

Guns, Culture, And The Last Century's Seismic Shift

The other day, having followed the aftermath of the latest school shooting (Douglas High School, Parkland, Fl.), I recalled a conversation between my late father and late uncle. I think I was in junior high school (I'm not sure). That's how long the left-liberal effort to control gun ownership has been going on, and this gives me hope that the Second Amendment is safe.

Today, of course, the issue has exploded again. We are regaled in every news broadcast by those emotionally proclaiming that "we need to have a conversation about guns," especially assault weapons.

I need to say up front: Second Amendment issues, types of firearms, the specifics of gun laws, their histories, etc., are not my areas of expertise. I've thus tended to steer clear of them. But our present situation is about more than guns. The upsurge of deadly violence involving firearms over the past couple of decades has not happened in a cultural vacuum. This I *can* write about with confidence.

So to continue: my two elders were recalling how they shot at rats moving in, out, and around a large dumpster behind the house where they grew up. My dad was born in 1923; his brother, in 1925. They became Depression kids, in other words. I also recall stories of their retrieving coal for the stove, which was the only way their parents could keep the place warm during winter months. Depression kids did things like shoot rats to amuse themselves, and it might have even kept the rat population in check (my dad once said he got to be a fairly good shot back then).

Arguably, guns were more prevalent then than they are now, and

kids had greater access to them.

No one gave this a second thought.

And as bad as things were for many families during the Depression, there were no school shootings. There were no epidemics of seemingly random mass murder. There were instances of violence, but they were traceable to specific events, such as unionized worker strikes and responses to them.

A kind of cultural maturity existed back then that does not exist today. Kids learned early that guns are not toys. They acted accordingly (neither my dad nor my uncle would ever have pointed a gun at one another, or at some other kid, not even in jest).

No one acted as if the masses having guns was a danger to the body politic. Why not?

Because the overall mood of the 1930s was considerably more optimistic than that of today.

All one need do to see this is listen to the music of the period. One of the best indices of a culture's mindset is its music. Is it upbeat? Does a culture's music stress positive and uplifting themes, or negative and destructive ones? Are artists performing *to* audiences, or *at* them? Are they celebrating what is good in this imperfect world, or at least appealing to human benevolence? Or are they trying to raze everything to the ground?

The 1930s saw the rise of the big bands in the wake of the "jazz age" of the 1920s. We saw variations like swing. A popular dance of the era was the "jitterbug."

[Listen to this YouTube Video](#)

My parents owned copies of many of those recordings. This was the music on their old record players (which had 78-speed

capabilities) when I was a child. These songs, whose individual themes may differ, communicate a sense of tranquility and inner peace that does not exist today.

Now listen to this, [Judy Garland's signature song](#), from later in the decade:

Her theme is escaping from troubles – but there's no negativity! No harshness! She is singing to her audience. Having listened, you feel uplifted and not like crawling into a closet.

Now compare what you just heard [to this, released last year](#):

I selected this track because British recording artist Gary Numan is intelligent and knows what he is doing. Note the desolation from the first frame. Instead of rainbows, we see a wasteland. Not a blade of grass anywhere; nothing to suggest hopefulness. We hear of "ruin," "vengeance," and "no one is calling." The constantly shifting camerawork, moreover, seems calculated to put you on edge and keep you there. The harsh nightmarishness of the music reinforces and is reinforced by this. The point is, in this track/video there's no peace, no tranquility; there are suggestions of troubles aplenty but no escaping them. It's all negativity. Having listened (assuming you made it all the way through), you don't feel uplifted. You might instead feel like breaking something!

It's a long way from the 1930s to 2017, of course, and popular music has had its uplifting moments and its downcast ones all the way through. But the general trend is clear.

The rock and roll of the 1950s was mostly upbeat. I would argue that cultural optimism in rock continued through the 1960s and early 1970s even if it was infused by psychedelic drugs and went in several directions from the soft and melodious folk-rock classics of Simon & Garfunkel to the "prog" of groups like Yes and ELP to the harder edges of Led Zeppelin.

