Chapter Eight

What's Next? Understanding and Misunderstanding America's Gun Culture

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I am an old scholar, but new to the study of guns. I got into the topic when I realized how common and how normal guns are to so many different people in the United States. I first noticed this in my adopted home state of North Carolina, where I moved a little over a decade ago. Riding with my friend on an interstate not far from Winston-Salem one day, I saw a tall wooden structure in the middle of a field. I said to my friend, "Look at that fort, sitting out in the middle of nowhere. So weird." To which my friend responded with equal incredulity, "That's a deer stand. People use those for hunting." Soon enough, without looking very hard, I began to find guns all around me. Gun shows are held several times a year at the annex to the arena where Wake Forest University's basketball team plays its home games. Ground signs abound on heavily trafficked street corners advertising "concealed carry classes." Gun stores regularly buy billboard space on area highways to advertise their products and services. Talking about guns with the highly-educated professionals I play tennis with widened my eyes still further. One owned several long guns that had been passed down from his grandfather. Another had two semi-automatic pistols in his basement that he used to shoot regularly. Some of the women I play tennis with own or carry firearms for self-defense. As for myself, I had never seen, held, or touched anything other than a BB gun until I was 42 years old. I did so only thanks to my wife, a North Carolina native and Coast Guard veteran who used to carry a Beretta M9 service pistol. She introduced me to her high school classmate who is a gun trainer for the North Carolina Highway Patrol.

These experiences with people outside the academy could not contrast more sharply with my experiences in the academy, especially with other sociologists. When I tell my colleagues I am studying "gun culture," they frequently hear me saying "gun violence," since their primary association with guns is with violence. Or they will respond, "Good, more people need

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to be studying gun control." It falls too far outside their experience with and understanding of guns to think of them in any way other than negatively. And I do understand this, because for the first 40 years of my life, and the first 20 years of my academic career, I shared this approach to guns. I have now come to see, however, that it is a profound *mis*understanding to approach the academic study of guns in such a partial and partisan way.

Entering the field, I was struck by how hard it is to find scholarship on the lawful use of firearms by legal gun owners. What Wright (1995) observed over 20 years ago in his "Ten Essential Observations on Guns in America" remains true today. The study of guns is dominated by the criminology and epidemiology of gun violence, which is a very small part of the social reality of guns, in American society at least. Indeed, going back even further, over 40 years ago Wright and Marston (1975, 106) observed,

> the vast, overwhelming majority of the 90,000,000 or so privately owned weapons are not involved in accidental shootings or intentional deaths. Most gun owners studied in this paper are probably responsible persons who use their weapons for legitimate recreational activities. In this respect, the data presented here may contribute more to the sociology of leisure than to that of social problems.

Three years later, O'Connor and Lizotte (1978, 428) concluded similarly:

> Hunting, gun collecting, and sport shooting are activities which involve large numbers of people for whom guns occupy a central but routine and legitimate place. These activities have been generally ignored by researchers interested in gun ownership and violence; but involvement in these activities surely accounts for most gun ownership in the country.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

The excessive focus on the criminology and epidemiology of gun violence impedes the ability to understand the normality of the lawful ownership and use of guns in the United States. Without understanding this, scholars cannot understand American gun culture. In fact, in focusing excessively on crime and violence, they actually misunderstand it. My goal in this concluding chapter is to suggest an approach to studying American gun culture going forward, which puts a central emphasis on understanding legal gun ownership and use and which therefore relativizes the predominant criminological and epidemiological foci.

UNDERSTANDING GUN CULTURE

The task of understanding American gun culture begins with understanding the lawful use of guns by legal gun owners. To the extent that there is

something called "American gun culture," it centers on this. In "America as a Gun Culture," Richard Hofstadter (1970) remarked on—more accurately, he lamented—the uniqueness of the United States "as the only modern industrial urban nation that persists in maintaining a gun culture." In Hofstadter's account, America's gun culture is rooted in the reality of widespread, lawful possession of firearms by a large segment of the population. That reality persists today.

