

Evil Black Guns: Hate, Instrumentality, and the Neutrality of Firearms

Christopher B. Strain
Florida Atlantic University

ABSTRACT

In the wake of mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado, where 12 moviegoers were killed and 70 injured; Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 children and 6 adult staff members were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School; and elsewhere, concerned citizens may question whether guns are neutral actors in the rage killings and rampage murders that have become increasingly familiar in U.S. society. Rather than revisit the well-worn aphorism “guns don’t kill people: people do,” this article considers a provocative counter-thesis—that firearms may serve not only as mechanisms of violence in shooting rampages but also as catalysts. Can guns themselves cause violence, apart from the motivation and intent of those who wield them? What is the relationship of guns to the triumvirate of hate speech, hate groups, and hate crime? This paper seeks to explore these questions in depth to examine how guns and hate-fueled rhetoric may combine in American society with deadly effect.

INTRODUCTION

The first part of the article explores the notion that guns may be less than neutral—neither tools nor consumer items but objects with particular individualities and contexts of usage that tend to give rise to negative outcomes. This characterization, while unfamiliar, is backed by a growing body of research in the fields of instrumentality and technological determinism. The article presents a new interpretive framework, unpacks its soundness and significance, and encourages consideration of its utility as a meaningful alternative. It moves the reader from the familiar assumption that guns are neutral, to the less familiar notion that they are not neutral, to the rather foreign idea that they may harbor a certain malignancy. The latter section explores the relationship between guns and far-right extremists who employ violent rhetoric to advance a certain worldview centered on hostility toward governmental authority. In this relationship, hate is not only an emotion but also a far-reaching worldview that incorporates a host

of angry, violent, and racist subtexts, some of which rely upon guns not only as rhetorical devices but also as levers of power, control, and terror.

Whether firearms are protected under the U.S. Constitution, or whether they encourage or inhibit street crime, as Lott (1998) has argued, are irrelevant to this discussion: the focus here is on the general metaphysics of the gun. This article is not intended to be a complete exegesis on the ontology of firearms. It is instead intended to explore their status as objects and subjects, their agency (if any), their implementation, and their relationship to hate speech, hate groups, and hate crime.

I. GUNS AS NEUTRAL

Public dialogue about firearms in the United States—including political debate about the constitutionality of firearms, the right to bear arms, and the intent of the Framers of the Constitution—tends to frame guns as neutral instrumentalities. Guns are construed by those who oppose tougher gun laws and by those who support tougher gun laws alike as *things acted upon*, not as things that possess their own agency or that manifest a causal interrelationship between subject and object or user and used. Accordingly, the defense of the Second Amendment is often framed by the assumption of guns as passive receptors; in other words, it takes *someone* to design, manufacture, advertise, sell, purchase, possess, load, hold, aim, and discharge a firearm. Within this framework, guns are described as:

- 1) inanimate objects,
- 2) consumer goods like any other,
- 3) tools, and
- 4) amoral entities.

These four conventions are central in the overarching assumption that firearms are neutral—so central, in fact, that they may be used as interchangeable premises or even as tautologies that support this overarching assumption.

First, guns are often seen as inanimate objects, lacking agency beyond that of the persons who wield them. They sit in racks, closets, nightstands, glove boxes, and holsters where they wait to be implemented; without that implementation, a gun has no life force of its own. They are machines: screws, springs, and other metal parts, stamped and assembled by human hands to accomplish a task.

The guns-as-inanimate convention shades easily into the second: the claim that guns are the same as other consumer goods. Guns are no differ-

ent from toasters insofar as they are consumer products, bought and sold in free-market trade.

The third convention relates to utilitarian value. As tools, guns are implements manipulated by others to accomplish certain ends, whether defensive, military, or sporting. Ranchers use firearms to protect their livestock; hunters use them to harvest food or procure trophies; police officers use them not only to protect themselves but also to keep the peace. Wayne LaPierre, current president of the National Rifle Association (NRA), notes that guns “are kept as tools in the country, much as lawnmowers are kept as tools in the suburbs” and euphemistically refers to guns as “certain hardware items” (LaPierre, 1994, p. xiv-xv).

Fourth and finally, guns are neither good nor bad; it is a category error to ascribe to them any inherent moral valence. They can be used for good purposes (for self-protection, say, or to put meat on the table) or for bad purposes (in carrying out a crime, for instance), but firearms themselves exist in a kind of amoral stasis. They are neither moral nor immoral, lying outside the sphere in which moral judgments apply. This logic led actor Charlton Heston, then president of the NRA, to proclaim on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on May 18, 1997:

There are no good guns. There are no bad guns. Any gun in the hands of a bad man is a bad thing. Any gun in the hands of a decent person is no threat to anybody—except bad people. . .¹

And, again, on Fox News on September 15, 1997:

There’s no such thing as a good gun. There’s no such thing as a bad gun. A gun in the hands of a bad man is a very dangerous thing. A gun in the hands of a good person is no danger to anyone except the bad guys. . .²

Accordingly, neutrality is a fundamental tenet of the pro-gun lobby in the U.S., as represented by the NRA, whose rhetoric often emphasizes firearms as blank tableaux upon which meaning is projected.

