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A Critical Review of Gun Violence Management in United States of America

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical review of gun violence management in United States of America. In order to be able to effectively reduce gun violence, the focus cannot solely remain on gun control reform; it is necessary for the anti-gun movement to align itself with the anti-neoliberal movement that is calling for changes for systematic social and economic changes that will bring about a shift in values, norms, and attitudes that shape social structures and relationships. This is especially important since passing gun-related legislation has been an uphill battle, especially at the federal level. It may be necessary to develop a strong popular movement that will effectively counter pro-gun organizations such as the NRA and provide the argument for gun control with the same political savvy and sway that is displayed by the NRA.

Keywords: *Gun Violence Management, NRA, United States of America*

1.1 Introduction

The United States has always leaned towards pro-gun culture and politics. This gun culture is associated with factors such as fear of domination by big government, the popular values of individuality and self-reliance, the fact that gun violence has been marketed as a problem for people who are evil, sick, and perhaps irresponsible, and the interrelationship between hyper-masculinity and pro-gun politics. Mass shootings have increased and escalated over the last

decade, which has re-popularized the debate surrounding gun control in the United States with the goal of reducing gun violence. However, the majority of Americans are uncompromising about their right to own firearms. Gun culture in the US is tied to a long history of anti-statist individualism, a political philosophy where citizen rejects the state's interference in social, economic, and personal affairs (Esposito & Finley, 2014). However, beyond this culture, not enough attention has been given to how the prevailing market ideology of neoliberalism has supported and reinforced the gun culture in the US. This paper, therefore, argues that in order to reduce gun violence, the policies must move beyond gun control and address as well as challenge the neoliberal ideology and social structure that has broken down social bonds, championed hyper-individualism, and popularized the survival for the fittest aesthetic.

Neoliberalism refers to an ideology and policy model that emphasizes the need for free-market competition. This ideology sees competition as the defining attribute of human relations. The citizens of a nation are essentially redefined as consumers who exercise their democracy through buying and selling rewarding merits and penalizing inefficiencies. This policy reiterates that the free market allows for the most efficient allocation of resources; as such, it requires little to no state interference in both social and economic affairs. As such, it calls for minimal taxation and regulation, the privatization of public services, and a lack of trade unions since collective bargaining has the ability to distort the markets, which essentially enhances the creation of a hierarchy of winners and losers. Inequality hence becomes virtuous since it enables the reward for utility and the generation of wealth, which, in theory, should trickle down to everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society can, therefore, be considered to be counterproductive and morally corrosive since the market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve. Neoliberalism, therefore, entails a worldview that completely ignores the social realm, highlighting the individual as the only metric of concern and analysis (Esposito & Finley, 2014). Efforts to promote this worldview include advocating for the abolishment of big government, emphasis on personal responsibility instead of social justice, prioritizing the private realm over the public sphere, and the treatment of social issues as personal problems. These defining features of neoliberalism can be linked to the support of pro-gun politics in the US.

When it comes to gun control, those who support and those who oppose seem to have very different understandings of the role of government in a democratic and free society. Those in support of gun control have a progressive view of government, meaning that they believe that the people, through activism and direct participation, can be able to channel the power of government into the efforts of advancing human freedom, fighting social injustices, and protecting the common good. In a sense, the government can be a mechanism that can be used to create a better society for all. Those in opposition to gun control, on the other hand, stand in stark contrast as they view the government as the enemy, and hence the government cannot be trusted to look out for the wellbeing of the citizenry. They are essentially self-reliant individuals operating in a free market and hence do not feel the need to report to a central authority (Esposito & Finley, 2014). They believe that a

hierarchy in the social and economic realm is simply a result of freedom, and it is, therefore, up to the individual to look out for one's own interests, including personal safety. As such, the right to bear arms is the way these individuals can protect themselves and their families, and as a result, it is a fundamental right.

