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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/12/25/americas-addiction-to-violence-2/print/>

America's Addiction to Violence

By Henry Giroux
December 25, 2015



On October 1, 2015, 14 people were killed and more than 20 wounded in a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. Mass shootings have become routine in the United States and speak to a society that both lives by violence and uses it as tool to feed the coffers of the merchants of death. Violence runs through American society like an electric current offering instant pleasure from all sources of the culture, whether it be the nightly news and Hollywood fanfare or television series that glorify serial killers. At a policy level, violence drives an arms industry, a militaristic foreign policy, and is increasingly the punishing state's major tool to enforce its hyped-up brand of domestic terrorism, especially against Black youth. The United States is utterly wedded to a neoliberal culture in which cruelty is viewed as virtue, mass incarceration the

default welfare program and chief mechanism to “institutionalize obedience.”[1] At the same time, a shark-like mode of competition replaces any viable notion of solidarity, and a sabotaging notion self-interest pushes society into the false lure of mass consumerism. All of these forces point to modes authoritarianism and registers of state violence and an increasing number of mass shootings that are symptomatic of a society engulfed in racism, fear, militarism, bigotry, and massive inequities in wealth and power.

Moderate calls for reining in the gun culture and its political advocates amount to band aid solutions that do not address the roots of the violence causing so much carnage in the United States, especially among children and teens. For example, Hilary Clinton’s much publicized call for controlling the gun lobby and background checks, however well intentioned, have nothing to say about a culture of lawlessness and violence reproduced by the government, the financial elites, the defense industries, or a casino capitalism that is built on corruption and produces massive amounts of human misery and suffering. Moreover, none of the calls to eliminate gun violence in the United States link such violence to the broader war on youth, especially poor minorities in the United States. In spite of ample reporting of gun violence, what has flown under the radar is that in the last three years 1 child under 12 years-old has been killed every other day by a firearm, which amounts to 555 children killed by guns in three years. An even more frightening statistic and example of a shocking moral and political perversity was noted in data provided by the Centers for Disease control and Prevention (CDC), which stated that “2,525 children and teens died by gunfire in [the United States] in 2014; one child or teen death every 3 hours and 28 minutes, nearly 7 a day, 48 a week.”[2] In addition, 58 people are lost to firearms every day. Such figures indicate that too many youth in America occupy what might be called war zones in which guns and violence proliferate. In this scenario, guns and its insane culture of violence and hyper-masculinity are given more support than young people and life itself.

The predominance of a relatively unchecked gun culture and a morally perverse and politically obscene culture of violence is particularly evident in the power of the gun lobby and its gun rights political advocates to pass legislation in eight states that allow students and faculty to carry concealed weapons “into classrooms, dormitories and other buildings” on campuses.[3] Texas lawmakers, for instance, passed one such “campus carry bill,” which will take effect in August of 2016. Such laws not only reflect “the seemingly limitless legislative clout of gun interests,” but also a rather deranged return to the violence-laden culture of the “wild west.” As in the past, individuals will be allowed to walk the streets openly carrying guns and packing heat as a measure of their love of guns and their reliance upon violence as the best way to address any perceived threat to their security. This return to the deadly practices of the “wild west” is neither a matter of individual choice nor some far-fetched yet allegedly legitimate appeal to the second amendment. On the contrary, mass violence in America has to be placed within a broader historical, economic, and political context in order to address the totality of forces that produce it.[4] Focusing merely on the mass shootings, or the passing of potentially dangerous gun legislation does not get to the root of the systemic forces that produce America’s love affair with violence and the ideologies and criminogenic institutions that produce it.

Imperial policies that promote aggression all across the globe are now matched by increasing levels of lawlessness and state repression, which mutually feed each other. On the home front, civil society is degenerating into a military organization, a space of lawlessness and war-like

practices, organized primarily for the production of violence. For instance, as Steve Martinot observes, the police now use their discourse of command and power to criminalize behavior; in addition, they use military weapons and surveillance tools as if they are preparing for war, and create a culture of fear in which militaristic principles replace legal principles. He writes:

This suggests that there is an institutional insecurity that seeks to cover itself through social control, for which individual interactions with the police are the means. Indeed, with their command position over people, the cops act out this insecurity by criminalizing individuals in advance. No legal principle need be involved. There is only the militarist principle. When the pregnant woman steps away from the cop, she is breaking no law. To force her to ground and handcuff her is far from anything intended by the principle of due process in the Constitution. The Constitution provided for law enforcement, but not for police impunity. When police shoot a fleeing subject and claim they are acting in self-defense (i.e. threatened), it is not their person but the command and control principle that is threatened. To defend that control through assault or murderous action against a disobedient person implies that the cop's own identity is wholly immersed in its paradigm. There is nothing psychological about this. Self-worth or insecurity is not the issue. There is only the military ethic of power, imposed on civil society through an assumption of impunity. It is the ethos of democracy, of human self-respect, that is the threat.[5]

Violence feeds on corporate controlled disimagination machines that celebrate it as a sport while upping the pleasure quotient for the public. Americans do not merely engage in violence, they are also entertained by it. This kind of toxic irrationality and lure of violence is mimicked in America's aggressive foreign policy, in the sanctioning of state torture, and in the gruesome killings of civilians by drones. As my colleague David L. Clark pointed out to me in a private email correspondence, "bombing make-believe countries is not a symptom of muddled confusion but, quite to the contrary, a sign of unerring precision. It describes the desire to militarize nothing less than the imagination and to target the minutiae of our dreams." War-like values no longer suggest a flirtation with a kind of mad irrationality or danger. On the contrary, they have become normalized. For instance, the United States government is willing to lock down a major city such as Boston in order to catch a terrorist or prevent a terrorist attack, but refuses to pass gun control bills that would significantly lower the number of Americans who die each year as a result of gun violence. As Michael Cohen observes, it is truly a symptom of irrationality when politicians can lose their heads over the threat of terrorism, even sacrificing civil liberties, but ignore the fact that "30,000 Americans die in gun violence every year (compared to the 17 who died [in 2012) in terrorist attacks.]"[6] It gets worse. As the threat of terrorism is used by the American government to construct a surveillance state, suspend civil liberties, and accelerate the forces of authoritarianism, the fear of personal and collective violence has no rational bearing on addressing the morbid acceleration of gun and other forms of unnecessary violence in the United States. In fact, the fear of terrorism appears to feed, recuperate, and expand a toxic culture of violence produced, in part, by the wide and unchecked availability of guns. America's fascination with guns and violence as a form of sport and entertainment, while offering the false promise of security, which even trumps a more general fear of violence on the part of terrorists. In this logic one not only kills terrorists with drones, but also makes sure that patriotic Americans are individually armed so they can use force to protect themselves against the dangers whipped up in a culture of fear and hysteria promoted by right-wing politicians, pundits, and the corporate controlled media.

Rather than bring violence into a political debate that would limit its production, various states, increase its possibilities by taking a plunge into insanity with the passing of laws that allow “guns at places from bars to houses of worship.”[7] Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law, based on the notion that one should shoot first and ask questions later is a morbid reflection of America’s national psychosis regarding the adulation of gun culture and the paranoid fears that fuel it. This fascination with guns and violence has produced a pathology that reaches the highest levels of government and serves to further anti-democratic and authoritarian forces. The U. S. government’s warfare state is propelled by a military-industrial complex that cannot spend enough on weapons of death and destruction. Super modern planes such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter cost up to \$228 million each and are plagued by mechanical problems and yet are supported by a military and defense establishment. As Gabriel Kolko observes such war-like investments “reflect a pathology and culture that is expressed in spending more money regardless”[8] of how it contributes to running up the debt or for that matter thrives on “the energies of the dead.”[9] Militarism provides ideological support for policies that protect gun owners and sellers rather than children. The Children’s Defense Fund is right in stating “Where is our anti-war movement here at home? Why does a nation with the largest military budget in the world refuse to protect its children from relentless gun violence and terrorism at home? No external enemy ever killed thousands of children in their neighborhoods, streets and schools year in and year out.”[10]

There is a not so hidden structure of politics at work in this type of sanctioned irrationality. Advocating for gun rights provides a convenient discourse for ignoring a “harsh neoliberal corporate-state order that routinely generates pervasive material suffering, social dislocation, and psychological despair—worsening conditions that ensure violence in its many expressions.”[11] It says nothing about the corrupt bankers and hedge fund managers who invest in the industries of death and trade in profits at the expense of human life, all the while contributing to the United States being the largest arms exporter in the world.[12] More specifically, the call for gun rights also conveniently side steps and ignores criticizing a popular culture and corporate controlled media which uses violence to attract viewers, increase television ratings, produce Hollywood blockbusters, and sell video games that celebrate first person shooters.