As already noted, it is important for anyone trying to understand the relationship of Americans to guns to recognize that for a large part of the population of the United States, guns are a perfectly normal part of life. A recent survey released by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center (2017) highlights this in a number of ways. To begin with, a majority of the population currently lives with a gun in their house or has in the past. A sizeable minority have thought about or are actively considering acquiring a gun. A remarkable 7 out of 10 American adults have actually fired a gun at some point in their lives—that is nearly 180 million people. Viewed the other way around: A minority of American adults has never shot a gun.

Hofstadter recognizes that guns as material objects are central to the construction of any gun culture. Without guns there is no gun culture. But in itself this is a trivial statement. What is crucial to explain is how people understand and use guns, as well as how guns themselves change over time, both responding to and facilitating different understandings and uses. Which is to say that studying gun culture *as culture* means examining the knowledge, beliefs, and recipes for doing things with guns, the many tools and products that are created, and the various practices that are centered on guns (Yamane, forthcoming).

For some Americans, there is a true fascination with guns—their history, their mechanical operation, what they can do, and what they stand for (Taylor 2009). These people are not unlike collectors or aficionados or obsessives in other areas of life like automobiles, trains, boats, or bicycles. Others have a more practical or pragmatic approach to guns—their usefulness as tools to accomplish certain tasks like hunting or recreation (Kohn 2004). But as I have argued elsewhere (Yamane 2017), the center of gravity of American gun culture is shifting away from the historic emphasis on hunting, recreational shooting, and collecting to the contemporary emphasis on armed self-defense. I call this a shift from Gun Culture 1.0 to Gun Culture 2.0.[1]

Of course, self-defense has always been a part of American gun culture. A noted firearms trainer told me that when he was a police officer in Tennessee in the *1970s,* it was so common for people to carry guns in their cars that when he pulled someone over he did not ask, "Do you have a gun in your car?" He asked, "*Where* is the gun in your car?" More systematic data supports this anecdote. A survey in 1978 asked, "Do you ever carry [your]

handgun or pistol outside of the house with you for protection or not?"
Twenty-nine percent of handgun owners responded "yes" (Wright, Rossi,
& Daly 1983, 142–43). The liberalization of concealed carry laws since the
1970s have further normalized—both culturally and legally–gun carrying
outside the home. The 29% of handgun owners who carried outside the home
in 1978 has grown to 57% today, according to Pew Research Center. That is
nearly 30 million people. As many as 16 million American adults, according
to one recent count (Lott 2017), have permits to carry firearms concealed in
public. And an increasing number of states (12 currently) allow legal firearms
owners to carry concealed handguns in public without a permit.

Carlson (2015) calls this a "gun carry revolution," and she is right. And yet
social scientists have been oddly silent about it. This is perhaps because it is
hard to use criminological or epidemiological perspectives to understand law
abiding gun owners engaging in a lawful action. In the best tradition of ethnog-
raphy, Carlson acts as a critical observer attempting to understand this aspect
of American gun culture from the inside out. As a result of her ethnographic
immersion, Carlson recognizes something that is so simple that its profundity
may go unrecognized. In the last paragraph of her book *Citizen-Protectors*,
Carlson (2015, 178) writes: "Guns solve problems for the people who bear
them." If we want to understand why 30 million Americans carry handguns
outside their homes and 16 million have concealed carry permits, we need to
understand that this behavior solves problems for the people who engage in it.

So the question becomes, what problems are solved by carrying a gun?
The primary problems solved by carrying a gun, according to Carlson, have
to do with identity. It's not so much about what carrying lethal weapons can
do for people in any practical sense as what it *says* about them. The subtitle
of Carlson's book—*The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*—
speaks volumes here. In an age of decline, carrying a gun allows men to
engage in everyday political acts that reassert their masculinity and help them
to "reclaim a sense of dignity" (Carlson 2015, 24). In *Good Guys with Guns*,
Stroud (2016) extends Carlson's gender analysis to understand how racialized
discourses shape the contrast between "good guys" and "bad guys." In oppo-
sition to the socially privileged (middle-class, white) "good guys with guns"
are socially disadvantaged (poor, black) "bad guys" who threaten to victim-
ize them. The third part of the gender-race-class trinity comes to the fore in
Stroud's examination of the binary distinction between the self-reliance of the
socially privileged and the dependence of the poor and minorities—and espe-
cially poor minorities—who are the criminal other against which they define
themselves as "good guys." Choosing to get a Concealed Handgun Licence
(CHL) is part of a larger, class-based ethos of self-sufficiency that articulates
with the ascendency of neoliberalism in the U.S.

