

Junk Freedom

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Critical Sociology
2016, Vol. 42(2) 187–191
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0896920515625867
crs.sagepub.com



These days, the truth is hard to find. As social scientists, we collect and produce data to provide tools to describe the world as it is. We apply theory to help marshal facts as evidence for interpreting how the world got this way. And if we lean towards revolutionary historical materialism, we brush our work against the grain of traditional science and history in an effort to not only comprehend but change the world. A tall order, but what else is there?

I am writing a book called *Kill it to Save it: How America is Killing Itself*. My primary argument is that, since the late 1970s and 1980s, political culture in the United States has been recast by a toxic blend of hyper-individualism and corporate hegemony. In the wake of the war in Vietnam and following the decline of social movement radicalism came a relatively triumphant neoliberal common sense, hard-wired to accept private sector solutions, corporate-driven knowledge, and the most egregious dismantling of public sector functions all in the name of individual freedoms and outcomes-based reform. Predictably, the only outcomes that mattered were corporate bottom-lines. Public institutions and social welfare programs that once buttressed the *possibility* of individual opportunity and achievement are now portrayed as soul-crushing, soviet-style communism – an even greater caricature now as Soviet communism fades completely into history’s rear view mirror.

In the book’s introduction, I note that one of our greatest ‘kill it to save it’ quagmires involves guns. I write:

In the wake of mass killings in Aurora, Sandy Hook, and most recently Charleston’s Emmanuel AME church, our inability to address the absurdity of our policy making debates seem ever more striking. We can’t pass serious regulations on guns, address the poor quality and paucity of mental health care, or change the direction of growing poverty and suffering even after witnessing time and time and time again the effects of NOT changing public policies that are in fact killing us.

Later in the book, where I focus more deeply on gun violence, I confess that I had returned to the introduction quite a few times to update the part where I mention the most ‘recent’ mass killings:

In mid-summer of 2015, white supremacist, Dylan Roof, shot and killed 9 African Americans in the Emanuel A.M.E. Church of Charleston, South Carolina. I had to substitute this shooting for the previous spring’s Isla Vista killings where a sexually frustrated misogynist, Eliot Rodger, had killed 6 people and

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injured 14 to punish women for rejecting him and sexually active men for being, well, sexually active. As I went back to this section of the book today, in Fall of 2015, Christopher Harper-Mercer has just fatally shot 9 people and wounded 9 others at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. Harper-Mercer had a history of mental illness and his mother had a large gun collection. Mrs. Harper-Mercer often took her son to the shooting range. In writings he left behind, Harper-Mercer praised Eliot Rodger and shared his own frustrations at being a virgin and social outcast. At this point I realized I should finish the book quickly.

But I could never finish fast enough to account for the rapidity with which mass shootings occur in the United States. Mass shootings (four or more people shot in one incident) happened on the average of two out of every three days from 1 January through 26 October 2015. According to the websites shootingtracker.com and the gunviolencearchive.com, at least one mass shooting occurred on 198 days – 45 days had two mass shootings, and 25 days had three or more. Particularly gruesome were the days of 13 June with five fatal shootings and 22 wounded; 15 July with five killed and 24 injured; and the week stretching from 15 August through 22 August when 16 people were murdered and 59 people were injured during mass shootings. This week of violence began with drive-by killings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Orangeburg, South Carolina, Los Angeles, California, and Miami, Florida, and ended with one dead and seven injured while attending a Modesto, California, music festival.