Self-described as “America’s foremost defender of Second Amendment rights,” the NRA has consistently asserted since the late 1960s that guns are only as malevolent as those who would use them for ill purposes. Its most effective expression of that idea is the well-known slogan, “guns don’t kill people: people do.” It is a tautology that cannot be effectively disproven; guns do not aim and shoot themselves, and people have always killed one another—even without guns. Rather than advocating any form of gun control, the NRA has suggested a number of other solutions to gun violence, everything from gun locks to tougher penalties for crime. Guns themselves are not part of the problem. Guns themselves are inert. It is a

simple, clear position, one that offers an easy, sensible-sounding talking point in any public debate over firearms.

Assumptions about the neutrality of guns have led to analogies intended to illustrate the absurdity of non-neutrality as well as the importance of user intent. If guns cause crime, some opponents of stricter gun laws have argued, then matches cause arson, pencils cause misspelled words, and forks cause overeating and weight gain. For the gun enthusiast, the incredibility of the pro-gun control position is self-evident in such blaming-the-tool-not-the-user comparisons.

II. GUNS AS NON-NEUTRAL

Each of the four conventions relied upon to support the guns-as-neutral thesis are susceptible to counterarguments based on a different set of assumptions. If guns are tools, for example, then they are tools designed with the explicit purpose of killing: an act considered in most moral frameworks to be wrong. They can be hung on the wall and used decoratively, or they can be used to dig a hole in the ground, but their design indicates the preferred end for which they “should” be used. If guns are consumer objects like any other, then why are they not regulated like blenders or microwaves or other common household items? Why are they not rendered less harmful through built-in safety considerations, like a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) designed to protect one from electrical shock? The answer, of course, lies in the fact that firearms are regulated differently from other consumer items because they *are* different from other consumer items; they are *expressly* intended to be able to take life, unlike blenders and GFCIs, and altering that fundamentally lethal purpose would result in something quite un-gun-like.

Of the four conventions, the guns-as-consumer-goods convention suffers the most from conflicting messages from the gun lobby. On the one hand, gun manufacturers claim that they are producing a product like any other consumer product; on the other, they sometimes claim special exemption from the same considerations that govern other manufacturers (Kopel, April 2000). For example, gun manufacturers are exempt from federal consumer product safety regulation. Not accountable to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, they are historically immune from lawsuits filed by victims seeking to hold gun manufacturers and sellers accountable for their role in marketing and supplying guns to criminals. Product liability cases involving firearms have been successful only when injury is alleged to have occurred due to malfunction or inadequate instructions or warnings. Of more interest are cases where guns function exactly as intended: while there have been many attempts to argue that guns are defective because they

are dangerous, the fact that a weapon injures or kills when fired has not traditionally been considered a defect in and of itself in American jurisprudence—namely because the gun lobby was able to gain an exemption for firearms from the 1972 Consumer Product Safety Act, the primary federal law that protects consumers from products which present unreasonable risk of injury. Whether guns could be made safer without affecting their intended function or destroying their utility remains unclear: there is no federal law or regulatory authority to set minimum safety standards for domestically manufactured firearms (Bejar, 1998).³

In legal terms, one must consider not only foreseeable use of a product but also intended use and actual use. If one argues that guns are *not* designed with intent to kill—thinking, perhaps, of target shooting or recreational applications—then one must at least concede that they are intended to launch projectiles at extremely high velocities, resulting in higher potential lethality at longer distances than most other close-quarter weapons. To date there have been no mass killing rampages with toasters or dining forks, and if guns are like pencils, then they do not come with erasers.

Of most interest is scholarship (Hoskin, 2001; Kleck, 1991; Tedeschi and Felson, 1994) that has pointed to guns not as subjects acted upon but rather as *actors in their own right*—active participants in their own use and operation. The intended use and disposition to be used are built into an object, but still require interaction in order for its power and utility to be realized; in this way it is intersubjective not unlike a painting or a sculpture. Pragmatists influenced in the tradition of William James or John Dewey might argue that there exist interactivities not only between gun and user but also between user and designer, manufacturer, and seller. In other words, the knowledge is built into the tool, and that knowledge predicates proper or intended use (and users). A few scholars, however, have carried the pragmatist view even further into the realm of agency. Zimring (1968) has described a “weapon instrumentality” effect, in which the presence of a gun increases the likelihood of injury and death—independent of motivation, intent, and usage. Guns alter power relationships between people by extending one’s personal command over a given situation. Accordingly, the presence of a gun may produce violence by emboldening and empowering an aggressor (or defendant) by giving its wielder the power and courage to act violently in a way he or she might not normally act. This phenomenon has been referred to as “facilitation” (Hoskin, 2001).

Such scholarship points toward the idea that guns may serve as a stimulus for heightened violence: a kind of cue for aggressive or violent behavior. According to Berkowitz and LePage (1967), guns can act as “aggression-eliciting stimuli.” Frustration and anger can lead people to act violently. Because of the learned association between weapons and aggress-

sive behavior, the sight or presence of a gun can evoke aggression in an angry or emotionally disturbed person. Noting that the finger pulls the trigger but “the trigger may also be pulling the finger,” Berkowitz (1968) has further argued that the presence of a gun can elicit negative thoughts along with negative emotions, thereby intensifying pre-existing negative emotion. In these ways, guns provide “stage directions” by prompting certain attitudes, behaviors, and actions (Selinger, 2012). As one young gangster explained to Hochschild (1995), “a gun want [sic] to get blood on itself. . . It want to get a body on it” (p. 201). If indeed guns “want” to be used, then their neutrality might be further questioned. The idea that guns themselves cause violence is relatively unexplored by policymakers and politicians in the U.S. (Strain, 2010).