Without arguing that Carlson or Stroud are wrong, their emphases on ideological problems solved by gun carrying push practical problem-solving to the margins. But in the recent Pew Research Center survey cited earlier, 7 percent of all adult respondents said they had used a gun to defend themselves or their possessions, whether they fired the gun or not. That is over 17 million adults in the US. Even on either side of the margin of error, that is a lot of people. So I suggest more effort be made to understand how guns represent for people part of their solution for safely negotiating the contemporary world.

Of course we do not want to reduce the study of American gun culture to the individuals who own and use guns. In my 2017 review essay in *Sociology Compass,* I suggest a number of concrete steps forward for those who want to understand the new incarnation of America's historic gun culture. These include understanding how the social world of gun culture is shaped by broader social institutions including the legal system, economy, and technology. For example, the widespread practice of legally carrying a gun in public was facilitated by the movement for "shall issue" concealed carry laws. The growing practice of concealed carry that is facilitated by these laws also creates a number of new challenges for the individuals who do so, as well as for the broader social worlds (other people, spaces, places) in which they do so. These challenges are individually and collectively addressed through the developing culture of armed citizenship—both the "hardware" of material culture like guns, accessories, and other products, as well as the "software" of ways of thinking, legal frameworks, and the development of relevant abilities.

In addition, greater attention to the wider social worlds in which gun owners participate is necessary. According to Stebbins (2001:54), "Serious leisure participants typically become members of a vast social world, a complex mosaic of groups, events, networks, organizations, and social relationships." The same is true for participants in both recreational and self-defense gun culture. America is not just a "Gun Show Nation" (Burbick 2007), it is a nation of gun clubs, training classes, shooting events, network meet-ups, gun collectors and shooters associations. Although Taylor (2009) and Kohn (2004) have captured small slices of this reality on the recreational side, and Carlson (2015) and Stroud (2016) on the self-defense side, this aspect of gun culture has not been adequately studied to date.

Of course, this is not to say that there should be no study of crime and violence in connection with guns. But it does suggest a certain approach to understanding them. In the balance of this chapter, I will highlight the ways in which gun crime and violence should properly be understood in relation to American gun culture.

UNDERSTANDING GUN CRIME AND VIOLENCE
IN RELATION TO LEGAL GUN CULTURE

In July 2017, the Michael Bloomberg–funded, anti–gun violence news/ advocacy outlet, *The Trace*, ran a story about the work of photographer Garret O. Hansen (Sauer 2017). Hansen was introduced to American gun culture when he took a job as an assistant professor of photography at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Once there he was surprised to find that "it was not uncommon for friends and colleagues, including those of a liberal tilt, to fire off a few rounds after work before grabbing a beer." As I did a few years earlier, Hansen found that target shooting at the range is normal for a large swath of the American population. Hansen himself tried shooting and subsequently thought to combine the shooting he had discovered (with guns) with the shooting he did professionally (with cameras). Among his ongoing series of works, which have been displayed in galleries and museums across the country, is "Silhouette." For the pieces in this collection, Hansen gathered the cardboard backings which are used to hold paper targets at gun ranges. In a darkroom he made prints of the cardboard which he then turned into one-to-one replicas in mirrored plexiglass. Hansen describes the experience of viewing the works when they are displayed: "As viewers approach the piece, they see their own reflections hollowed out by the countless bullets."[2] For the final works in this series, "Memorial," Hansen uses 12 panels to depict the actual monthly gun homicides in Kentucky in 2016. As he reflects, "This work acknowledges and lays bare the heavy price of having a heavily armed civilian population." So Hansen's work, and *The Trace*'s coverage of it, follows a very common narrative structure that moves from law abiding citizens engaging in a lawful activity of having fun shooting at targets at a gun range to homicidal violence involving guns.

