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Chapter 9

Understanding and Misunderstanding America's Gun Culture

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Understanding America's Gun Culture is part of a renaissance of interest in the academic study of guns over the past decade. In addition to individual books and articles, this volume sits alongside several other recent edited volumes (Carlson et al. 2019; Obert et al. 2019) and special issues of journals (Metzl as editor for *Palgrave Communications* in 2019; Steidley and Yamane as editors for *Sociological Perspectives* and Dowd-Arrow, Burdette, and Hill as editors for *Sociological Inquiry*, both forthcoming in 2021). All of these works contribute something to our understanding of American gun culture, to be sure. At the same time, they share in common some of the limitations that I have previously identified (Yamane 2017) and that others have highlighted for decades (O'Connor and Lizotte 1978; Wright 1995). Specifically, there is an excessive focus on gun culture as deviant and connected to violent criminal behavior.

This limited view of gun culture begins with the editor's introduction and continues through their conversation with Jim D. Taylor in the chapter preceding this one. Nodding to the various ways in which guns are a normal part of life for many normal Americans, editors Hovey and Fisher pivot quickly to the issue of gun violence and connect this to the question of gun control (Introduction, 1-2). Of nine total chapters in this volume, two raise ethical questions about gun culture. Ryan concludes that Christianity offers a rival to the "theo-ethical vision" of American gun culture (chapter 2) and Stolick argues that advocacy for gun rights is inconsistent with the teachings and example of Christ (chapter 6). Three other chapters specifically connect criminal violence to gun culture. Kumar argues that mass shootings "are the symptoms of the damaging influence and power of the gun culture" (chapter 3, 55). Crews and Crews seek to address "the impact of the American Gun Culture . . . upon K-12 American school violence" (chapter 7, 151-152). And

a chapter ostensibly about understanding youth gun culture in the Caribbean actually focuses on gang involvement and violence among youth, and the authors actually operationalize involvement in gun culture in part by whether respondents had close friends who carried a gun to school (chapter 4, 81). Even Taylor, whose 2009 book on *American Gun Culture* is one of the few that seeks to understand its normality, centers his conversation with the editors on the use of firearms “in the commission of violent crimes” (chapter 8, 171 and 172).

To be clear: focusing on deviance and criminal violence in connection with guns is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when this limited focus is not supplemented by other perspectives. Although I have previously made this argument as concerns sociology (Yamane 2017), this interdisciplinary volume highlights how a limited understanding of gun culture is endemic in the field of gun studies writ large.

In what follows, I begin by using philosopher Firmin DeBrabander’s interpretation of the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol building as a contemporary example of a longstanding trend that associates gun culture with criminal violence. I then offer an alternative perspective on gun culture that begins with the assumption that guns are normal and normal people use guns, and therefore relativizes the predominant deviance and criminal violence foci. Next, I highlight the shift in the center of gravity of American gun culture toward self-defense, what I call “Gun Culture 2.0.” Having outlined these ways of understanding gun culture, I turn my attention to one of the major ways in which gun culture is misunderstood: the conflation of legal gun culture with the violent criminal use of guns. I conclude by offering a personal reflection on studying gun culture that moves beyond the partial and partisan views too often found in the field of gun studies.

THE MISSING INSURRECTIONIST GUN OWNERS

In early January 2021, my work on this chapter was disrupted by a text message from a friend: “They are storming the capitol.” It took me a moment to figure out who “they” were, but I soon made the connection. *They* were people attending the march for Trump rally in Washington, DC. Formally organized by Women For America First, the rally included a motley crew of people wanting to “Save America” by overturning Donald J. Trump’s defeat by Joseph R. Biden in the November 2020 presidential election. Joining run-of-the mill members of “MAGA nation” in forcefully entering the U.S. Capitol building were followers of movements like Stop the Steal, the QAnon conspiracy, Proud Boys, Nick Fuentes’s Groyper Army, Boogaloo Bois, Oath Keepers, and III%ers. As some, at least, were attempting to disrupt a meeting

of Congress to certify Biden's Electoral College victory, many have called the event an insurrection.

As a citizen, I was horrified at what I was seeing on TV on January 6th. As a sociologist of guns, I knew it would be only a matter of time before gun culture would be implicated. Sure enough, on January 11th, philosopher Firmin DeBrabander (2021) pointed a finger in *The Atlantic* at the gun rights movement, especially the National Rifle Association (NRA), holding it responsible for promoting "insurrectionist fever dreams" (see also DeBrabander 2015). The following day, a reporter contacted me for comment on "a story about gun advertising and how the industry's marketing strategies have helped fuel the insurrectionist ideology we saw on display at the capitol on Wednesday." Even though few guns were in evidence, people I spoke with frequently referred to the "armed insurrection."