The presumption that guns are neutral is part of a broader notion that technology is neutral—which is itself problematic, deriving from an effort to absolve the creators of technology from any responsibility for the consequences of their designs, according to Rey (2012). “From Frankenstein’s monster turning on its creator to Robert Oppenheimer’s own reflections on creating the bomb,” Rey writes, “Western civilization has wrestled with the question of where responsibility resides in atrocities facilitated by technology.” Technology is not neutral, according to the author, “because its birth—its very existence—is the product of both political forces and values-oriented decision making.” In other words, science and technology do not occur in a vacuum. Technological inventions are the product of human hands and minds; as such they are created with certain human assumptions—most of which, according to Haraway (1989, 1991), are both masculinized and corporatized—built into them.

According to Selinger (2012), the most common view of technology is the “instrumentalist” view that technology is value-neutral, subservient to human beliefs and desires, which it neither constrains nor determines; it is this view reflected by the aphorism “guns don’t kill people: people do.” A shooter learns that he or she alone is ultimately responsible for the consequences of pulling a trigger; however, “by equating firearm responsibility exclusively with human choice,” argues Selinger, “the NRA claim abstracts away relevant considerations about how gun possession can affect one’s sense of self and agency.” Such a position fails to convey the perceptual “affordances” provided by firearms and the transformative results of yielding to these affordances. The author notes:

To someone with a gun, the world takes on a distinctive shape. It not only offers people, animals, and things to interact with, but also potential targets. Furthermore, gun possession makes it easy to be bold, even hot-headed. Physically weak, emotionally passive, and psychologically introverted people will all be inclined to experience shifts in demeanor.

Responding to Don Ihde, a leading philosopher of technology, the author further explains how “guns mediate the human relation to the world through a dialectic in which aspects of experience are both ‘amplified’ and ‘reduced’.” The world seems less dangerous when armed with a gun—at the same time that more opportunities are offered, which might be suitably resolved through violent means. Selinger concludes with the observation by French interdisciplinary scholar Bruno Latour that the experience of possessing a gun actually changes the shooter. “You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with your holding it,” Latour has argued. “You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you.”

Selinger’s argument sums up the view of *technological determinism*: that a human invention does, in fact, have a kind of animus (as disposition, not as anything specifically negative or hateful) beyond that of other simple objects. Such is the view of Melvin Kranzberg (1986), whose views have been reified among philosophers of technology simply as “Kranzberg’s Laws,” the first of which is “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.” The author cites DDT—once thought to be a boon for its ability to eliminate disease-carrying pests, now villified for its ability to disrupt ecological systems—as an example of technology having different results in different contexts under different circumstances than originally envisioned. A better example might be Agent Orange, whose original compound was discovered by Dr. Arthur Galston, a botanist intent on helping soybean production; regardless, the lesson here is that when seemingly benign technologies are implemented on a massive scale, unforeseen consequences can arise. Certainly the same can be said for weapons technology, though itself hardly benign. In a world in which technology enables widespread destruction (*vis-à-vis* nuclear warheads or other “weapons of mass destruction”) or limited destruction (as in the impersonal but imperfect “targeted” killing of drone strikes), the presumed innocence of technology, even for things never actually used, must be subject to further scrutiny.

Given some evidence of guns as aggression-eliciting stimuli, as power brokers in human interactions, and as lethal devices, it may make little sense to view them as neutral entities. Furthermore, given the absence of neutrality in technology itself—particularly in destructive technologies—it may be plausible that guns could harbor a kind of animus beyond current understanding. Further research is needed in this realm.

III. GUNS AS “BAD” OR “EVIL”

In critiquing Heidegger (1977) and his understanding of technology, Latour (1999) provides a bridge between the conceptualization of guns-as-

nonneutral and guns-as-“bad.” Every technological artifact has its own built-in script, he argues, capable of guiding a user to play roles in its own story. A hammer, for example, is meant to pound other objects and through its design encourages users to do so: who, with a hammer in his or her hand, has not at some point wanted to pound something? The author describes this transformative implementation as a process which he calls *translation*, in which both agents (the user and the artifact) create a new goal that corresponds to neither agent’s original program of action: “the prime mover of an action becomes a new, distributed, and nested series of practices whose sum may be possible to add up but only if we respect the mediating role of all the actants mobilized in the series” (p. 181). He discusses guns, in particular, as an example of translation, in which a citizen is transformed by carrying a gun, which “*adds something*” to the act of its use (p. 177). It instructs, directs, even contributes to its own implementation; agents (or actants) can therefore be nonhuman. “If I define you by what you have (the gun), and by the series of associations that you enter when you use what you have (when you fire the gun),” he writes, “the you are modified by the gun—more or less so, depending on the weight of the other associations that you carry” (p. 179). And not always for the better: “A good citizen becomes a criminal, a bad guy becomes a worse guy; a silent gun becomes a fired gun, a new [unused] gun becomes a used gun, a sporting gun becomes a weapon” (p. 180).

