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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/12/16/american-exceptionalism-american-nightmares/>

## American Exceptionalism / American Nightmares Culture of Guns

by HOWARD LISNOFF

12/16/2014

A moderate breeze came in off of the Hudson River this past Saturday along with a December chill. Something was different, however, about Washington Square Park, which in one way or another has often been identified as an epicenter for protest and avant-garde challenges to the status quo of a capitalist and a militarist United States. Here were centered, in part, the bohemian movement of the late 1940s and 1950s; the counterculture and antiwar movements of the 1960s and 1970s; the women's movement of the 1960s to the present; and the gay rights and LGBT movement of the late 1960s to the present.

It is hard to deny a close and personal nostalgia for the place since many of the political and personal changes that I hold dear took place on these streets and a connection to the place is almost visceral.

But Saturday was a somber and sad day. The ugliness that has walked the streets of this nation for so long... I count forty years... informed the mood of the march against the police murders of innocent black people across the nation and in New York ("25,000 March in New York to Protest Police Violence," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2014). And the alleged vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida also came to mind. In fact, the memory and horror of Jim Crow lynchings, that racist madness that followed on the heels of the *Emancipation Proclamation* and the *Constitution's* Fourteenth Amendment, tragically seem analogous to how the capitalist oligarchy/plutocracy of the early 21st century now deal with the issues of race and

class. And these elites have support at the highest levels of every single branch of government in Washington, D.C., and in so many locales at the state and local levels of government and from public opinion across this nation.

In addition to the horror and outrage of the murder of Eric Garner on Staten Island, for the capital crime of selling loose cigarettes, which was the primary focus of Saturday's march, the protest focused on the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the free reign that the judicial system and the elitist and rapacious economic/political/social system across this nation have given police to act out the most vile of impulses against a population of black, brown, and poor people, and any others of goodwill who have said "enough!"

Marching north up Sixth Avenue on the West Side of Manhattan, before turning back at Herald Square and heading to New York police headquarters, the line of 30,000-strong marchers passed a banner that documented the names of what I counted as at least a dozen women who had been allegedly killed at the hands of police. Ignorance of this fact shocked me. Next, just below Herald Square, a group of protesters and marchers displayed a series of photographic panels that made up the eyes of Eric Garner. Not to feel outrage at this system and feel the shame of knowing what takes place against those deemed enemies of this nation because of their very humanity and who they are, is impossible to deny!

During the march, 2 fellow protesters marched in back of me carrying handmade images of a hooded person. No words were needed to drive home the lightning impact of the lethal danger faced by young black men for the crime of wearing a hoodie and going out to buy a snack.

Two years have passed since the massacre of 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. A Pew Research Center opinion poll just released found that that a slim majority of 52 percent polled in the U.S. favor the rights of gun owners over the restrictions government places on gun ownership ("Poll Finds That More Americans Back Gun Rights Than Stronger Controls," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2014). Is this possible after the insanity of the killing of these 20 beautiful and innocent children and the brave adults who tried to come to the aid of the children in their care in the face of gun violence fueled by untreated mental illness and the easy availability of guns in this gun "culture?"

I teach a course in the skills and strategies of navigating the college experience at a community college in New York. The final several classes of this fall semester dealt with test-taking strategies (which can come in handy in a school culture driven by high-stakes testing). One of the classes took an editorial from *The New York Times* ("Mental Illness and Guns at Newtown," December 3, 2014) on the relationship between the availability of guns in this society and the mental illness that affected Adam Lanza, and developed essay questions based on that writing. At the end of class, I asked how students had been personally affected by the incidents of gun violence in public places across this nation and particularly by school shootings. Students seemed surprised when I mentioned that at the beginning of class in late August I routinely check the room for a means of escape in case of emergency, availability of phone service to campus security, and whether or not the door to the classroom locks from the inside. On the anniversary of the awful massacre in Connecticut, these are issues to be explored and thought about seriously.