A more uncomfortable statistic suggests that, while gun-related homicides have *declined* alongside all murders and violent crimes over the past 20 years, shooting deaths overall actually increased because of gun-related suicides. Over the past 30 years, firearm suicides have exceeded firearm homicides even when homicide rates were at their highest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And the relationship between guns and suicide proves deadly. Although guns are not the most common method of *attempting* suicide (drug overdose and poisoning are), gun-related suicides comprise the most *successful* attempts compared to all other methods *combined*. For example, drug overdose attempts succeed in only about 3% of cases, while handguns and shot guns succeed almost 95% of the time. Meanwhile, the accessibility and ease, as well as the overall number of guns available, have serious correlations to gun-related suicides. According to the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, more guns equal more suicides, especially among male teens and young adults. These cases often involve weapons found in their own homes. Researchers controlled for region, divorce, education, unemployment, alcohol use, poverty and urbanization, to demonstrate the most statistically significant relationship between youth and successful suicides is the accessibility of guns (Miller et al., 2004, 2007; Johnson et al., 2010).

Gun violence of another sort is also on the rise – those large-scale, public events defined by the FBI as ‘active shooter incidents’. Examining the years from 2000–2013, the FBI identified 160 active shooter incidents: 70% in business and school environments, but also occurring on ‘city streets, on military and other government properties, and in private residences, health care facilities, and houses of worship’. The findings establish an increasing frequency of incidents annually. During the first seven years included in the study, an average of 6.4 incidents occurred annually. In the last seven years of the study, that average increased to 16.4 incidents annually. In other words, despite the significant decrease in violent crimes and gun homicides between 2000 and 2013, the number of active shooting incidents and mass killings has risen dramatically (Blair et al., 2014).

As in all health-related issues where government regulation might save lives but cost corporations a few bucks, lobbyists and spin-merchants abound. The National Rifle Association’s [NRA] lobbying efforts to deny virtually *any* regulation of *any* type on carrying *any* gun remain legendary. While the organization’s annual lobbying expenditures have ranged between US \$2 and US \$4 million since 2008, their election cycle contributions to candidates have skyrocketed

250%, from just over US \$8 million to over US \$28 million, during that same time period. In 2016, they aim to raise US \$50 million for the presidential campaign. Despite the incredible impact that gun violence has on our nation's public health, politician after politician refuse to support even minimal regulations regarding background checks, waiting periods, or assault weapons. In part, the NRA succeeds in supporting hand-picked candidates who adhere to the group's legislative agenda and infamous 'scoring' system. But the real impact emanates from the intimidation factor that their campaign war chest motivates. As one congressional aide suggested, 'Unlike some interest groups, where it is money that creates influence, here it is more the threat of response ... The idea is that if you come out for any type of gun control, any type of common-sense reform, they are going to come after you' (Kirk, 2015; Stein and Blumenthal, 2012; Feldman, 2007; Brown and Abel, 2010; Melzer, 2010; Carlson, 2015).

Not only does our nation's inability to address gun violence suffer from the same 'follow the money' scheme as 'kill it to save it' policies in education and climate change do, the NRA and its investors have their own hack researchers and knowledge thugs, too. Most notable and prolific is John Lott and his new Center for Crime Prevention Research. Lott's (1998) seminal work, *More Guns, Less Crime*, argued that violent crime rates go down when states pass 'shall issue' concealed carry laws. In this and other books, Lott promotes the prevalent myths in gun debates: more guns equal less crime; good guys with guns stop mass shootings; guns are used more in self-defense cases than in committing crimes; mass shootings increase in 'gun free' areas; women's gun possession makes them safer; and low firearm murder rates in other countries are overrated and misapplied when compared to the United States. Lott has created large data base sets to do highly sophisticated econometric studies. Unfortunately, as is often the case in such research, it doesn't prove what the researchers want it to prove and, as their research gets scrutinized, their responses get more outlandish and more wrong.