If, as Latour argues, the mere presence of guns can alter the likelihood of violent outcome, then one must relinquish the assumption that guns are neutral, independent, amoral objects/tools akin to other consumer goods. *If* guns are in fact not neutral, then it stands to reason that they might engender a particular axiological disposition—which is to say they might tend to be “good” or “bad” (or both). Any device designed and intended to take life can hardly be considered unqualifiedly “good” or indeed even contingently good, if, in fact, one considers life to be sacred; therefore, all guns, even when used for righteous purposes (for self-defense) or social sanctioned purposes (by law enforcement personnel) probably shade into the realm of “necessary evil” at best—or into something much more onerous at worst.

Consider the firearm currently under the lens of public scrutiny: the military-style assault rifle. At times, particular models (e.g., the TEC-9, popularized on the television show *Miami Vice* in the 1980s and by gangbangers in the early 1990s) or genres of guns (e.g., cheap, small-caliber imports or “Saturday Night Specials,” used not only in street crime and bar fights in the 1960s but also in the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968) have drawn criticism, strict regulation, or even outright bans. In the 1990s, military-style assault rifles were targeted because of their high-capacity,

rapid-fire abilities. Most recently, because of what happened in Newtown, the military-style assault rifle is again under fire.

According to Lieutenant Paul Vance of the Connecticut State Police, the primary weapon used by Adam Lanza in the Sandy Hook shooting was a .223-caliber Bushmaster rifle; the same make and caliber used by the D.C. sniper in 2002 (Almasy, 2012; Johnson, 2012). The Bushmaster may be considered a so-called “evil black rifle,” part of a family of guns related mainly by function and appearance. Popularized by gun enthusiasts on online shooting forums, the term has come to mean any military-style assault rifle, though it originally referred to the civilian variants of the M-16, namely the AR-15. When those who supported stricter gun laws began to distinguish in the 1990s between sporting firearms used for hunting and fast-cycling, high-capacity, semi-automatic “assault rifles” used for military and paramilitary purposes, those who opposed stricter guns laws began to refer to the latter, with their plastic stocks and matte finishes, as “evil black rifles.” Tongue-in-cheek, the term was intended to highlight the futility of distinguishing between particular firearms based on cosmetic appearance. Opponents of stricter laws argued that there was no real difference, apart from looks and after-market accessories, between their own “EBRs” and Grandpa’s semi-automatic hunting rifle (a .30-06 Remington Model 74, perhaps, with wood stocks and blued finish); they were functionally identical. No gun is inherently evil, they argued, but if supporters of stricter laws insisted on singling out particular firearms to demonize, then they would happily tout their preference for their own utilitarian and “ominous-looking” assault rifles.

Opponents of stricter laws are correct in noting that certain firearms should not be demonized because of the way they look. Whether dressed in black plastic stocks or not, a semi-automatic hunting rifle is little different (except in terms of how much ammunition they hold) from a semi-automatic military-style rifle. Moreover, within the neutrality paradigm, it is impossible to view *all* guns as anything other than inanimate, amoral tools, no different from other consumer goods. Outside that paradigm, however, lies a different and troubling possibility: in a non-neutral paradigm, guns have agency as pieces of technology with built-in predilections and biases, as actors in interpersonal conflict and, possibly, as morally significant entities. In this paradigm, it is not that EBRs *look* deadly, nor is it a matter of certain guns being more dangerous or more wicked-looking than others. It is in fact that *all guns* may be considered dangerous, “wicked,” and—with the aforementioned axiology—evil (for lack of a better word).

In a society with 300 million firearms in civilian hands, and in which more American civilians have died from domestic gunfire over the past forty-five years than U.S. soldiers killed in all of the nation’s wars from the

Revolutionary War onward (including the Civil War), the implications of the “evilness” of guns, though unclear, are far from insignificant. Some researchers (Passas, 2004; Davidson, 1996) include the firearms industry with both licit and illicit enterprises—everything from the tobacco industry to pesticide companies—in their studies of corporate power and abuse, which can create negative externalities (or unintended, harmful side effects). Large sectors of society consider certain products, such as alcohol or pornography, to be socially harmful; though perfectly legal, such products are still deemed offensive, inappropriate, or detrimental, usually for moral reasons, and on this basis subject to heightened regulatory control. For many, guns are part of this matrix. While there is sharp ambivalence in the American mind regarding firearms, public perceptions of the firearms industry have soured with every high-profile school shooting in the 1990s and 2000s, as it again became easier for some Americans to see gun manufacturers as “merchants of death” (as in the 1930s when this phrase was first popularized).

IV. GUNS AS INSTRUMENTS OF HATE

Again, of most interest here is the relationship, if any, between guns and hate. If guns arguably have complex agency that includes the ability to elicit aggression and violent action, then what effect can they have in the hands of those who openly express hate-filled views? While there is presumably interest in guns on both sides of the political divide, including the extremes, it is the far-right where the most emphasis is put on gun rights and civilian ownership. It is also this sector of U.S. society where the politics of enmity, so often displayed in conservative discourse, have the most potential to devolve from hate speech into hate crime (Dharmapala & McAdams, 2005).