To be sure, some gun rights proponents argue strenuously that an armed citizenry is "a final, emergency bulwark against tyranny" (French 2018), and militia movements like the Oath Keepers and Threepers are very, very progun (Jackson 2020). But blaming gun rights advocates, the gun industry, or gun culture for the clumsy coup at the Capitol makes a causal connection that does not reflect the broader reality of guns and gun ownership in America. Tens of millions of gun-owning Americans hear the exhortations of the NRA and other (even more fervent) gun rights groups, are exposed to gun industry advertising, and engage in other social activities around guns. And yet were *not* inspired to force their way into the U.S. Capitol Building to "stop the steal."

While many focused on the hundreds of people rioting in DC, I am wondering about the gun owners who we might call "The Missing Insurrectionists." I am inspired in this thinking by sociologist Charles Kurzman's book, *The Missing Martyrs*. In it, Kurzman (2019) takes the question of Islamic terrorism and turns it on its head, asking, "Why are there so few Muslim terrorists?" After all, there are 1+ billion Muslims in the world and revolutionary Islamists who seek to convert them to terrorist violence. And yet, the book's description reads, "As easy as terrorism is to commit, few Muslims turn to violence." This could, with slight editing, be rewritten to state: "As easy as domestic terrorism is to commit, few gun owners turn to insurrectionist violence."

To be sure, some gun owners are violent or potentially violent insurrectionists, and some of those surely have been fed by aspects gun rights rhetoric and imagery. But these *some* are proportionately very few. Let us not forget: there are at least 60-million gun owners in the U.S. who possess 400 million or so guns. About 1-in-5 gun owners characterize themselves as political liberals, nearly 40 percent as political moderates, and less than 1-in-20 as very conservative (Yamane et al. 2020). As I write this in late January 2021, 125

individuals have been charged in federal court in the District of Columbia for crimes committed at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th. Of those, only two are charged with gun crimes. One for “Carrying or having readily accessible, on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol Building, a firearm and ammunition” and one for “Possession of an unregistered firearm (destructive device) and carrying a pistol without a license” (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). So, to rephrase Kurzman’s question, “Why are there so *few* violent insurrectionist gun owners?” That seems to me a question that also needs to be asked and answered.

Questions like this, to be sure, are not new to me. Entering the field of guns studies, I was struck by how hard it is to find scholarship on the lawful use of firearms by legal gun owners (Yamane 2017). I also found it remarkable that scholars have been noting this oversight at routine intervals for the past forty years. Wright and Marston (1975, 106) sought to correct the record by observing that “the vast, overwhelming majority of the 90,000,000 or so privately owned weapons are not involved in accidental shootings or intentional deaths.” The same is true of today’s 400 million civilian firearms. O’Connor and Lizotte (1978, 428) concluded similarly that lawful activities “which involve large numbers of people for whom guns occupy a central but routine and legitimate place . . . have been generally ignored by researchers interested in gun ownership and violence” (see also Wright 1995). *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

The excessive focus on the criminology and epidemiology of gun violence impedes our ability to understand the normality of the lawful ownership and use of guns in the U.S. Without understanding this, scholars cannot understand American gun culture. In fact, in focusing excessively on deviance and criminal violence (including political violence), they actually misunderstand it.

GUNS ARE NORMAL, NORMAL PEOPLE USE GUNS

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 U.S. “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.

This reality stretches back to the colonial, revolutionary, and early republican eras in the U.S. Historically, guns were tools necessary for self-preservation on the frontier (when the colonies themselves were a frontier) and symbols of citizenship (hence according the right of ownership largely

to white men). As gun historian Clayton Cramer (2009, 236) observes, guns played a fundamental role

[f]or the collective military purposes of each colony; for the defense of individual families and isolated settlements; as symbols of being a citizens with the duty to defend the society; and more than occasionally, to demonstrate that nothing has changed in the human condition since Cain slew Abel.

Thus, Cramer (2009, 236) concludes, "Gun ownership appears to have been the norm for freemen, and not terribly unusual for free women and at least male children, through the Colonial, Revolutionary, and early Republic periods." In this early history of the American nation, guns were more practical than symbolic for most people. They were tools of necessity for hunting, self-defense, and national defense.

Although gun culture has evolved since then, the reality that guns are a perfectly normal part of life for a large part of the U.S. population persists. A comprehensive 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 had in the past, and a sizable minority—what I call the "gun curious"—have thought about or are actively considering acquiring a gun (Kelley and Ellison 2021; Warner 2020). Only about one-third of Americans say they do not and will never own guns (Yamane 2019b). 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 recognized 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 2019a).

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. Following gun writer Michael Bane, I call this a shift from Gun Culture 1.0 to Gun Culture 2.0.

