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## Guns and Capitalism: a Love Story

By Mark Harris  
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It's telling that in February 2008 I wrote an op-ed for an Illinois newspaper titled, "What Makes Someone a Campus Murderer?" The commentary then was prompted by the shooting deaths at Northern Illinois University (NIU) of five people and 21 injured at the hands of a former student.

At the time, I recalled my visit to the DeKalb, Illinois campus in the days after the violence. As a student there years earlier, I knew Cole Hall where the shootings took place quite well. I

remember the blustery, frigid winter weather that day as I drove into town. It felt bleak, and suitably appropriate to the blizzard of grief then sweeping through that Midwestern campus.

Even though the NIU incident was hardly the first school shooting incident, there was the sense that something uniquely out of the ordinary had happened. How could it be otherwise? As routine as gun violence is in this country, there is something especially grotesque about some suicidal person's desire to indiscriminately gun down innocent people, driven by whatever murky grievances inflame their broken minds.

## **The Roots of Violence**

Since 2008 there have been several other equally appalling massacres. Unfortunately, what is more shocking now is perhaps not the rarity of these mass killings, but their regularity. What is at the root of such tantrums of "insane" deadly public violence? Unless we believe that such evil, destructive behavior is somehow inexplicable, as some religious moralists might conclude, there is always an explanation.

Lurking in the stories of many individual murderers, as neurologist Jonathan Pincus, MD, writes in his book, "Base Instincts: What Makes Killers Kill," is predictably some combination of mental illness, neurological damage, and child abuse. In fact, poverty or losing a job or other stressors of living in the world will not in themselves typically cause someone to become a murderer, unless—and this is critical—the seed of some corrosive psychology already exists in that individual. The psychology writer Alice Miller and others have written much about the social consequences of early childhood trauma, identifying the emotional wounds that often simmer unresolved in the pathology of violent adults.

As Miller describes in her essay, "The Roots of Violence," the need or impulse to kill it is not a result of a malleable "human nature" per se, but results from damage inflicted upon the developing brain. "People whose integrity has not been damaged in childhood, who were protected, respected, and treated with honesty by their parents, will be—both in their youth and in adulthood— intelligent, responsive, empathic, and highly sensitive," writes Miller. "They will take pleasure in life and will not feel any need to kill or even hurt others or themselves. They will use their power to defend themselves, not to attack others."

In other words, murderers are made, not born.

But murderers are also not made in a vacuum. Mass gun violence represents a phenomenon whose understanding requires social context. In addition to a history of child abuse, violent and murderous behavior in adults is also frequently linked to substance abuse and chronic exposure to a violent environment, as Jeffrey Swanson, a Duke University behavioral scientist notes in a recent Salon interview.

Tellingly, says Swanson, the crime rate in the United States is not that different from other countries in Western Europe, the United Kingdom, Japan and Australia. But the homicide rate is dramatically higher. One obvious reason is the easy availability of guns. Consider a recent incident in New York City in which two young women were wounded and another killed

outside a Manhattan nightclub. A late-night altercation inside the club led security guards to expel one young man from the premises. Angered, this individual retrieved a gun from his car, and then tried to reenter the club. He was prevented from doing so. Instead, a short while later he drove by the club, shooting at the entrance and killing an innocent bystander. It was reported the shooter was targeting the security guards he had scuffled with.

Such incidents in countries where the prevalence of guns is less than in the United States are just less likely to end in gun-related bloodshed. But in the United States an otherwise petty incident is far more likely to escalate into gun violence or murder. Is this entirely unexpected? According to government data, the United States has 4.4 percent of the world's population, but over 40 percent of all civilian-owned guns. In 2013 there were approximately 357 million firearms in this nation of 319 million people.