While it would be wrong to suggest that the violence that saturates popular culture directly causes violence in the larger society, it is arguable that such violence serves not only to produce an insensitivity to real life violence but also functions to normalize violence as both a source of pleasure and as a practice for addressing social issues. When young people and others begin to believe that a world of extreme violence, vengeance, lawlessness, and revenge is the only world they inhabit, the culture and practice of real-life violence is more difficult to scrutinize, resist, and transform. Many critics have argued that a popular culture that endlessly trades in violence runs the risk of blurring the lines between the world of fantasies and the world we live in. What they often miss is that when violence is celebrated in its myriad registers and platforms in a society, even though it lacks any sense of rationality, a formative culture is put in place that is amenable to the pathology of totalitarianism. That is, a culture that thrives on violence runs the risk of losing its capacity to separate politics from violence: A. O. Scott recognizes such a connection between gun violence and popular culture, but he fails to register the deeper significance of the relationship. He writes:

...it is absurd to pretend that gun culture is unrelated to popular culture, or that make-believe violence has nothing to do with its real-world correlative. Guns have symbolic as well as actual power, and the practical business of hunting, law enforcement and self-defense has less purchase in our civic life than fantasies of righteous vengeance or brave resistance....[Violent] fantasies have proliferated and intensified even as our daily existence has become more regulated and standardized — and also less dangerous. Perhaps they offer an escape from the boredom and regimentation of work and consumption.[13]

Popular culture not only trades in violence as entertainment, it also delivers violence to a society addicted to an endless barrage of sensations, the lure of instant gratification, and a pleasure principle steeped in graphic and extreme images of human suffering, mayhem, and torture. Violence is now represented without the need for either subtlety or critical examination. Relieved of the pedagogical necessity to instruct, violence is split from its moral significance, just as it becomes more plentiful and lurid in order to provide infuse the pleasure quotient with more shocks. Americans now live in “a culture of the immediate” which functions “as an escape from the past” and a view of the future as one of menace, insecurity, and potential violence.[14] In an age of cruel precarity and uncertainty, the present becomes the only register of hope, politics, and survival. Americans now “look to the future with worry and suspicion and cling to the present with the anguish of those who are afraid of losing what they have,” all the while considering those deemed “other” as a threat to their security.[15] Under such circumstances, trust and mutual respect disappear, democratic public spheres wither, and democracy becomes a cover for false promises and the swindle of fulfillment. Another consequence is the merging of pleasure and cruelty in the most barbarous spectacles of violence.[16] One telling example of this can be found in those films in which the use of waterboarding has become a prime staple of torture. While the Obama administration banned waterboarding as an interrogation method in January 2009, it appears to be thriving as a legitimate procedure in a number of recent Hollywood films including, *GI Jane*, *Safe House*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Taken 3*. In a world in which nothing matters but a survival-of-the-fittest ethos, pleasure and gratification slide into boredom, shielding a pornography of violence from any sense of moral and public accountability.

Guns are certainly a major problem in the United States, but they are symptomatic of a much larger crisis, one that suggests not only that democracy is broken in the United States but that the country has tipped over into forms of domestic and foreign terrorism characteristic of a new and deadly form of authoritarianism. We have become one of the most violent cultures on the planet and regulating guns does not get to the root of the problem. Zhiwa Woodbury touches on this issue when he writes:

In truth, the gun issue is an easy chimera that allows us to avoid looking in the mirror. It is much easier for us to imagine that this is an unfortunate political or regulatory issue than it is to ask what our own complicity in this ongoing, slow motion slaughter of innocents might be. Think about this. We are a country of approximately 300 million people with approximately 300 million firearms – a third of which are concealable handguns. Each one of these guns is made for one purpose only – to kill as quickly and effectively as possible. The idea that some magical regulatory scheme, short of confiscation, will somehow prevent guns from being used to kill people is laughable, regardless of what you think of the NRA. Similarly, mentally ill individuals are responsible for less than 5% of the 30,000+ gunned down in the U.S. every year.[17]