But this narrative from gun culture to gun violence assumes a connection that needs to be documented empirically. Exemplifying the slow progress being made in understanding guns in America, O'Connor and Lizotte (1978, 428) already problematized this narrative four decades ago in a series of questions:

> [H]ow are legitimate uses of guns related to illegitimate uses of guns? . . . [H]unting, sport shooting, and gun collecting are socially ordered activities which place a strong emphasis on the safe and legitimate use of firearms. Are hunters and sport shooters involved in a socially organized activity also likely to use firearms in illegitimate ways? . . . Are there any links between legitimate, socially ordered, activities in which guns are central, and illegitimate, though probably socially ordered, activities in which guns are used?

These questions remain largely unanswered today. In fact, according to a more recent essay by Legault and Lizotte (2009, 469), "A vast majority of legal gun owners never experience the illegal use of guns firsthand." What we see, in fact, is that gun culture and gun crime/violence exist quite literally as different social worlds.

It is often said that the United States has the highest rate of gun violence in the developed world. A study by four authors from the Centers for Disease Control shows that the firearm homicide rate in the United States was 3.66 per 100,000 from 2010–2012 (Fowler, et al. 2015). Among 31 high-income members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. has the highest per capita homicide rate. That is significant. But while aggregating data for the entire United States helps us see some things, it blinds us from others. Most importantly as concerns exposure to homicidal violence, no one lives in "the United States," per se. We live in 50 different states. But we don't just live in one of 50 states, we live in one of over 3,000 particular counties or county-equivalents. But we don't just live in one of 3,000+ counties, we live in one of thousands of cities, towns, municipalities, unincorporated areas, and so on. My risk of being a victim of homicide in my home town of Winston-Salem, is different from the risk in the next city over, Greensboro, or the state's capital, Raleigh. There are cities in gun rich parts of the United States which have extremely low homicide rates, like Henderson (Nevada) at 1.5 per 100,000, Lincoln (Nebraska) at 1.1, and Plano (Texas) at 0.4. If the entire country had Plano's homicide rate, the United States would rank #211 out of 218 countries in the world.

Moreover, even city-wide averages can obscure the realities of relative risk of gun violence. We don't even live in particular cities, but in particular neighborhoods. *The Trace* explored the issue of relative risk in St. Louis, the U.S. city with the highest homicide rate in recent years. "The homicide rates in several neighborhoods in the city are so high," *The Trace* writes, that "they exceeded those in Honduras, the deadliest country in the world" (Team Trace 2017). At the same time, in other neighborhoods in St. Louis, "the risk is negligible." St. Louis is the murder capital of the United States, but some parts more dangerous than Honduras and some parts as safe as Switzerland.

The problem with averages is that no one lives in "The United States." As the CDC researchers observe, "firearm violence is not evenly distributed by geography or among the populations living in these communities. Rather it is highly concentrated in specific 'hot spot' locations and often occurs within high-risk social networks" (Fowler, et al. 2015, 11). Andrew Papachristos, the leading sociologist studying gun violence, utilizes the complex mathematical tools of network analysis to uncover patterns of gun violence in communities. Papachristos shows that gun violence while tragic is rarely

random. Gun violence is concentrated among certain people and in certain places. In Boston, 50% of gun violence takes place on just 3% of streets. Moreover, like a blood borne disease, gun violence travels within social networks. In Boston, 85% of gunshot injuries took place in a network of just 6% of the population (Papachristos, Braga, and Hureau 2012). In Chicago, 41% of homicides take place in a network of just 4% of the population (Papachristos and Wildeman 2014).

Understanding the highly concentrated reality of gun crime and violence has very little to do with understanding American gun culture. With two exceptions. There are two zones of intersection between the legal culture of guns and criminal cultures that involve guns. The first is when "good guys with guns" become "bad guys with guns." The second is a specific instance of the first, when legal gun owners provide guns to criminals in underground gun markets.