But in the mid to late 1970s, with “punk rock,” things turned dark:

[Compare this YouTube Video from 1970](#)

[with this YouTube Video from 1977](#)

“Johnny Rotten” is “singing” at people, of course, not to them. And yes, next to him is “Sid Vicious,” who lived up to his stage name by murdering his girlfriend with a butcher knife a year or so later and then, out on bail, dying of a heroin overdose before his trial date. He was 21.

Punk rock groups had names like the Clash, the Dead Boys, the Damned, Suicidal Tendencies, etc. They tended to not rehearse, because their purpose was not to make music but mayhem. Their shows involved not “jitterbugging” with real dance moves requiring actual ability, but “slamdancing” in which audience members jumped up and down (this was called “pogoing”) flailing their arms in circles or careening into others. Fistfights were common; shows were sometimes stopped because of violence.

There were hints of darkness before, of course (especially in New York City “underground” bands), but it was around 1977 that such groups caught on and began to draw a major following, helped by the mainstream rock press, e.g., *Rolling Stone* which promoted punk rock incessantly. The 1980s partially recovered, but a dark underground remained. Rap, of course, was also violent, with its incitements of attacks on police, on white people, etc. – also to be contrasted with the uplifting *soul* which dominated black music in the 1960s or the jazz of someone such as Ella Fitzgerald that prevailed earlier. With very rare exceptions, I could not post exemplars of rap because of their streams of casual obscenities.

Television followed a parallel trajectory once it got started. The 1960s saw family oriented series (e.g., *Leave It To Beaver*) and variety shows (e.g., *The Jackie Gleason Show*) that

were wholesome fun for the whole family. In the late 1970s, popular nighttime “soaps” like *Dallas* introduced cynicism and casual cruelty into their plots, personified by the character J.R. Ewing who acted without conscience using people and situations to climb to the top of the oil business. By the 1980s, police dramas (e.g., *NYPD Blue*) were bringing graphic violence into people’s family rooms on a regular basis.

By the 1990s, TV had descended to the studied absurdity of *Seinfeld*; comedy more broadly had been taken over by “performers” who couldn’t speak three sentences without curses or scatological references. They “performed” in clubs because if television had grown progressively coarser there were still limits, if only because of legal liabilities. Cable had arrived the decade before, of course, and soon offered pay-per-view movie channels some of which dispensed hard core pornography which was, in any event, was readily available on the Internet by the 2000s.

This, of course, doesn’t begin to cover the avalanche of violence in films during this same period. We have also come along way from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) which featured Judy Garland’s song to *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and *American Psycho* (2000).

Obviously, Anglo-American popular culture underwent a long-term seismic shift during the last century. A single article can’t begin to cover all its effects, from music to film and television to technology and its effects.

The materialist worldview had dominated the scientific-philosophical world for at least three decades by the time of the Depression, of course. Leading British philosopher Bertrand Russell had penned [this](#) classic defense of science-based atheism back in 1903. He was not the first to announce that ethically, we were essentially on our own with our “ideals.”

Philosophies such as French existentialism (major exemplars: Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus) were responses in a broad sense to materialist atheism. They focused not on “ideals” so much as on the condition of the human person in a world rendered meaningless and absurd – where we have (as Johnny Rotten would “sing” years later) “no future” except the grave.

The world of the 1930s was still fundamentally Christian, especially in the U.S. Common people looked to Christianity’s transcendent values for morality, for support, and for hope. A Christian worldview was built into most families, into education, and into communities.

This was reflected in the era’s music.

One institution after another, beginning in the early 1950s, removed Christianity from its center – relying on bogus interpretations of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause that ignored “the free expression thereof.” The elimination of prayer from public schools was the most visible and controversial of these moves.

So what does all this have to do with guns?

There aren’t significantly more guns per capita today than there have ever been, but there are more people willing to use them to kill. Why is that? Not simply because guns are available, I argue, but because of the growing sense of absurdity as well as frustrated expectations: the sense even in the mainstream that all we exist for is to earn money to survive or by helping someone else get rich, the overseas wars fought at taxpayer expense most of them unnecessary, have all cheapened life. The legalization of abortion in 1973 was a quantum leap in devaluing human life.

The divine spark in all of us rebels against this in one way or another.

But some will argue, we’ve always had war, and in the past we

had well-known acts of genocide.