UNDERSTANDING GUN CULTURE 2.0

On March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency concerning the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in the U.S.. On March 15, Reuters photographer Patrick Fallon captured an image of dozens of people lined up on the sidewalk in front of Martin B. Retting, Inc. in Culver City, California. The diverse group was waiting for the historic gun store—established in 1928—to open. The following day, gun sales in the U.S. peaked at approximately 176,000, according to an analysis of data from the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) (Levine and McKnight 2020). (Caveat: NICS data is commonly used by scholars, advocates, and the media as a proxy for gun sales. These data, as Steidley (2020b) argues, come with many caveats and must be interpreted with due modesty.)

Gun sales were so robust in the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic that total sales for March 2020 (6.95 per 1,000 people in the U.S.) exceeded the previous record month, set in December 2012 following the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre (Steidley 2020a). That event amplified existing concerns that the recently reelected President Barack Obama would seek strong gun control laws, including an “assault weapons” ban. With gun sales in April and May 2020 also exceeding the previous year’s figures, it was clear that COVID-19 had supplanted President Barack Obama as the “Greatest Gun Salesman” in U.S. history (Depetris-Chauvin 2015). As it turns out, this was just the beginning of a gun-buying spree that spiked again in the summer.

As the reality of the coronavirus pandemic was settling in, nationwide protests were breaking out following the May 25 death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. Some of these protests had violent elements, including looting and property destruction. Calls to “defund the police” spread. Although not as high as March’s record, gun sales in June again exceeded 2 million (Steidley 2021). Fueled by the ongoing pandemic, protests for racial justice, and a contentious presidential election campaign, gun sales remained high through the end of the year. According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation (2021), the primary firearms industry trade group in the U.S., background checks for firearms sales in 2020 were 60 percent higher than in 2019.

Many find these exceptional figures shocking and appalling. But as someone who has spent the past ten years immersed in American gun culture, I found them remarkable for how clearly they reflect ongoing trends. My research shows that defensive ownership has supplanted hunting and recreational shooting as the core of American gun culture (Yamane et al. 2019, 2020). Thus, faced with social uncertainty and social unrest, it is not surprising that a broad swath of the American population would respond by buying guns. The great gun-buying spree of 2020 is best understood in the context of this new Version 2.0 of American's longstanding gun culture.

Over time, self-defense has moved from being a part of American gun culture to being its core element. Incubated in the social unrest and global uncertainty of the 1960s and 1970s, Gun Culture 2.0 was hatched in the 1980s and 1990s and has been maturing since then. This is evident in various types of data, including the growing percentage of gun owners who say they own guns for self-defense, the increasing proportion of handguns solid in the civilian market, the rise of the civilian defensive firearms training industry, the codification of castle doctrine and stand your ground laws, the liberalization of concealed carry laws, and the growing number of Americans who have permits to carry concealed weapons in public (Lott and Wang 2020; Pew Research Center 2017; Yamane 2021).

The liberalization of concealed carry laws since the 1970s has further normalized—both culturally and legally—gun carrying outside the home (Yamane 2021). 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, and Daly 1983, 142–43). This has grown to 57 percent today, according to the Pew Research Center (2017). That is nearly 30 million people. Almost 20 million American adults, according to one recent count (Lott and Wang 2020), have permits to carry firearms concealed in public. And an increasing number of states (seventeen currently) allow legal firearms owners to carry concealed handguns in public without a permit (Yamane 2021).

Carlson (2015) calls this a “gun carry revolution,” and she is right. And yet social scientists have been oddly silent about it (but see Anker 2019; Shapira and Simon 2018). 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 ethnography, 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 20 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 opposition to the socially privileged (middle-class, White) “good guys with guns” are socially disadvantaged (poor, Black) “bad guys” who threaten to victimize 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 especially poor minorities—who are the criminal other against which they define themselves as “good guys.” Choosing to get a concealed handgun license is part of a larger, class-based ethos of self-sufficiency that articulates with the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the U.S.

Without arguing that Carlson or Stroud are entirely 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 (Pew Research Center 2017). That is over 17 million adults in the U.S. Even on either side of the margin of error, that is a lot of people. Moreover, although no one yet knows exactly how many, we have good reason to believe that a significant part of the 2020 buying spree—reflecting defensive gun ownership demographics more generally (Azrael et al. 2017)—was new gun owners, women, racial and sexual minorities, and political liberals. That is, those least likely to turn to guns for identity purposes.

