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Capitalism, Racism and Selling the AR-15



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When it comes to mass shootings in the United States (like the one that just took place in Nashville), the figures are unequivocal. “Active shooter” cases have become more common in recent years. The percentage of mass shooters using semi-automatic rifles in those incidents has risen since 2009, with those armed with such rifles killing more people on average than those with handguns. One particular weapon, the AR-15-style rifle, stands out in recent incidents.

Some estimates put the number of AR-15-style rifles owned by civilians in the U.S. somewhere between 5 and 20 million. This may represent a small share of the roughly 400 million firearms privately owned in the United States; however, due to their customization and versatility, these rifles are being increasingly used in mass shootings. The AR-15 has

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thus consolidated itself not only as “America’s Rifle” – as the National Rifle Association (NRA) cheerily calls it -, but also as the preferred weapon of choice for mass murder in the United States.

Easy access to these firearms also has negative effects elsewhere. My own country of origin (Mexico) experienced a decline in homicides between 1999 and 2004, followed by a sharp increase afterwards – at the same time as the production and advertising of military-grade weapons in the U.S. soared. Nowadays between 70% and 90% of firearms recovered from crime scenes in Mexico come from the United States (with rifles representing a third of all weapons recovered there and traced by American authorities). As for my current country of residence (Haiti), both the United Nations and U.S. authorities acknowledge the uptick of high-powered weapons being smuggled from Florida to Haiti, fueling the unprecedented gang violence ravaging the country. These two countries are hardly the only ones in the region experiencing increased gun violence as a result of firearm trafficking from the U.S.

Some suggest that the proliferation of AR-15s can be attributed to an American exceptional gun culture. But what lies behind this “exceptional culture” is a tale of capitalist greed meeting white fear. Confronting gun violence and the proliferation of “America’s Rifle” will require more than legislative action. It will require addressing unbridled capitalism and white supremacy in the United States.

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Designed in the late 1950s by the California-based company ArmaLite (which later sold the patent to Colt), the AR-15 was first issued to American units engaged in Vietnam in the early 1960s. In 1963 the U.S. military officially adopted a modified AR-15, designated M16, which eventually became the service firearm for American troops. Today all branches of the U.S. military use a variant of this rifle as their standard weapon.

At around the same time that the rifle was adopted by the military, Colt began merchandising a semiautomatic version of the AR-15 for law enforcement agencies and civilians. In the late 1970s, after most of the patents for the AR-15 expired, other American firearm manufacturers also began producing copies of the weapon under various names. However, sales of these rifles were not significant, not even while U.S. troops were in Southeast Asia. For many years the rifle was on the fringes within the American gun market.

The AR-15’s “popularity” really took off in the early 2000s as a result of two major factors. First, in the wake of 9/11 attacks, patriotic sentiment surged; support for the

military spiked as the United States sent forces to Afghanistan and Iraq. This in turn would shift public opinion regarding gun control, especially for a certain social segment (white, middle- or upper-class, with some relationship to the military or law enforcement). As former gun executive Ryan Busse mentions,

Nothing normalized the “black rifle” like the evening-news segments featuring U.S. soldiers on combat missions. Later, as returning veterans, they would go on to form a ready-made customer base for civilian versions of the rifle. For many of those ex-service members, owning and shooting the rifle became a way to stay connected to the people they had served [in Afghanistan and Iraq].

Secondly, the U.S. government undermined gun control by advancing the interest of gun capitalists. In 2004 Congress allowed the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban (which, despite its drawbacks, had prohibited the manufacture, sale or possession of some types of AR-15 rifles) to expire. Later, the George W. Bush administration further signed, in 2005, the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA), which shielded gun manufacturers from any liability in the use of their products. Finally, in the 2008 *District of Columbia v. Heller* case, the U.S. Supreme Court reinterpreted the Second Amendment of the Constitution as securing an individual right of gun ownership for self-defense.

Without constraints, gun manufacturers – encouraged and abetted by the American ruling class – were ready to reap profits by merchandising their products to the civilian market. Knowing that there was “niche” for AR-15 rifles to exploit, gun companies pursued a relentless campaign to sell them to civilians. Today, almost every major gun company in the United States produces some variant of the rifle, increasingly being marketed for women and minors. Although merchandised as “modern sporting rifles”, they are indeed military-grade weapons; not even magazine capacity as a form of gun control will take the rifle’s military essence away.

The *Washington Post* and *BBC* notwithstanding, gun manufacturers knew very well what they were selling. They were also aware that their products could end up in the wrong hands. They nonetheless continued to extract massive profits by appealing to white fear in some segments of American society, which explains successful sales despite mass shootings involving this firearm.