For example, soon after Lott's book came out, a 16-member National Research Council [NRC] panel convened to examine whether right-to-carry laws influenced crime rate. Their 2005 report, *Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review*, looked at Lott's methods in detail and wrote:

The committee found that answers to some of the most pressing questions cannot be addressed with existing data and research methods, however well designed. For example, despite a large body of research, the committee found no credible evidence that the passage of right-to-carry laws decreases or increases violent crime. ... The committee found that the data available on these questions are too weak to support unambiguous conclusions or strong policy statements. (Wellford, 2005)

Such critique might have influenced Lott to note his limitations, suggest that results are debatable, and that science works best when people dedicated to its project continue to examine and collect data to find the most accurate results and defensible conclusions possible. Instead, Lott doubled down with absurd defenses of his initial research and paranoid accusations of an NRC's political witch hunt.

When Aneja, Donohue and Zhang (2011) revisited Lott's work and the NRC panel's findings, their critique of Lott went even further than the NRC. According to DeFilippis and Hughes (2015), they corrected Lott's dataset, which had several errors. The NRC panel had also

failed to incorporate a number of proper criminal justice control variables. ... Whereas the NRC panel found contradictory yet statistically significant results across most of the crime categories, Donohue and his coauthors found very few statistically significant effects of RTC laws on crime rates, but almost all of them, significant or not, show crime increases. ... Lott is wrong. It is no longer a question of whether RTC laws are beneficial, but rather if they are impotent or harmful.

Most recently, Lott has been taken to task for using fraudulent survey data and reviewing his own books under false names for Amazon.com and other websites. As his academic career spirals downward, he can still be found on Fox News and other right-wing Pinkerton websites like Brietbart.com. But so much of these discussions has gone beyond trying to really present facts and figures, scientific analyses and policies that would actually promote the public's health and welfare. The power of 'kill it to save it' is its ability to ignore uncomfortable facts and devolve into what Stephen Colbert once called 'truthiness'. In food production, Coca Cola can spend millions of dollars trying to convince people that 'virtually no compelling evidence' exists for junk food and sugary soft drinks causing diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Exxon can spend millions producing false claims about climate science to deny the impact of greenhouse gas and global warming. They succeed because our 'kill it to save it' common sense suggests we trust corporate science, especially when it jives with our desire for unregulated individualism. American's health and safety degrades and declines before our eyes, but the instinctive commitments to individualism and the bottom-line make it hard to imagine what a different world might look like. So we get angry with each other, rationalize our inaction with an overarching sense of impotency, and we eat junk food, consume junk science, and live junk freedom.

In the case of guns, regardless of how deadly and dangerous to the general public, they have become symbolic of 'American Freedom'. To own a gun without restriction or (since gun ownership has actually declined while opposition to gun control has increased) just knowing you can own a gun without restriction has become emblematic of our nation's gut definition for what freedom is. Freedom is *not* free education. Freedom is *not* universal, free health care. Freedom is *not* unrestricted access to decent jobs with living wages. Freedom is *not* a right to basic food, clothing and shelter. These phenomena do not make Americans *feel* free. Guns do. Individuals can hold guns. And since we can't really measure freedom, if guns make you *feel* free then the more guns we have, the more freedom we feel. And so we embrace them, fetishize them, rationalize their virtue, and defend them most virulently at those moments when they seem least virtuous – after every mass killing in America.

Over Thanksgiving, *Critical Sociology* Editor David Fasenfest blogged:

We [the United States] declare 'war' on terrorists but refuse to limit gun sales even if the person is on a watch list. We lament the deaths due to terrorism if the shooter is black or a Muslim, but define mass killings by right wing, white militants as instances of mental illness. We ignore a culture of violence and discrimination against other religions and non-whites while pretending we are a tolerant society. This 'holiday' weekend celebrating genocide and appropriation is truly an 'American' holiday!

As I write this introduction, five people have been shot at a Minneapolis #BlackLivesMatter protest against the police killing of Jamar Clark, a young black male apparently handcuffed when he was shot. And a police officer and two 'civilians' were killed (nine others wounded) outside an abortion clinic in Colorado Springs. So I had better conclude this introduction right here.¹

Note

1. The day after sending this piece to the journal, the United States' largest mass shooting this year took place in San Bernadino, California. Enough said.

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