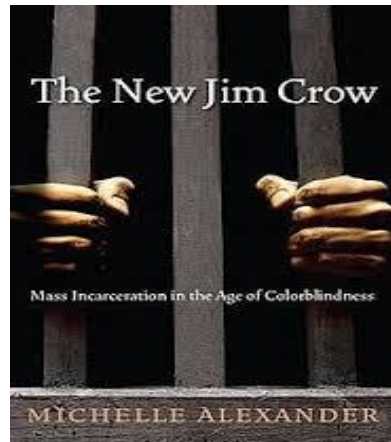
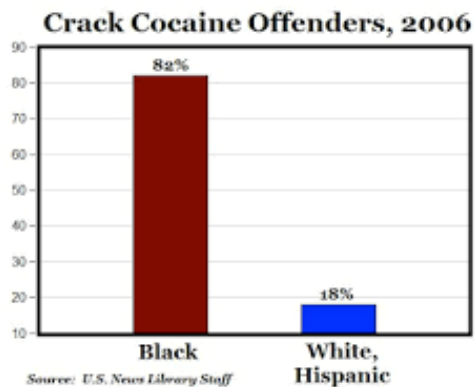
Chris

March 1
Everybody,

I am glad Chris feels my recent post represents an "advance" on gun control, not least because it recognizes that mass shootings represent a serious social problem. In fact, I have always felt that mass shootings have been and continue to be a serious social problem. Yet, I have felt, and still feel, that gun control is a false



solution. If people remember the origins of the "War on Drugs" that began a few decades ago and that is still going on, that too was meant as a solution to a real social problem, that of highly addictive drugs, then crack cocaine, later other drugs, that were devastating Black and other poor communities. Much of the demand for that crackdown came from members of the Black community itself, a fact that is often forgotten today. And it was largely put in place by liberal politicians, among them, then-president Bill Clinton. But, as we now know, it did not end the proliferation of addictive drugs. It did result in a further destruction of poor Black communities, caused by, among other measures, minimum sentencing guidelines, "three-strikes-you're-out", and the resultant mass incarceration of young, mostly male, Black people. People seem to think that passing laws that outlaw particular substances and items results in their disappearance. Instead, it merely forces the undesired substances and items underground, resulting in a vast black market, the proliferation of extremely violent criminal gangs, and a significant escalation of invasive and violent police/state repression.



There was a prior exemplification of this dynamic. I am referring, of course, to Prohibition, the outlawing of the production, distribution, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The War on Booze was also a response to a very real social problem, that of widespread alcohol consumption and the social devastation that it brought with it, such as rampant alcoholism, alcohol poisoning, domestic violence, the destruction of families, public drunkenness, brawling, and similarly destructive effects. While Prohibition did result in an overall decline in the consumption of booze, it also resulted in a huge escalation of criminal activity, providing the "material basis" for organized crime (the Mafia/Mob), the corruption of police and politicians, gang warfare, mass shootings, and, of course, the production of illegal alcoholic beverages, often poisonous. The vast network of criminal gangs that Prohibition engendered had a decisive impact on US life for decades afterward. Likewise, the War on Drugs. Most of us do not directly experience the criminal gangs that this "drug control" engendered, but they, too, have wreaked havoc on poor, Black, and Latino neighborhoods, and even entire nations, such as El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and other Latin American countries.

I worry that the present mass cry for gun control will have similar results. While bans on semi-automatic rifles and other weapons may reduce the incidence of the mass shootings somewhat, I doubt they will succeed in suppressing them altogether. (We may, instead, get more bombings.) However, I think it highly likely that they will provide greatly expanded opportunities for the criminals. If the public/state response to the opioid epidemic now devastating rural and semi-rural areas is to ban opium-based drugs, such a ban, along with bans on semi-automatic weapons, will result in the further devastation of

those communities, since many of the owners of semi-automatic weapons live in those very communities.



I put forward my willingness to consider some of the measures that are now being proposed (such as an extension of background checks to private sales, an increased waiting period between sale and delivery of weapons, raising the age at which people can legally purchase certain types of weapons) as a desperate tactic to enable us to talk to people currently being swept up in the gun-control hysteria, and as a way to try to resist the drive to impose even more repressive measures. I am very worried that the current gun control mania will in fact lead to a War on Guns, which will have similar results to the War on Drugs and the War on Booze.