2.1 Critical Review

For over three decades, the perspective of those in opposition to gun control has dominated the social, cultural, and economic discourse in the United States. This position has been bolstered and reinforced by the market ideology—that is neoliberalism. This is because neoliberalism aligns with pro-market policies, namely: privatization, deregulation, and liberalization. Neoliberalism, however, extends beyond policy since the policy was developed in response to Keynesianism and similar theories that called for a regulated economy and a strong welfare state; the architects of the theory, therefore, understood that the free-market approach was a deliberate mechanism of organizing social life (Esposito & Finley, 2014). By calling for individuals to operate within the private realm, the individuals had the option to act in a manner that promoted their self-interest. Minimizing government and promoting the private sector is, therefore, a central principle in the neoliberal agenda. However, what sets neoliberalism from other economic theories is the fact that this theory seeks to extend the logic of the market to every sphere of life, including the state, as such the state in a neoliberalism context is no longer the guardian of public interest but the servant of the market. The state essentially neglects social welfare, opting to focus on penal policy and national security. Whatever issues an individual faces are essentially attributed to poor judgment, weaknesses of character, bad choices, among other personal deficiencies, even though these issues can be attributed to bigger social issues (Esposito & Finley, 2014). Any attempts by the government to interfere in various social issues are treated as suspect since social and economic justice within a neoliberal context is considered to be a form of government tyranny. As such, any attack on gun ownership in the US by the federal government has been interpreted by millions of Americans as a form of tyranny. The threat of tyranny is the foundation of the second amendment movement.

The second amendment movement was developed as a means to protect white male privilege from the threat of an activist government that supported feminism, racial minorities, and other supposedly undeserved groups. It became popular in the 1950s amidst the civil rights movement and the feminist movement. The fears among the patriarchy were further exacerbated by the Gun Control Act of 1968, leading to the radicalization of the National Rifles Movement (NRA). By the 70s, the NRA underwent a political revolution and evolved from being primarily a sports organization to a pro-gun lobby. During the Reagan administration in the 80s, neoliberalism gained more prominence, being inculcated into the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the United States. It was during this era that the United States witnessed an increase in gun violence, including a rise in mass shootings. The neoliberal reforms enacted by the Reagan administration

tore apart the welfare state, and self-reliance became synonymous with the American belief in a free society. Success in the American context was associated with economic attainment, power, and social status (Esposito & Finley, 2014). This led to the development of an apathetic society, and as such social bonds were eroded, giving birth to a society that worshipped excessive materialism that was extremely competitive, narcissistic, and rabidly individualistic. This trend can be observed this day as society values self-gain over anything else.

During the Obama era, millions of Americans became suspicious of his administration as he showed more willingness to use the power of the state to correct various social and economic injustices than the presidents who came before him. By signing the Recovery Act, passing healthcare reform, among other welfare-related policies, he would be considered a socialist by many Americans. These interventionist policies were considered to the growing of a “big” government that would eventually undermine the free market, self-reliance, and personal liberties. The calls for gun control by the Obama administration would further increase fears among neoliberal Americans that the government was being tyrannical and intruding on the private lives of Americans (Butts et al., 2015). This kind of reaction hence makes gun reform all the more difficult. The NRA would hence launch an attack on President Obama, referring to him as an anti-second amendment president who wanted to disarm the populace in order to institute a totalitarian government. By creating fear among the public -that they were under the threat of disarmament- the public would respond by buying more guns; gun sales would skyrocket across the country as Americans started stocking up since they believed that their liberties were under threat (Butts et al., 2015).

A little known fact to the public, however, is that the NRA does benefit from gun sales despite making claims that it is not associated with any firearm manufacturers. The NRA is, in fact, a front group for America’s gun manufacturers. Most of the NRA’s money does not come from membership fees; it is obtained from contributions, advertising, grants, and royalty incomes, most of which is derived from the gun industry, with some companies even donating a portion of their sales to the NRA. Other fundraising initiatives include allowing customers to make donations at the time of purchase; some companies such as Roger & Co. even mandate their customers to donate to the NRA. As such, the revenue of the NRA depends on the success of the gun industry. The NRA, therefore, does the bidding for this industry, ensuring that no major legislation is passed that could affect gun sales adversely (Esposito & Finley, 2014). The NRA prides itself on protecting the rights of gun owners while it has essentially evolved to become a subsidiary of the gun industry. The NRA serves the functioning of developing and maintain the market for gun products. This can be observed through the fear tactics they deploy, by, for instance, telling the American people that Obama will take their guns; through these tactics, the NRA manipulates the public into buying more guns and pushes the neoliberal agenda associated with deregulation that benefits the gun industry. This fear-mongering is, in some cases, racialized as fears of disarmament and tyranny can also be accompanied by claims that the white man is declining in status and is thus unprotected.