The answer is that such acts always provoked horror and revulsion. Today, abortion is proclaimed in feminist classrooms as a “woman’s reproductive right” as we stand on the remains of over 60 million unborn babies slain in their mothers’ wombs.

A significant fraction of what would have been the millennial generation has been aborted. What does that tell us about the value of life not in Soviet Russia or in Nazi Germany, but rather in liberal-secularist America?

Our problem is not guns. Our problem is our prevailing philosophical and cultural ethos, which is nihilistic and destructive.

Get to the point! some will retort. People with criminal backgrounds, or who have diagnosed mental illnesses, should not be legally able to obtain firearms.

Maybe not, but we beg to ask: just what is behind the epidemic of mental illness in this culture? Some (e.g., [this writer](#)) blame the avalanche of pharmaceuticals in the marketplace and invite you to observe that every third television commercial today advertises a drug. While there is abundant evidence that at least some mass killers (those at Columbine in 1999 come to mind) were under Big Pharma’s “loving care” – there’s a problem.

While I’m no friend of Big Pharma’s, millions of people take its products and do not become mass killers. That tells me that trying to establish cause-and-effect here is premature.

Our problem is not pharmaceuticals, unhealthy though they may be, and however unhealthy may be a medical marketplace in which corporations can rake in billions dispensing this stuff.

Still others will argue that all we need to do regarding guns

is go back to the basics: reaffirm our Constitutional right to keep and bear arms (Second Amendment). This Amendment was not written to protect the rights of hunters to shoot ducks. It was written so common people could organize (the "militia") and protect themselves from encroaching tyranny, should it come to that. Either you believe in an inherent right to defend yourself or you do not. Period.

I agree completely, in the abstract. One problem, however, is that being based on logic instead of emotion, this argument brings a knife to, er, a gunfight. For that reason alone it will probably fall on deaf ears. The more important issue, for my purposes here: it, too, misses the larger point.

Our problem is not mere departures from the Constitution, bad as these are. It is the prevailing philosophy and the cultural ethos it has enabled.

I do not mean philosophy in the *academic* sense. Most academic philosophy is worthless (trust me: I was there). Academic philosophers traded relevance for job security long ago, and then – also beginning in the 1970s – threw a big part of the next generation to the wolves. My generation. That's a different article. The point is, they fumbled the ball. The nihilists in music, art, television, cinema, and other arenas picked it up and ran with it.

One other factor is worth discussing briefly. American culture today is hypercompetitive. It is more money-focused than ever before. These factors also tend to isolate people from one another, especially impressionable teens. The emphasis on some having more wealth than others, better lives than others, more fun than others, better sex than others, etc., etc., triggers resentments. Social media offers a bogus sense of connectedness that often exaggerates this fear that *you* are the one losing out.

Financial problems, moreover, tend to break up more families

than any other single isolable factor. For over three decades now, many teenagers – many of whom never had the stable family life that is requisite to a truly healthful development – have been left to fend essentially for themselves, without moral guidance, and so have little trouble deciding that if material reality gets the last word in a world of scarcity based on money and competition where some win and some lose, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with not mere indifference to others but actually hurting them if that's what it takes to be one of the winners.

Capitalism may have done better than any other economic system at producing wealth and prosperity, but its marriage to a materialist worldview has been a cultural and educational disaster, encouraging psychological isolation, seething resentments, kleptocracy among the elites, and sociopathy within the masses.

For a damaged and isolated teenager, angered by additional personal factors (in Nikolas Cruz's case, losing a girlfriend to a breakup last year) and with access to firearms, it is not many more steps to the idea that it is "okay" (or at least, not "wrong") to express one's rage by using them to kill.

The problem, again, is not capitalism or hypercompetition or teenage isolation or the hurt that is often par for the course when immature teen relationships end: things that have happened to most of us at one time or another. The problem is the philosophy that tells us that in the *final analysis* it doesn't mean anything, that human life has no *intrinsic* worth because there are no *fundamental* rights or wrongs, and that therefore if you *want* to do something, such as pick up a gun and kill your classmates, there can be no *ultimate* judgment against it.

