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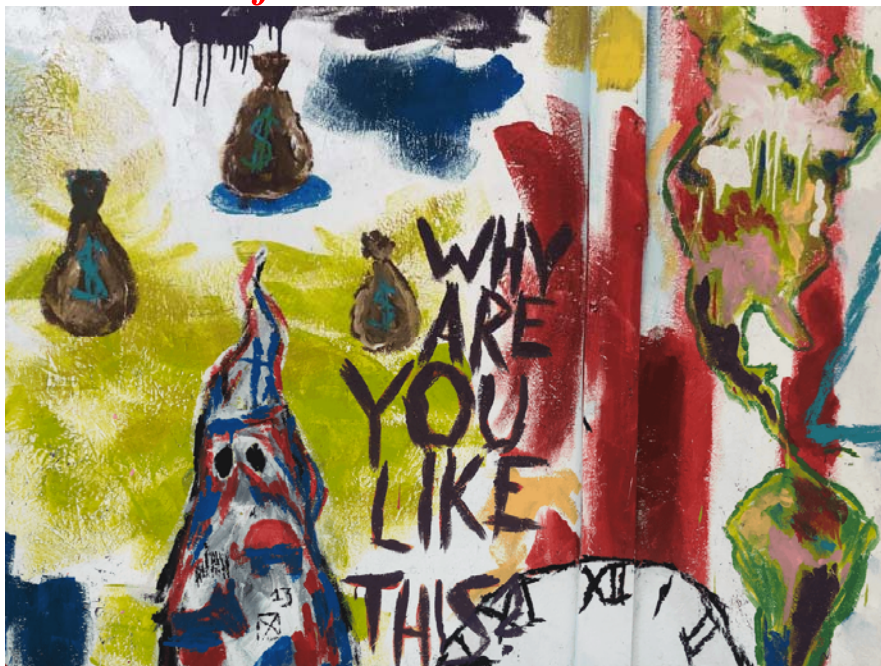
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BY HENRY GIROUX

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America Radiates Violence: Challenging the Politics of Isolated Incidents



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

In light of the tragic violence that has unfolded once again in the form of mass shootings in Boulder, Colorado and Atlanta, Georgia, it becomes clear that another pandemic defines the United States—a pandemic of violence. The figures speak for themselves. Since the Columbine shooting in 1999, there have been 114 mass shootings with 1300 victims. Moreover, as one national report notes “Every day, more than 100 Americans are killed with guns and more than 230 are shot and wounded.” All of this happening in a country in

which there are more guns than people and where laws are enacted that make it easier to buy a gun than to vote.

America radiates violence and mass shootings are only one register of this plague. The richest country in the world is armed, has one of the largest prison systems in the world, rings the planet with over 800 military bases in 70 countries, and has a military budget of \$738 billion that is insanely bloated and is larger than the next ten countries combined. Moreover, it criminalizes social problems, has an entertainment culture that trades in violence as a spectacle, demonizes people of color, militarizes its police forces, and elects politicians who denounce democracy and support a former president who emboldens right-wing violent extremists by using language as a vehicle to glorify violence as a way of solving social problems.

Sadly, 75 million Americans voted for Trump whose penchant for violence is only matched by his hatred of democracy and a celebration of ignorance and the crushing of dissent.

Americans can no longer be safe in schools, supermarkets, walking down the street, or going to church, synagogue, or any other house of worship. Violence is not just endured or ubiquitously present in the United States, it is glorified in its culture and ignored in its history. Lawlessness shapes its politics while the logic of financialization, consumption, deregulation, and commodification erases all traces of social and moral responsibility.

Domestic terrorism now rules the United States as it abandons the demands of democracy for a war culture, if not perpetual war. Americans no longer appear capable of understanding where violence ends since it has become a solution for addressing most of America's pressing problems. The public imagination has turned lethal. America has blood on its hands, and the mass shootings will continue unless such violence can be understood as surface manifestations of the much larger issue of a society in which matters of justice, equality, and social responsibility are under attack in a neoliberal capitalist state that elevates profits over human needs, ignorance over reason, and inequality over community, and expulsion over the common good.

Mass shootings cannot be treated as isolated events since they are rooted in institutional and systemic economic and political problems normalized every day through a market-based callousness and collapse of conscience that allows a staggering threshold of violence to shape almost every level of society and daily life.

Violence in America has become routine, almost expected as a new normal. There is more at work here than the limited debates about gun culture or the sordid implication that

violence is largely produced by people with mental health problems. Violence saturates American culture domestically and in foreign policy. It defines the mainstream notion of a vitriolic masculinity and militarization of social relations manifested in a growing assault on women's bodies, undocumented immigrants, young people living in poverty, indigenous populations, and the elderly who are warehoused in dilapidated and dangerous nursing homes.

The spectacle of violence dominates the mainstream media adding to a culture of cruelty and misdirected notion of pleasure in which violence becomes the chief source of entertainment. Violence is a business and source of profit for the merchants of death that include lobbyists for the defense industries, the National Rifle Association, and the gun dealers.

The mass shootings that extend from Columbine and Las Vegas to more recently Boulder and Atlanta raise more questions than answers. The United States has a culture soaked in blood, and violence is its calling card. Violence becomes visible in the most shocking of instances, but it is the slow, accumulating violence beneath the surface of the mass killings that needs to be addressed. This extends from a savage form of capitalism that denigrates anything and anyone that does not fit into the script of commercial exchange to the systemic and death dealing forms of systemic racism, sexism, nativism, and militarism that permeate every aspect of society and provide the fodder for explosions of violence that now define all social relations, including the destruction of the planet.

The shootings, pipe bombs, drive by killings, gun mania, police violence, and prison-industrial complex must be seen within a broader understanding of a society marked by massive inequality, systemic injustice, and death dealing poverty. Matters of violence must be examined critically within the totality of sites in which it takes place, which serve to mutually reinforce the legitimacy of a war culture, a ruthless survival of the fittest economic system, and a plague of massive aggression against the most vulnerable populations. Everyday violence, including mass shootings, have to be linked to state violence, underwritten by a political culture indifferent to the value of human life, except for the rich and privileged.

If we want a real debate about violence, it is crucial to understand it as part of a larger social order that enacts the abandonment of public goods, health care for all, basic social provisions, democratic values and democracy itself. America is addicted to violence because it has become the organizing principle of a predatory socio-political-economic system in which human suffering, human misery, and death function as a valued form of

political and economic currency. The mass shootings that have become expressions of daily life are signposts that make clear that America has become a failed state, a country in which fascism now has a smooth edge.

The conditions for democracy have been obliterated under neoliberal capitalism. In its place is a society imbued with a penchant for violence. America has a fascist problem that marks its emergence into an age of public death and political psychosis, and it must be addressed if we are to think our way to a different politics and future.

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