Railing against the “liberal elite” whom they decry as having deprived their audiences of their rightful place in American public life, media demagogues have whipped up other white males through a brand of journalism in which listeners/viewers are sometimes left to conclude through inductive reasoning that misogynistic, homophobic, xenophobic, and/or racist responses would not be unreasonable. As Reimler (1999) points out, when white males, raised with an expectation of certain privileges based on race, gender, or sexuality come to the realization that being white may not necessarily give them a “free pass,” then it is unsurprising that some of these individuals choose to lash out at society in general, or at specific minorities which seem to threaten their hegemony. Ready to actualize their hate, extremists carry this irrational aggression to its furthest limits. As Levin et al. (1993, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2014–15) have noted, those who disseminate

hate-filled messages do not necessarily participate in hate crime themselves, instead aiming to incite others to act; the relationship between hate speech and hate crime, if distal, can still be causal, rather than proximate and correlative. The messages of anti-minority, anti-female, and anti-homosexual rhetoric therefore have potentially dangerous consequences when heard by a disaffected, disillusioned, and disempowered audience.

When that same audience is also heavily armed, the problem compounds and worsens: if the politics of exclusion create enemies (be they “gangbangers” or “illegals”), then fear-based consumption pushes an increasingly well-armed minority to horde even more firearms. In response to concerns that the federal and state governments would limit the sale of firearms and ammunition, consumers have responded with “panic buying,” scooping up guns and ammo in record numbers; ammunition shortages occurred after President Barack Obama’s election in 2008 (National Public Radio, 2009) and again in 2012 after the Sandy Hook massacre. Increased demands from civilians, federal agencies, and the military help to explain the shortages, with retail sporting goods stores enjoying the boost in sales. Gun manufacturers and dealers, backed by powerful lobbying groups such as the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and the NRA—with its assurances of governmental gun-grabbing, always just around the corner—obviously profit considerably from such buying habits (Miniter, 2013; Valentine, 2013).

Weapons caching and hate-based paranoia seem to go hand-in-hand. Far-right extremists come in different flavors and varieties; however, the one thing they seem to share—whether white supremacist, anti-federalist, survivalist, millennialist, or some combination of the above—is an appreciation of guns. As Perliger (2012) explains, the far-right is multifaceted, including the belief that the American political system was hijacked by external forces interested in promoting a “New World Order” in which the U.S. will be absorbed into the United Nations or another version of global government. These individuals and groups often espouse strong convictions regarding the federal government, believing it to be corrupt and tyrannical with a natural tendency to intrude on individuals’ civil and constitutional rights; they also often support civil activism, individual freedoms, and self-government. By itself, none of these convictions distinguishes the far-right from other strains of political and jurisprudential thought duly skeptical of the dangers of tyrannical government; instead, what is distinctive is the insistence that the right to bear arms be interpreted as the individual freedom that enables civil activism in defense of self-governance. The Second Amendment is the foundation upon which these other convictions rest; therefore, extremists in the anti-federalist movement direct

most of their animosity toward the supposed gun-grabbing ploys of the federal government and its proxies in law enforcement.

Stern (1996) has traced this fascination with firearms across a generation of far-right extremists, from the Minutemen of the 1960s to the militias of the 1990s, many of which are still active. The Minutemen stockpiled everything from machineguns to bazookas and flamethrowers. A generation later the Trochmann family (John, David, and Randy) used gun control to launch the Militia of Montana: as John Trochmann explained, “Gun control is only for one thing: people control” (p. 72). Furthermore, Stern explains how gun ownership “has become a benchmark of liberty” (p. 109). Trochmann and others used guns as symbols of freedom. Government agents who would regulate guns were cast as tyrants interested—*before* doing anything else—in disarming the citizenry in order to subjugate them; without means to resist, a disarmed populace were at the mercy of tyrants. In this framework, people have a right to arm themselves in order to engage and defeat U.S. military forces. To make this argument, militias focused on the Second Amendment to legitimize their agendas; in doing so, their rhetoric coincided with NRA rhetoric. Both the militias and the NRA advanced what Stern calls “an alternative interpretation of the Second Amendment” to justify not only the individual right to bear arms but also the right to resist the government. It is a philosophy that borrows more from Mao Tse Tung, who argued that power grows from the barrel of a gun, than from the faith in democratic process and principle as articulated by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other American founders.

Horwitz and Anderson (2009) have explained the centrality of guns in right-wing ideology as a function of an antigovernment sentiment they call “Insurrectionism,” a worldview hostile toward public education, immigration, international institutions (such as the United Nations), and almost any type of social welfare program, especially those run by the federal government. Noting that antigovernment sentiment is not confined to gun enthusiasts, the authors point out that “the Insurrectionist idea” adds “an emotionally charged element to the standard conservative critique.” That is, “big government is not just inefficient or even corrupt but is an alien force that threatens to annihilate us if we fail to exercise constant vigilance against its natural tendencies toward tyranny” (p. 2). As this idea gains traction, moving from the far-right extreme toward the middle of conservative (and even some progressive) thinking, democratic values are threatened:

Right-wing populists are attracted to the idea that Insurrection through force of arms is a morally and legally legitimate instrument of political expression in a democracy largely because it fits neatly with their core

ideological premises—that is, that the government should be kept in a condition of weakness because collective approaches to social problems are wasteful at best and more often constitute an insidious threat to individual liberty. (p. 3)

In the view of Insurrectionists, who see themselves as self-protectively preparing against governmental threat, guns provide the means to keep the state in a condition of weakness.