The line of thought here may seem startling or harsh or perverse, but is not that different from those in a kleptocratic political class, or in the global corporatocracy,

who woke up one day years ago in their plush circumstances having decided that given the absence of *fundamental* accountability to a Higher Power, there is nothing *wrong* with them increasing their power on Earth and ruling as they see fit, by whatever means are necessary.

As Thrasymachus the worldly sophist scornfully told Socrates in Plato's classic *The Republic*, "justice" is just the will of the stronger party, who defines the term to his advantage.

Without saying that Cruz was consciously thinking any of this – who knows? – philosophy is *not* irrelevant to culture: to the kind of culture that breeds a select number of mass killers who use guns simply because they are available.

A philosophy that dominates intellectual centers (universities) will seep outward by a kind of cultural osmosis, as those they train move into positions of influence. It will work its way through mediating institutions and change them from the inside out. People who are not even aware of its principles intellectually will nevertheless begin to live them. If a replaced worldview expressed and allowed for cultural optimism and the replacing one encourages nihilism and rage, the new cultural products and practices will reflect that.

I submit that this philosophical seismic shift – and not the prevalence of guns in America – bears the brunt of blame for "gun violence": which includes not just school shootings, of course, but the fact that thousands of people will die violently in cities like Chicago this year, and their survivors will not be paraded on camera as have been the kids of Douglas High School as if they had suddenly become experts on why government should immediately institute new gun control measures (even though law enforcement agencies including the FBI had received numerous warnings that Nikolas Cruz was a walking time bomb and did nothing!).

No, more gun bans are not the solution.

Our problem is the culture's prevailing philosophy, which (among other things) tells us we are animals with big brains, that there is no God to Whom we answer, nor any Afterlife, and that some of us are damaged victims and others are victimizers and villains, and that if "we" are to get *justice* (conveniently left undefined) it must be gotten in *this* life, *here* and *now*!

Since most of us are relatively powerless in this life, such a philosophy is a recipe for chaos!

The solution is easy to say but will be very hard to implement.

Debunk materialism. Work to undo its long-term effects. Restore the Christian ethos that once prevailed (minus that era's admitted faults, such as racial discrimination).

What will make this hard to do is not merely the heated emotions of those shouting hysterically that "we need to get rid of guns!" What will make it hard is the fact that our educational system is dysfunctional from top to bottom. Kids are graduating from places like Douglas unable to do basic math, much less understand the intricacies of legal reasoning, whether about guns or much else. The type of conversation we need will therefore be light years over the heads of those currently making the most noise.

It is very difficult to get worldviews discussed publicly. Universities don't teach the concept. The percentage of the population that understands it is vanishingly small. Much of the mainstream is probably unsalvageable. We are told there is a small "remnant" that is reachable (Isaiah 1:9), and it will be this "remnant" that rebuilds whatever is left of this culture – possibly in the guise of localization-focused efforts of the sort I've written about [previously](#). If we are to have any chance of reaching them, we need to start *now* –

not tomorrow, not next week, not at the next election – but now!

[Author's Note: *if you believe this article was worth your time, please consider supporting my writing with a \$5/mo. pledge on [my Patreon site](#). If the first 100 people who read this all donate, my goal of just \$500/mo. would be reached in no time! And if we're honest about it, we all waste that much money each day.*

This is an attempt to raise money to publish and promote a novel, Reality 101, to be marketed as the first serious novel of the Donald Trump era, which, so far as I know, it is. In it, a ex-Wall Street globalist technocrat defends his views on elitism and oligarchy before a community wracked by the effects of globalization in a voice filled with irony and dripping with cynicism – to be contrasted with the possibility of freedom outside the world as he sees it.

Promoting a book, in my case, means the necessity of international travel which is not cheap.

I do not write for an audience of one. I write for you, readers of this site. If you believe this work might make a contribution to the world of political-economic ideas, please consider supporting it financially. I am not a wealthy person, and unlike the leftist groups I often criticize, I do not have a George Soros funneling a bottomless well of cash my way.

If I reach the above goal of \$500/mo., I may be able to speak at an event in your area (contact info below).

I allowed myself (via a handful of reader emails) to be talked out of going into retirement at the end of 2017, to give this at least one more year, but due to my own situation, that will be the best I can do.]

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