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The Connecticut massacre and America's estrangement from reality

In the wake of the Connecticut school massacre, gun control is just one of many issues requiring attention in the US.

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12/17/2012

In the aftermath of last week's school shooting in Connecticut in which 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed 27 people, including 20 children, the Associated Press **quoted** Afghan President Hamid Karzai's extension of condolences to the US:

"Such incidents should not happen anywhere in the world", Karzai said, adding that Afghanistan frequently witnesses such tragedies and can sympathise with those affected.

Of course, the list of tragedies witnessed by Afghanistan also includes items such as the **US airstrike that killed 18 civilians** in June. This occurred on the heels of the *New York Times* report on the US "**kill list**" and Obama's role in authorising civilian collateral damage abroad.

Given the utter lack of human empathy exhibited by the US in its dealings with the world, it should perhaps come as no surprise when the lack of empathy is replicated on a smaller scale at home by school assassins and the like. It goes without saying, however, that the **president's tears** are reserved for the non-military slaughter of domestic civilians.

As for Obama's **pledge** to do whatever he can to "prevent... more tragedies like this", it would seem that true prevention efforts would require the comprehensive rewiring of American society.

The profitable approach to individual torment

In the widely circulated post-Connecticut piece "**I Am Adam Lanza's Mother**", Liza Long describes her appeal to a social worker for advice on how to deal with her teenage son Michael's mental illness, which she reports is occasionally manifested in life-threatening violence. The answer, quite simply, is "to get Michael charged with a crime".

Long has received **deserved criticism** from anthropologist Sarah Kendzior for violating her troubled child's privacy by "embark[ing] on a media tour promoting him as a future mass murderer". However, many of her points are valid:

*I don't believe my son belongs in jail... But it seems like the United States is using prison as the solution of choice for mentally ill people. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of mentally ill inmates in US prisons **quadrupled** from 2000 to 2006.*

In 2006, Human Rights Watch also determined that the rate of reported mental health disorders was five times greater among the prison population.

Long cites American society's "stigma on mental illness and its broken healthcare system" - in which "state-run treatment centres and hospitals [are] shuttered" - as decisive factors in the drive for imprisonment.

She also mentions that Michael has been "on a slew of antipsychotic and mood-altering pharmaceuticals", a nod to an industry known for reaping vast profits from the rampant **over-prescription** of drugs to treat mental and behavioural disorders. These medications in turn lend themselves to a variety of complications, ranging from addiction to depression to **sudden death** to the conversion of hyperactive children into automatons.

As for the practice of over-imprisonment as a source of capital, it is useful to review attorney John W Whitehead's **analysis** earlier this year:

In an age when freedom is fast becoming the exception rather than the rule, imprisoning Americans in private prisons run by mega-corporations has turned into a cash cow for big business... Today, as states attempt to save money by outsourcing prisons to private corporations, the flawed yet retributive American "system of justice" is being replaced by an even more flawed and insidious form of mass punishment based upon profit and expediency.

Clearly, a neoliberal US system that values profit over human wellbeing and thereby alienates people from society is hardly a way to foster mental stability and social cohesion, and underscores the extent to which mental disorders can be symptomatic of greater societal ills.

The American disconnect

Without speculating about the details of Lanza's mental condition or motivations, it is nonetheless helpful to draw attention to the context in which such events occur.

For one thing, the American fixation with individual achievement and self-made success is an isolating phenomenon that produces pressures often not so evident in societies that attach more value to familial and communal units.

To be sure, the government's tendency to promote pro-corporate policies to the detriment of the majority of the population further exacerbates individual isolation.

Television programmes and video games glorifying violence may also play a role in chipping away at compassion and rendering abstract the reality of human suffering - a reality already under attack thanks to the state's policies of blissful bellicosity, remote control killing and dehumanisation of "the Other", all of which negate its own humanity.

As for the ease of procuring weapons in the Land of the Free that facilitates the domestic orgy of violence, the *Washington Post* has offered a **chart** depicting UN figures for gun-related murders in 32 developed nations, accompanied by the following summary:

The United States has by far the highest per capita rate of all developed countries. According to data compiled by the United Nations, the United States has four times as many gun-related homicides per capita as do Turkey and Switzerland, which are tied for third. The US gun murder rate is about 20 times the average for all other countries on this chart. That means that Americans are 20 times as likely to be killed by a gun than is someone from another developed country.

In the end, however, gun control is merely one of many issues requiring attention in a country that should itself be diagnosed as mentally ill.