Gun consumers are reminded that the world is changing around them, and as such, they come to believe that guns will be able to protect their way of life. The other function of the NRA is a public relation one where it absorbs criticism following incidences such as mass shootings at schools; in these instances, the gun industry hardly ever speaks; the response usually comes from the NRA (Esposito & Finley, 2014).

Neoliberalism and pro-gun activism are intertwined in that both these perspectives look at the world from the perspective of people as individuals and not part of an interconnected community. From this viewpoint, both freedom and democracy are considered to be synonymous with self-reliance. Conversely, a viable democracy requires a strong sense of connection among the citizens. Neoliberalism, therefore, weakens a democracy by prioritizing self-interest over the needs of the community. This can be observed through the fanaticism that is displayed over the second amendment over all other rights. These individuals emphasize their right to own arms overlooking how this right might infringe on other people's right to live in a society free from unprovoked gun violence. The second amendment proponents may, however, argue that guns are a tool used to protect human life; they, however, forget the fact that this logic presupposes the "every man for himself" type of order to be normal or even virtuous. Even though an individual can perform a heroic action with a gun by, for instance, defending people during a mass shooting, this mindset still prioritizes the individual right to own guns over any societal concerns related to gun violence (Esposito & Finley, 2014).

Since 1968 more individuals have died from gun violence than from any war, the country has fought within this time. Over 100 Americans die every day as a result of gun violence. Evidence suggests that guns do not make individuals families or home safe; a gun is more likely to hurt a loved one than it is likely to kill an armed intruder. In 2015, 60.7% of gun-related deaths were due to suicide. When a gun is used in a suicide attempt, it results in deaths 90% of the time, whereas other means such as ingestion of pills or cutting of hands fail over 90% of the time (Bauchner et al., 2017). Furthermore, those who attempt suicide one follows up again, and if a gun is used, it is very likely that one may not survive. Gun violence is, therefore, a public health issue since, for instance, during mass shootings, some people die, others are wounded while others are forever traumatized by being present during the incident. Furthermore, suicides cause a lot of psychological distress among family members who are left behind, and some never really recover from the loss.

When it comes to mass shootings, in 2019, there were over 417 mass shootings in the US. This was the highest number of mass shootings in the US since 2014 (Kolbe, 2020). School shootings are another major issue associated with gun violence; these shootings are causing unnecessary death of children, staff members, and members of the community who happen to be in the vicinity of these schools. These senseless attacks have caused feelings of fear and insecurity among children while in school as well as academic difficulties since children find it difficult to

concentrate, especially after surviving an attack. Research indicates that following an attack at school, staff and students are likely to become increasingly anxious and depressed, suffer from traumatic stress, and have general concerns about their safety in these environments (Kolbe, 2020). Even after resolving these issues, these students are likely to suffer in their academic achievement as well as their social and emotional growth. Mass shootings and school shootings are, therefore, social issues with far-reaching consequences that could affect an entire generation.

Male gender norms in an American context have been associated with aggression; as such, the norms associated with masculinity promote risk-taking as well the fight over dominance over other men and women. This behavior parallels the agency that is encouraged in a neoliberal market society. In this kind of society, subjects are encouraged to exercise their dominance through materialism by owning and possessing things. Furthermore, due to the fact that a neoliberal market society is centered around ultra-competition, there is the implication that individuals should protect their possession through virtually any means available. In this context, possession extends beyond material goods include one's own family, one's sense of self-worth and one's ego (Esposito & Finley, 2014). This concept of possessive individualism is consistent with hegemonic masculinity that is prominent in the United States, which tells men that they at their most value when they stand up for themselves and their loved ones against any form of physical and verbal attacks. This, however, is not to be confused with self-defense since these actions are associated with a sense of entitlement. Evidence from research indicates that men are willing to fight back against anyone who challenges them just to prove that they are "real" men; they consider this behavior normal and appropriate. Furthermore, this concept of masculinity has been linked to mass shootings since most of these attacks are carried out by white men, a happenstance that is deeply rooted in a pathology of privilege (Esposito & Finley, 2014). Many of these white perpetrators have, in one way or another, been bullied or marginalized, and as a result, they decide to strike back against a society that has emasculated them and taken away privileges they believe are rightfully theirs. Mass violence and masculinity are connected since these individuals believe that the only way they can reclaim their masculine pride is by a grandiose display of violence. Guns are, therefore, central to this form of hyper-masculine posturing. In the US, the concept of real manhood has become very intertwined with violence and the defense of oneself as well as one's family and domain, which aligns with the neoliberal promotion of individualism and self-reliance. Gun manufacturers have even been known to play up these fears among white men by making an association between guns and masculinity, basically implying possessing a gun makes one a "real" man (Esposito & Finley, 2014).