In the current historical conjuncture, war, bigotry, and the call to violence is embraced by many including Donald Trump, the leading Republican Party presidential candidate making it clear as John Pilger has argued that in America “an insidious modern fascism is now an accelerating danger.”[18] It is difficult to watch both Trump and the corporate coverage of his fascistic assaults and actions. What is truly crucial to recognize is that there are ideological, economic, social, political, and cultural forces at work in the United States that have created the formative culture in which this kind of authoritarian populism and its embrace of symbolic and material violence thrives. Surely, two of the major crises of our times are the crisis of agency and civic literacy, on the one hand, and the withering of public values, trust, and democratic public spheres on the other. The drumbeat of fascism and its embrace of violence does not rely only on the infamous brownshirts of Nazi Germany but also on the collapse of democratic politics, the concentration of power in the hands of the few, the myth that only individuals are responsible for the systemic assaults they have to weather, and that self-interest is the only value that matters. Consumerism becomes a form of soma, memory no longer serves as a moral witness, and politics is in the hands of the 1 per cent, utterly corrupted by money and power. Traces of a totalitarianism now appear, stripped of memory and the horrors they produced. In their new forms, the threats they pose go unrecognizable and are tolerated as politics as usual, only with less civility. Under such conditions, the social withers, solidarity is replaced by shark like competition, and state violence and the spectacle of violence become normalized. We live in a time of monsters and Trump is simply symptomatic of the financial class he represents and the history we refuse to learn from.

As I have said elsewhere, violence has arisen from the breakdown of public space, the erasure of public goods, the embrace of a deadly war psychology, and a growing disdain for the common good. Gratuitous violence has become central to a society that trades on fear and fetishizes hyper-violent and punitive practices and social relations. Brutal masculine authority now rules American society and wages a war against women’s reproductive rights, civil liberties, poor black and brown youth, and Mexican immigrants. Americans inhabit society run by a financial elite that refuses to recognize that war is a descent into madness and the scope and breadth of the violence it produces infects our language, values, social relations, and democracy itself. War has become an all-embracing ideal that feeds the most totalitarian practices and shores up an authoritarian state. As an organizing principle of society, unravels the fabric of democracy suggesting that America is at war with itself, its children, and its future. The political stooges who have become lapdogs of corporate and financial must be held accountable for the deaths taking place in a toxic culture of gun violence. The condemnation of violence cannot be limited to police brutality. Violence does not just come from the police. In the United States there are other dangers emanating from state power that punishes whistle blowers, intelligence agencies that encourage the arrests of those who protest against the abuse of corporate and state power, and a corporate controlled media that trades in ignorance, lies, and falsehoods, all the while demanding and generally “receiving unwavering support from their citizens.”[19]

Yet, the only reforms we hear about are for safer gun policies, mandatory body cameras worn by the police, and more background checks. These may be well-intentioned reforms but they do not get to the root of the problem, which is a social and economic system that trades in death in order to accumulate profits. What we don’t hear about are the people who trade their conscience for supporting the gun lobby, particularly the National Rifle Association. These are the politicians in

congress who create the conditions for mass shootings and gun violence because they have been bought and sold by the apostles of the death industry. These are the same politicians who support the militarization of everyday life, who trade in torture, who bow down slavishly to the arms industries, and who wallow in the handouts provided by the military-industrial-academic complex. These utterly corrupted politicians are killers in suits whose test of courage and toughness was captured in one of the recent Republican Party presidential debates, when Ben Carson, was asked by Hugh Hewett, a reactionary right-wing talk show host, if he would be willing to kill thousands of children in the name of exercising tough leadership. As if killing innocent children is a legitimate test for leadership. This is what the war-mongering politics of hysterical fear with its unbridled focus on terrorism has come to—a future that will be defined by moral and political zombies who represent the real face of terrorism, domestic and otherwise.

Clearly the cause of violence in America will not stop by merely holding the politicians responsible. America has become a society in which the illegitimacy of violence is matched by the illegitimacy and lawlessness of politics. What is needed is a mass political movement willing to challenge and replace a broken system that gives corrupt and war mongering politicians excessive and corrupting political and economic power. Democracy and justice are on life support and the challenge is to bring them back to life not by reforming the system but by replacing it. This will only take place with the development of politics in which the obligation to justice is matched by an endless responsibility to collective struggle, one with a politics and social formation that speaks to the highest ideals of a democratic socialism.

Notes.

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[3] Manny Fernandez, “Texas Lawmakers Pass a Bill Allowing Guns at Colleges,” *New York Times* (June 3, 2015). Online: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/03/us/texas-lawmakers-approve-bill-allowing-guns-on-campus.html?_r=0

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[6] Michael Cohen, “Why does America lose its head over ‘terror’ but ignore its daily gun deaths,” *The Guardian* (April 21, 2013). Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/21/boston-marathon-bombs-us-gun-law>

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- [16] Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of the Spectacle* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).
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