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For many years, the NRA (founded in 1871 to improve marksmanship skills) was best known for serving the interest of hunters and sportsmen. It even supported federal laws against machine guns during the violent years of Prohibition. Up to the late 1970s, its

leadership seemed perfectly fit to work with the U.S. authorities to devise reasonable laws to limit the spread of firearms. But this all changed after the NRA held its annual convention in Cincinnati in May 1977.

At the time, the NRA's leadership favored orienting the organization closer to its sportsmen identity whilst distancing itself from a constituency advocating armed self-defense. Ahead of that year's meeting, two fierce opponents of gun control – gun-magazine publisher Neal Knox and former head of the U.S. Border Patrol Harlon Bronson Carter – maneuvered within the NRA to replace their leaders. Knox and Carter's faction changed the organization's bylaws and voted out much of the leadership during the 1977 convention, after which the NRA pledged never to support gun control again. The takeover made the NRA more partisan as well, endorsing in 1980 a presidential candidate (Ronald Reagan) for the first time in the organization's history. Slowly but surely, the NRA waged a war to eradicate most gun control regulation, even in the wake of notorious school shootings. During its 1999 convention (held a few days after the Columbine massacre), the NRA held closed-door business meetings to discuss strategy options. When faced with engagement with lawmakers to help draft improved policies or resorting to white fear mongering to sell their products, the NRA leadership chose the latter.

By doing so, the NRA simply upgraded a historical trend that best suited the white nationalist base forming its constituency. This trend is illustrated by all the historical obstacles faced by black people in the U.S. to own firearms. Even after the end of the U.S. Civil War, many states enacted gun control bills to make it impossible for black people to own guns, while the KKK was given free reign to disarm and terrorize them. The NRA supported gun control later again to prevent gun ownership by black people, teaming up in 1967 with then California governor Ronald Reagan to pass the Mulford Act – a state bill prohibiting the open carry of loaded firearms in response to the Black Panther Party.

Not surprisingly, this trend continues. The NRA declined to comment on the deaths of two black legal gun owners – Philando Castile and Jason Washington – shot and killed by police in 2016 and 2018. When it comes to police brutality against black people owning guns, the NRA does not invoke the individual freedoms it allegedly defends.

In fact, the relentless defense of firearms – including military-grade weaponry – has little to do with protecting individual freedoms or preventing tyranny on U.S. soil. No guns were brandished to defend the Constitution when the U.S. government authorized surveillance on civilians without warrant, imprisonment of suspected terrorists without

trial, extrajudicial executions, and war without congressional approval – thus flouting four other constitutional amendments along the way.

For historian Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz – author of *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* – and others, the history of the uniquely American gun culture is closely linked to settler colonialism, segregation and racism. As Dunbar-Ortiz recalls in a recent interview,

The gun as a technology is deeply tied to the history of U.S. expansion and warfare [...] The Second Amendment is really understood by many Americans as a religious covenant linked to white nationalism, and the idea that God has ordained this country for whites and therefore licenses white nationalist’s violence [...] The Second Amendment is about the right but also the obligation of settlers to own guns and to take those guns out into the frontier to kill Native people.

That the AR-15 epitomizes white supremacy is well understood by gun manufacturers and retailers. Barack Obama’s victories in 2008 and 2012 provided the firearms industry with a culture-war boost, as the NRA took to promoting conspiracy-theory-minded fears. And every mass shooting involving the AR-15 has been met with a spike in sales (and stocks) lest some form of gun control is enacted. Gun retailers know which audience they want to reach when glorifying a teenager who shot unarmed civilians with such a rifle.

Advocacy for the AR-15 often stems from the same right-wing influencers who regularly bemoan “critical race theory” and embrace the “great replacement theory”. Little wonder that a weapon designed for – and extensively used in – U.S. wars of imperial aggression became a symbol of right-wing politics. The firearm industry, the NRA, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and their enablers in government know very well the constituency for which these rifles are marketed. Hence the intense symbolic importance attached to AR-15-type rifles in right-wing circles. White fear, NRA’s influence in government, aggressive marketing, the returning soldiers and the glorification of war have all coalesced into this political climate.

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More people are questioning not only the militarization of police, but also of civilians. Two black representatives were just expelled from the Tennessee House Chamber after leading protesters in a call for stricter gun laws. Outside the United States, the Mexican government has been pursuing a lawsuit since 2021 against gun companies in the U.S. for their negligent commercial practices facilitating the illicit trafficking of their firearms into Mexico.

These are all encouraging signs. Nonetheless, a major challenge for American society will be acknowledging that guns (and particularly the AR-15 in recent years) have been an indispensable part of white male violence, often perceived as the most effective means of exercising it.

Gun control activists must demand more than better laws governing gun ownership. As Dunbar-Ortiz suggests, they must yearn for a revolutionary change deeper than legislative victories. They must demand a shift in public consciousness, which can only be achieved with a reckoning of the U.S. history. Such an effort must begin by taking the AR-15, in the American context, for what it is: an enforcer of capitalism and white supremacy.

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