There is a Constitutional right to bear arms in the United States. But there is also a kind of unbridled, corrosive violence at the root of American society, one whose exclamation point now is the widespread access to lethal weapons. In fact, the headline incidents of mass killings are just the tip of the iceberg of gun violence in the United States. As The Washington Post reports, nearly 10,000 people have been killed in gun violence incidents in the United States so far just this year.

Some people want to put the onus for worsening levels of gun violence largely on inner-city gangs. But reality is more complex. In fact, guns have proliferated in many poor, inner city communities as a consequence of the politically motivated "War on Drugs." It's a consequence of decades of law-and-order grandstanding of both Democrats and Republicans.

As Temple University historian Heather Ann Thompson explains in a 2014 essay in The Atlantic, "This new drug war created a brand-new market for illegal drugs—an underground marketplace that would be inherently dangerous and would necessarily be regulated by both guns and violence."

In many urban minority communities, the War on Drugs translates into an everyday reality of racially driven police harassment, surveillance, and killings. Instead of treating substance abuse as a public health issue, says Thompson, it has become a cudgel for law enforcement to brutalize inner city communities.

### **Individualism Gone Astray**

In a sense, widespread gun violence in society represents the celebrated individualism of American life turned in on itself. In a society where bonds of community, the fabric of the social infrastructure, including public mental health resources, exist at minimal levels for many, should we be surprised that many people fall off the edge of this make-believe version of the good society?

"When violence becomes an organizing principle of society, the fabric of a democracy begins to unravel suggesting that America is at war with itself," writes Henry A. Giroux of McMaster University in a recent CounterPunch essay. Giroux is right. We live in a society defined and

sustained by violence. The very same week as the Oregon shootings the U.S military targeted air strikes at a hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan that killed at least 22 people and injured dozens more.

Apparently, we've become so inured to the permanent war economy—to the militarization of foreign policy—that wars can now be declared over even when they're not over. With a military budget that equals half of all military expenditures for the rest of the world combined, our militaristic global presence sends the message that violence is the ultimate solution to any dispute. This is a message that invariably seeps into the subsoil of the American psyche and culture.

Certainly the Second Amendment right to bear arms does not preclude reasonable weapons regulations. But, of course, guns are already subject to many regulations. Contrary to the boilerplate paranoia of the National Rifle Association (NRA), measures to prevent “off the books” gun sales to individuals with violent histories are not inherent “gun rights” issues, any more than new “smart” technology innovations might be that prevent weapons from being fired without identity verification.

“A gun is only a tool, as good or as bad as the man using it,” declared actor Alan Ladd as the gunman Shane in the classic 1950s western film. So also is the measure of a society wallowing in a mire of endless violence, divided by extremes of wealth and poverty, and fundamentally designed to enrich the one percent or less who own the bulk of the nation's industries and resources. Indeed, the latter reality constitutes a form of economic violence against the country's working majority, whose impoverished social safety net and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions serve as provocative backdrop to the American epidemic of gun violence.

It might be noted that even in the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, the streets remained relatively safe from civilian gun violence, at least more so than today. Even in the 1940s, the world aflame in the violence of war, estranged misfits were not walking into schools to recklessly shoot down innocent people. But such comparisons only speak to the corrosive, soul-destroying effects over time of an archaic capitalist social order on the human condition. The last hundred years constitute one of the most violent centuries in the history of humanity. Is this fact not relevant to any discussion of gun violence as a public health issue?

In a sense, the specter of gun violence in the United States is a reflection of an atomized, militaristic society living on the fumes of democracy, desensitized to violence and human suffering, and now coughing up the phlegm of alienation and a sometimes deadly bitterness among the ranks of the most marginalized citizens.

If there is an antidote to this toxic reality, it will in the long run be found less in new gun laws or regulations, but in the radical vision of a new kind of society. This is a vision of genuine mass democracy as best embodied in the historic ideals of the socialist movement. The antidote remains as always the fresh air of social solidarity, of human relations rooted in values of cooperation and caring, and ensuring that every child's social and developmental needs are met from the beginning of life.