Although she focuses largely on the lawful use of firearms by legal gun owners, Carlson devotes a chapter of *Citizen-Protectors* to the case of Aaron, an African American father who Carlson characterizes as "a model gun carrier" (Carlson 2015, 143). Aaron entered a gas station in suburban Detroit as a "good guy with a gun" and left it as a "bad guy"—arrested for felonious assault and eventually pleading guilty to a lesser charge of brandishing for pulling his gun on an unarmed woman. Carlson argues that it was Aaron's *over*-commitment to the citizen-protector ideal promoted in Gun Culture 2.0 that led him to break the law. This problematizes the notion of a bright line distinguishing "good guys" from "bad guys." Indeed, like "talent," being a good guy with a gun or a bad guy with a gun is something we can only recognize after the fact. At the same time, Carlson (2015, 142) herself notes, "Gun carriers . . . are not more likely to commit crime than the general population. As a general rule, a gun carrier is *much* less likely to be arrested than the general population." Clearly, more work needs to be done to understand the processes by which some legal gun owners choose to engage in criminal activities with their guns. One of those ways is when guns move from gun culture to criminal culture through underground gun markets (Cook, et al. 2007). Although the bulk of trafficking in black market guns is done by individuals who have criminal backgrounds, some legal gun owners contribute to the black market through personal gun sales outside the criminal background check system.

CONCLUSION: GETTING BEYOND THE PARTIAL AND PARTISAN

No individual scholar is responsible for covering the entirety of any field of study. But we do have a problem when the collective effort of scholars work-

ing on a particular topic focuses so relentlessly on one part of the entire field. This is the case with the study of guns and gun culture in the human sciences broadly understood. In addition to being partial, the study of guns and gun culture is also too frequently partisan. Only studying guns from the perspective of criminology and epidemiology necessarily leads to policy solutions focused on gun control. So much so that one wonders the extent to which the interest in gun control drives the criminological and epidemiological approaches, rather than vice-versa.

My approach to studying gun culture, which I encourage others to follow, is taken from the late Weberian sociologist Reinhard Bendix. The approach does not advocate a non-existent Archimedean standpoint of objectivity. Rather, as Bendix (1984, 28) summarizes this position, "Social research is characterized by an interplay between identification and detachment, of subjectivity and objectivity."

My identification with guns came not until my 43rd year of life, when a combination of circumstances led me to learn to shoot a handgun under the guidance of my future wife and a trainer for the Highway Patrol. From there I had the opportunity to do more fun shooting: plinking with .22 handguns, trap and sporting clays with shotguns, and destroying plastic bottles with a .50-caliber rifle. I also came to identify with armed self-defense after a very dangerous encounter with a drug addict and criminal in the parking lot of my apartment complex. Thus, even before I began studying Gun Culture 2.0, I had already formulated certain answers to questions such as "What are guns for?" and "Why do people need X/Y/Z gun?" and "Why carry a gun?" I necessarily approach empirical questions about guns with these pre-scientific intuitions and experiences in mind. It is this "value-relevance" which shapes my choice of phenomena to study.

Although I am personally connected with this subject matter—as I was with my previous four books on Catholicism, by the way—my scholarship is not partisan. I am neither pro-gun nor anti-gun; I am pro-truth. In seeking to understand Gun Culture 2.0, I turn not to speculation or advocacy but to my disciplinary training as a professional sociologist which stresses the aspiration to detachment and objectivity in the analysis of empirical data. This was best summarized for me by Reinhard Bendix himself, who I had the good fortune to meet at UC-Berkeley when I was an undergraduate and he a distinguished faculty member. Not long before his death in 1991, Bendix referred me to a quote from the philosopher Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus* (i, 4), which I will always remember as embodying the social scientific ideal to which I still aspire and which I commend to others attempting to understand American gun culture:

I have sedulously endeavored not to laugh at human actions, not to lament them, nor to detest them, but to understand them.

NOTES

1. I am documenting this at even greater length in an ongoing book project, parts of which can be previewed on my blog, *Gun Culture 2.0* (http://www.gunculture 2point0.com).

2. Garret O. Hansen, HAIL Statement from photographer's website at http://www .garrettohansen.com/Hail/Pages/Void-S.html. Retrieved on 15 August 2017.

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