Other scholars have reached similar conclusions. Crothers (2003) notes that militia groups in the 1990s convinced themselves that the Founding Fathers believed power should remain in the hands of the people to stop usurpation of governmental power; in their wisdom, the Founders envisioned an armed populace that could rise up at any time to overthrow elected officials. Accordingly, the author notes, “Perhaps no other policy exemplifies federal government abuse of authority better than gun control,” an important symbol of governmental evil for militias, survivalists (or “preppers”), and doomsdayers (p. 53). As part of a larger plot to undermine the individual freedoms “guaranteed” in the Constitution—perhaps even part of an international plot orchestrated at high-levels—gun control represents a particular menace to militias, whose status as armed citizens empowers them to defend themselves against a hostile government. Only guns, and the freedom to own them without restriction, spell the difference between tyranny and freedom. To limit gun ownership, and the number and type one can own, would be to limit one’s ability to check this menace; in this schema, gun control is a kind of attack on liberty itself. For those already heavily armed, it is but a small step from guns as the objects of political debate to guns as supplements to political activism used to intimidate, threaten, and control the parameters of the debate—and perhaps even to guns as political actants themselves.

It is here—in that liminal space between hate speech and hate crime, where certain individuals and groups promise to carry through on their threats and ideations—that the relationship between hate and firearms is most dangerous. In describing the lethality of far-right extremists, Perliger likens far-right violence to an iceberg, with a wide base of attacks by unaffiliated individuals that become more focused and deadly as those individuals affiliate with other like-minded individuals in organizations. The author finds that “the narrower parts of the iceberg are indeed sharper,” with a smaller number of more lethal attacks (Perliger, p. 143). Stern (1996) employs a similar metaphor, with one interviewee likening the 1990s militia movement to a “funnel moving through space,” able to pick up people at the large end through mainstream issues, such as gun control, and feed them conspiracy theories as they went further in; zealots, easily identifying with

anti-government dogma, popped out of the small end of the funnel after becoming increasingly willing and eager to kill along the way.

Reasoning that any concessions toward reform will inevitably slip slopingly toward confiscation, the National Rifle Association has done its part to enable such individuals by consistently opposing gun control (Davidson, 1998). A vintage NRA publication that criticized the 1911 Sullivan Act (which required New Yorkers to obtain a police-issued or court-ordered license to possess a firearm) argued, “Any law which. . . depends on the cooperation of the criminal has no chance of being effective” (Trefethen and Serven, 1967, p. 291). Since then, the NRA position has grown increasingly rigid and unyielding (Winkler, 2011; Melzer, 2012). As the foremost political lobbying entity for the gun-manufacturing industry, the NRA has led the cry that a strong government is antithetical to freedom—though few observers have noted that organization’s financial self-interest in promoting such a message. The shriller the warnings of confiscation, the more guns are sold. Sales spiked in 1993 and 1994, for example, before passage of the Brady Bill; sales of machine guns—“Class III” firearms restricted under the 1934 National Firearms Act—shot up dramatically in anticipation of the 1986 National Firearm Owners Protection Act, which further restricted sales of such weapons; and ammo flew off shelves in December 2008, when gun enthusiasts (wrongly) anticipated a gun-grabbing attempt by President-elect Barack Obama.

Much of the hoarding hysteria stems from online speculation about the possibility of gun-grabbing by the government. Online blogs, discussion boards, and listservs provide three important venues to express anti-gun control views, and the relative anonymity of the Internet provides a relatively anonymous forum for hate speech. The interplay between discussions about guns on pro-gun, anti-government, pro-militia, and “prepper” websites is quite fluid, with a shared tendency for hyperbolic rage. The amount of hate expressed on *Stormfront.org*, the Internet’s “premier” white-supremacist website is unsurprising, but similar views expressed on *AR15.com* or The Firing Line (whose staff fights a constant battle to check ad hominem attacks against various politicians) can be shocking to the uninitiated. One author (Adams, 2011) has described the trolling and online disinhibition, or “deindividuation,” that tends to make online exchanges susceptible to more spitefulness than is customary in face-to-face communication:

Deindividuation is what happens when we get behind the wheel of a car and feel moved to scream abuse at the woman in front who is slow in turning right. It is what motivates a responsible father in a football crowd to yell crude sexual hatred at the opposition or the referee. And it’s why under the cover of an alias or an avatar on a website or a blog—sur-

rounded by virtual strangers—conventionally restrained individuals might be moved to suggest a comedian should suffer all manner of violent torture because they don't like his jokes, or his face.