I believe that some very simple measures could have prevented the vast majority of the mass shootings that have occurred. Many schools in Los Angeles and nearby Glendale are fenced in, so that the only way to enter or exit the campus is through one or two main entrances. In some schools, during class hours, one must be buzzed in through a steel-meshed gate to gain access. Such measures can and should be taken in other areas. Currently, many/most nightclubs have serious security procedures that prevent people with weapons entering those premises. Where was such security at the Orlando, Florida club? Hotels and casinos, which have large security squads, mostly devoted to spotting cheaters and card counters, can and should devote at least some of those resources into scanning the luggage of their guests as they enter. And we know that in Parkland, the FBI had a least one clear warning about the shooter, and that the county sheriff's department had somewhere around 20, some very graphic, and in hindsight,

very insightful, warnings. Why wasn't something done to have him put under surveillance, or at the least, to warn the school's administration?

I have always felt mass shootings are a serious social problem. I continue to feel that gun control is not the answer. What is new is that, under the current circumstances, I am willing, out of desperation, to take a "united front" approach to the movement for gun control, if only to avoid cutting ourselves off entirely from some serious, socially-concerned people. However, the thrust of what I wish to say to such people can be summed up in two slogans: (1) "Be careful what you wish for"; and (2) "Remember the War on Drugs."

Ron

March 1
Mike,

Thanks for your thoughts on gun issues. I find what you raise both informative and provocative. My thoughts:

1. I believe there is a 'culture of violence' in the United States. I distinguish that from a 'gun culture.' My evidence for thinking there is a culture of violence centers on the level of daily citizen-on-citizen violence, cop-on-citizen-violence, levels of incarceration and frequent (seemingly senseless) mass shootings. There are, of course, places in the world where violence takes place at an even higher level, if we specify local and regional wars, genocides, etc. But, looked at from the vantage point of a country not at war (at least on the surface), not facing mass starvations and related deprivations, and 'well off' (compared to much of the world), I think asserting that there is a 'culture of violence' is a fair point. Contrast the US to Canada...and a long list of comparable countries.



2. I think that the US culture of violence stems from a combination of the violence of the US state and its hypocritical nature. There can be many explanations as to why people in this country commit egregious violence against one another. More provocatively, I would say that people's outlook and actions cannot simply be 'blamed' on something or someone else. People have responsibility for what they do, at least at some level. Nonetheless, I think the fact that this state (yes, all the way back to slavery) has been the most hypocritical purveyor of violence in modern history has great bearing.

3. By implication, any solution to the 'culture of violence' does not lie in adjusting this law or that.

4. I share your view that there is a great deal of prejudice, much or most of it stemming from the liberal wing of the US political spectrum, toward people who, a:) defend gun rights; and/or, b) enjoy and use guns; and/or, c) recognize that gun ownership is important to their own (and their family's) personal safety. Both you and Ron have made the case for this sufficiently clear that I don't feel I need to repeat the arguments. I will say that I agree that saying that 'guns are the problem,' or that 'gun culture' is the problem completely misstates the reality.

5. You state, correctly, that among something that could be termed a 'gun culture,' there are people who are racists/nativists /homophobic/misogynists (I am putting words to what you wrote, but I think it is the essence). You are right, I think, that this is a distinct minority. And, among the liberal wing of political spectrum are imperialists, racists, exploiters of workers, committers of

violence against women...etc. So, lets be careful about tar and brushes.



6. Your comments on the student movement are harsh, in some sense, but true in many senses. I would only add that each 'spark' or 'upsurge' of a new movement (post-Trump election; Women's March; actions against anti-immigrant policies, 'Black Lives Matter, this new initiative) brings with it the possibility that it will radicalize, move past acceptance of the 'shell game,' etc. In this sense, I am in alignment with Ron's desire to find some united front approach, while recognizing that a narrow movement for gun control (and the inevitable corollary--elect Democrats) is a dead-end. I suspect you agree with this, even if it wasn't en explicit focus of your email.

7. Your statement that "sharply restricting or closing off access to firearms especially semi autos as a solution is delusional" was compelling, particularly when backed up by the facts you presented (specifically, that there are 'currently 300 million out there, at least 3 million assault rifles.'). The liberal/progressive movement doesn't want to face inconvenient truths.

8. You didn't talk about things that we could, or should do. I know it wasn't the purpose of your email, but it seems to me that a perspective is incomplete without it. I think you and I agree that a 'maximalist/abstentionist' route is not the way to go. So, we need to search for ways that we can take a united front approach: 'yes, this, that and the other thing would be a small step forward, but it won't last, won't solve the problem, which is.... I would be particularly interested, given your insights to on this issue, to know what that might look like for you.

Thank you again for your contribution to the discussion and my own understanding.

Rod