In a neoliberalism context, gun violence has been recast as a personal issue ignoring all the wider social, cultural, and economic factors that might influence an individual into committing these violent acts. The popular course of action following incidences of mass violence is to look for the cause of such behavior on an individual actor basis. They completely ignore the fact that gun violence in the US has escalated due to a societal structure that has bred apathy, led to social

isolation and devalued human life due to the survival of the fittest ethos that is a key feature of neoliberalism (Sperlich, Logan-Greene, Slovak & Kaplan, 2019). When it comes to explaining unprovoked gun violence especially related to mass shootings, organizations such as the NRA usually result to blaming the individuals for being evil or mentally unstable. Mass shootings are considered to be the work of genuine monsters, and since such evil exists, there is a need for moral agents armed with guns to battle evil; guns, therefore, become the antidote for evil in this narrative. Following this logic, those who support gun control, therefore, become the enablers of evil. This kind of argument completely decontextualizes gun violence downplaying the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that are underlying the issue (Sperlich et al., 2019). By attributing evil as the cause of gun violence, the pro-gun lobby shuts down any further dialogue that may get to the root of the problem and develop meaningful and long-lasting solutions.

Another popular narrative in the political circles and mass media involves relating unprovoked gun violence to mental health; these incidents are supposedly carried out by individuals who are sick, insane, or abnormal. The occurrence of these incidents is, therefore, blamed on not giving these individuals the proper mental health treatment they need. Ironically though, the scarcity of mental health services can be linked to the neoliberal agenda to defund the government. At the same attributing gun violence to sick individuals aligns with the neoliberal trap of personalizing larger social issues that extend beyond mental health (Sperlich et al., 2019). Similar to blaming gun violence on evil, the explanation of mental health also shuts down dialogue by blaming this behavior on psychopaths and other pathologies, exonerating the kind of society that would produce these kinds of individuals in the first place.

3.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has indicates that in order to effectively reduce gun violence, policies must move beyond gun control to include anti-neoliberalism since neoliberalism is the major culprit responsible for the toxic gun culture in the US. In order to be able to effectively reduce gun violence, the focus cannot solely remain on gun control reform; it is necessary for the anti-gun movement to align itself with the anti-neoliberal movement that is calling for changes for systematic social and economic changes that will bring about a shift in values, norms, and attitudes that shape social structures and relationships. This is especially important since passing gun-related legislation has been an uphill battle, especially at the federal level. For instance, the Bipartisan Background Checks out Act of 2019, which passed the House of Representative with 240 votes over a year ago, has not yet been brought to the senate. This is despite the fact that the majority of US citizens do support universal background checks. Without any federal legislation, most states have developed their own laws, with states like Massachusetts and California strengthening gun laws while most of them are relaxing their gun laws making gun control much harder. There is the need to challenge extreme individualism that has been championed by neoliberalism, which is essentially the foundation of the gun culture in the US. This ideology must be exposed as it goes

against the principles of a free and safe society. This, however, is not meant to promote collectivism over individualism; however, it is simply meant to bring awareness to the fact that without stable and peaceful societies with strong social bonds and hence interpersonal trust and recognition, the American people will continue to live in a state of fear and anxiety (Esposito & Finley, 2014). Neoliberalism has replaced dialogue and interpersonal understanding with fear and cynicism; this, combined with the availability of firearms, has hence brought about tragic results. Furthermore, there is the need to challenge gender norms that tell men and young boys that violence is synonymous with masculinity. Masculinity should be redefined in American society and boys and should be re-socialized to adopt a more egalitarian and inclusive understanding of manhood. Furthermore, for meaningful discussion to be had on the subject of gun violence, the society must reject the neoliberal agenda of personalizing the issue of gun violence by labeling perpetrators as sick or evil (Esposito & Finley, 2014). It is necessary to analyze all the relevant social, political, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to gun violence in order to be able to deal with the problem effectively. Finally, it may be necessary to develop a strong popular movement that will effectively counter pro-gun organizations such as the NRA and provide the argument for gun control with the same political savvy and sway that is displayed by the NRA.

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