Anonymous bullying of this sort is comparatively risk-free for the bully; apart from its effects on the bullied, its greatest danger lies in its contribution to an uncivil public dialogue in which certain participants cannot distinguish between the bluster of empty threats and the real McCoy. Others (Kirshenbaum, 2011; Wolf, 2011) have also noted the toxic effects of online hate speech, worsened by the anonymity of pseudonyms.

The admiration by far-right extremists of the NRA and its policies—all of which revolve around the elevation of the Second Amendment to individual-rights primacy—seems to derive from an increasingly flagrant disregard for efforts to regulate guns, a disregard itself catalytic to outlaw subculture. Timothy McVeigh, bomber of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, internalized the mantra, “The day guns are outlawed is the day I’ll become an outlaw,” which would morph into the more widely intoned, “When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns.” So incensed was he by the 1993 standoff at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas (that ended in an inferno in which more than eighty people died) that McVeigh arrived onsite during the standoff to demonstrate his support of the besieged Davidians; atop a nearby hill, McVeigh set up a roadside stand where he distributed bumper stickers with messages such as “Fear the Government that Fears Your Gun,” “Politicians Love Gun Control,” and “Ban Guns: Make the Streets Safe for a Government Takeover” (Linder, 2006). Many far-right extremists have embraced an outlaw identity in championing gun rights—a phenomenon only partially related to the fact that some are, in fact, actual outlaws. McVeigh’s instruction manual, in fact, was William Pierce’s novel *The Turner Diaries* (1978), an imaginative account of insurrection and an influential text in far-right circles. *The Turner Diaries* poses the rhetorical question, “What will they do when they come for your guns?” For Pierce, the answer was simple: start a race war (Jackson, 2004).

Other gestures are non-racialized but no less dramatic. The outlaw subculture has a legal but controversial counterpart in the open-carry movement, in which proponents openly wear holstered sidearms in public. Forty-four states have laws which allow firearms to be carried in public view with little or no restrictions; by actually doing so, open-carriers hope to draw attention to their Second Amendment rights. Their protests—as when a 22-year-old man carried an AR-15 into a Kroger supermarket in Charlottesville, Virginia, in January 2013—can be dramatic and alarming

for customers unused to seeing firearms carried in public (Urbina, 2010; Hausman, 2013).

This flair for spectacle and hyperbole has become a staple of NRA posturing. At an August 2007 concert in Oroville, California, rock musician Ted Nugent brandished two assault rifles onstage and invited then presidential candidate Barack Obama to “suck on one of these, ya punk”; during the campaign he also called Obama a “piece of s**t.” Nugent—who has served on the NRA Board of Directors since 1995—later railed against President Obama, Supreme Court Justices, and others at the NRA Convention in St. Louis on April 14, 2012, when he accused policymakers in Washington of “wiping their ass with the [U.S.] Constitution.” Nugent pledged that if Obama were re-elected he would be either “dead or in jail by this time next year,”—killed or incarcerated, presumably, in attempting to assassinate the president. Such tirades prompted an investigation of Nugent by the U.S. Secret Service (Dwyer, 2012).

If Nugent is an extremist, he is not alone in the upper echelons of NRA leadership. Yet it is not simply discomposd absolutists who use such language to display both affinity for firearms and acrimony toward gun control and those who would advance it. Mainstream Republican politicians have also voiced views that echo the rhetoric of far-right extremists on guns, individual freedoms, and ancillary topics. In the 1990s, for example, the late Helen Chenoweth-Hage [R-Idaho] heartened militiamen and white supremacists in her adopted state when she voiced the suspicion that armed federal agents were landing black helicopters on Idaho ranchers’ properties to enforce the Endangered Species Act, as many conspiracy theorists had long suspected (Egan, 1995). After Republicans took control of Congress in 1994, Newt Gingrich [R-Georgia] announced, “As long as I am Speaker of the House, no gun control legislation is going to move”; presidential hopeful John McCain [R-Arizona], who supported a number of gun-control reforms, locked up NRA support in 2008 by declaring, “I strongly support the Second Amendment and I believe the Second Amendment ought to be preserved—which means no gun control” (Winkler, 2011). It is this ability of the NRA—to inculcate its core principles in the very halls of the U.S. Capitol—that makes it a formidable lobbying group in Washington, D.C.

NRA pretense takes many forms. Under newly elected president Charlton Heston, the National Rifle Association held its 1999 annual convention in Denver, while under protest from those who urged a change of venue, no less than one week after the Columbine massacre in nearby Littleton, Colorado. There, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had killed twelve students and one teacher after leaving behind a hate-laced video diary (Hendren, 1999). Hoisting a rifle above his head at the 2000 annual convention in Charlotte the following year, Heston told Democratic presidential nomi-

nee Al Gore that he could have his gun when he pried it from Heston's cold, dead fingers. This posturing—an unapologetic defiance, a kind of gleeful acceptance of the collateral damage of guns in American life, and a thumb-in-the-eye to the politicians, policymakers, and reformers who would attempt to stop rampage violence and hate crime—came in the wake of school shootings like the ones in Littleton or, more recently, in Newtown, Connecticut. As Heston's successor, Wayne LaPierre has written (1994), "I submit that the actions of criminals and lunatics are irrelevant to my own right to own and use firearms in pursuit of my own personal enjoyment," thus effectively arguing that his personal affinity for recreational shooting and other "personal enjoyment" trumps the need for public safety (p. xiv). Most recently, LaPierre challenged President Obama's efforts to reform gun laws after the Sandy Hook massacre, when he vowed to increase NRA membership rolls and ramp up efforts to stop reform. Writing in *The Daily Caller*, a conservative news website, he pledged:

We will not appease. We will buy more guns than ever. We will use them for sport and lawful self-defense more than ever. We will grow the NRA more than ever. And we will be prouder than ever to be freedom-loving NRA patriots. . . We will Stand and Fight. (LaPierre, 2013)

Those who oppose stricter gun laws have highlighted the importance of proper mental health care and the necessity of keeping guns out of the hands of criminals. However, in light of LaPierre's style of rhetoric, it should come as little surprise that some foreign observers have questioned whether Americans have come to value guns more than we value the lives of our own children (Matsuda, 2013-14; Strain, pp. 3-5).

CONCLUSION

This article advances an admittedly provocative thesis, one that presents many "ifs," and certainly more research is needed on the instrumentality and axiology of firearms. In evaluating this thesis, four additional considerations are worth pondering. First, Americans from across the entire political spectrum adulate firearms. In this sense, "gun love" is apolitical; appreciation of and affection toward firearms is not limited to the far-right extreme. Second, attitudes toward firearms are varied and complex in the U.S. Gun ownership and attitudes toward guns are complicated; the former is no predictor of the latter. Many gun owners seek responsible reform, just as many Americans who do not own guns champion the rights of those who do. Third, a vast majority of Americans see a need for substantive change in gun policy. Americans seem to agree on the need to keep firearms away

from certain people who would use them to do harm to others, and a variety of polls taken after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary indicated that nearly all Americans continued to support mandatory background checks for gun buyers (including at gun shows), with steady majorities supporting a ban on magazines that allow ten or more bullets to be fired before reloading (Clement, 2012). Fourth and finally, guns and hate can create a toxic mix in American society, with its liberal guns laws (under the Second Amendment) and its general legal protection of hate speech (under the First Amendment), so long as that speech falls within a constitutionally-protected speech form.

According to Dorélien et al. (2009), three factors have combined in recent years to make this mix more dangerous. First, hate groups are on the rise. Second, the incendiary rhetoric of the gun lobby has ramped up fears of gun owners with false claims that the government is moving to take away their guns. Third, politicians in Washington have failed to enact reasonable measures to protect American citizens from gun-wielding extremists. If, in fact, guns can be seen not as passive objects but rather as actors themselves in this drama, then they may actualize violence committed in the name of hate in ways not fully understood or appreciated. One might add a fourth factor—that mass shootings seem to be on the rise both in numbers of incidents and fatalities, an impression confirmed by The Center for American Progress, a left-wing think-tank (Cooper, 2012).

In sum, firearms in the hands of individuals with hate-filled worldviews are, socially and societally speaking, not optimum: more hate plus more guns equals more potential for hate-fueled violence. If, in fact, these guns are somehow themselves contributing to the possibility of violence, then the U.S. situation is perhaps even worse, or at least more volatile, than earlier imagined. Whether or not guns are able to “store” hate and evil, as some academic literature seems to suggest, they do negatively empower and enable many of those who already fetishize firearms and ascribe to them weighty meanings and symbolisms.

The strange story of Christopher Dorner, the rogue ex-cop who terrorized southern California in early 2013, provides a final, chilling example of this interplay between guns, moral agency, and hate. Fired from his job with the Los Angeles Police Department, and incensed at the injustices he perceived within the department, the former Navy reservist began a one-man war against the LAPD from February 3 to February 12: a bloody campaign to “get back his name” that left four people, including two police officers, dead. In a hate-choked, 11,000-word “manifesto” posted online before the killings began, Dorner identified his enemies and warned them of his plans to shoot them to death. Paradoxically, he also pondered the need for gun-control reform to end shooting sprees, as if he himself were no

longer in control of his actions. After pointing out that all of his firearms were purchased legally, Dorner noted the ease with which he acquired silencers for his guns, rhetorically questioned why anyone needs short-barreled rifles (“SBRs”) or AR-15s (other than to assassinate police officers), renewed the call for an assault weapons ban (“AWB”), and mused that his own vendetta would have been rendered ineffective with adequate gun-control policies. “If you had a well-regulated AWB,” he observed matter-of-factly, deconstructing his own hate-fueled rampage, “this would not happen” (Dorner, 2013).

NOTES

1. A collection of NRA quotes, including Heston’s, is available at <http://www.nrawinningteam.com>. See also Charlton Heston’s September 17, 1998 address at The Claremont Institute, available at http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.503/pub_detail.asp, as well as excerpts from his December 7, 1997 speech to the Free Congress Foundation, available on the Violence Policy Center’s webpage at <http://www.vpc.org/nrainfo/excerpts.html>.

2. Ibid.

3. See 15 U.S.C. § 2052(a)(1)(E). The CPSC regulates virtually every one of the approximately 15,000 different consumer products that are used for household or recreational purposes; firearms, however, were specifically exempted under the 1972 law.

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