This suggests more effort needs to be made to understand how guns represent for people part of their solution for safely negotiating a contemporary world characterized by social uncertainty and unrest. A recent imperfect but suggestive study of firearm purchasing in 2020 inadvertently highlights this (Lyons et al. 2021). New gun owners who bought a firearm in response to COVID-19 are also more likely than gun nonowners to have stocked up on hand sanitizer (63.1 percent vs. 32.9 percent), first aid supplies (40.2 percent vs. 14.0 percent), home security products other than guns (24.6 percent vs. 1.8 percent), and pepper spray (13.4 percent vs. 1.8 percent).

Of course, this does not mean gun buying only solves practical, real-world security problems. In a May 2020 news story on the increase in gun sales in Appalachia (Keppler 2020), I said first-time buyers are often purchasing some peace of mind:

I think the intended purpose of the purchase is physical security, and they are also attempting to buy some psychological security. . . . It's like the toilet paper. If they can't have anything else under control, they know they have that one thing under control.

Not surprisingly, new COVID-19 gun owners were also more likely to stock up on toilet paper (74.3 percent) than nongun owners (46.8 percent) during the early months of the pandemic (Lyons et al. 2021).

Similarly, I do not want to reduce the study of American gun culture to the individuals who own and use guns. I have previously offered a number of concrete steps forward for those who want to understand the new incarnation of America's historic gun culture (Yamane 2017). 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 (Yamane 2021). 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 (Yamane 2019a), 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 meetups, gun collectors, and shooters associations. These aspects of gun culture have not been adequately studied to date (but see Taylor 2009 and Kohn 2004).

Finally, I do not claim that there should be no study of crime and violence in connection with guns. But my argument here does suggest a certain approach. 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.

MISUNDERSTANDING GUN CULTURE IN RELATION TO CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

In July 2017, the Michael Bloomberg-funded, antigun 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 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 Plexiglas. 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” (Hansen, n.d.).

For the final works in this series, “Memorial,” Hansen uses twelve 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” (Hansen, n.d.). 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 criminal gun violence exist quite literally as different social worlds.

Many, including the editors of this volume (Introduction, 1-2), observe that the U.S. 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 U.S. was 3.66 per 100,000 from 2010 to 2012 (Fowler et al. 2015). Among thirty-one high-income members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the U.S. indeed has the highest per capita homicide rate. That is significant. But while aggregating data for the entire country 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 fifty different states. But, we do not just live in one of fifty 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 U.S. that 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 U.S. would rank #211 out of 218 countries in the world.

Moreover, even citywide averages can obscure the realities of relative risk of gun violence. We do not 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 one of the highest homicide rates in recent years. "The homicide rates in several neighborhoods in the city are so high," *The Trace* reports, 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 U.S., but some parts are more dangerous than Honduras and some 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, in my opinion 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 percent of gun violence takes place on just 3 percent of streets. Moreover, like a blood-borne disease, gun violence travels within social networks. In Boston, 85 percent of gunshot injuries took place in a network of just 6 percent of the population (Papachristos et al. 2012). In Chicago, 41 percent of homicides take place in a network of just 4 percent of the population (Papachristos and Wildeman 2014).

Understanding the highly concentrated reality of criminal gun 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 activity that involves 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 legal to illegal status 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.

A CONCLUDING PERSONAL REFLECTION: GETTING BEYOND THE PARTIAL AND PARTISAN

I am an old scholar, but relatively 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 U.S.. I first noticed this in my adopted home state of North Carolina, where I moved in 2005. Riding with now wife on an interstate not far from Winston-Salem one afternoon, I looked out in a field and saw a wooden structure that seemed very out of place. I said, "Sandy, isn't that a weird spot for kids to build a fort?" She looked at me as if I were from another planet, which I sort of was, and said, "That is a deer stand." She also had to explain to me what they are used for. (For some reason, she married me anyway.) 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 semiautomatic 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. From these experiences spring the idea that guns are normal and normal people use guns.

These experiences with people outside the academy could not contrast more sharply with my experiences in the academy, especially with other sociologists. Take Jonathan Metzl, for example. Metzl is Frederick B. Rentschler II Professor of Sociology and Medicine, Health, and Society at Vanderbilt University, Director of its Center for Medicine, Health, and Society, and a leading sociologist studying guns. He was tapped by the Social Science Research Council to lead an initiative on "social science research pathways into understanding American gun violence, gun culture, and its discontents" (Metzl 2018); served as editor of a special issue of *Palgrave Communication* on "What Guns Mean: The Symbolic Lives of Firearms" (Metzl 2019a); and published a book about how the politics of racial resentment has fatal consequences for White Americans, including gun suicides (Metzl 2019b). Clearly, he is a thought leader in the field of gun studies. As is often the case, it was in the less formal setting of a professional meeting that Metzl's fundamental

view was laid bare. At the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 2018, Metzl organized and presided over a panel on "Guns and Violence in Trump's America." In his opening statement, he reviewed various negative outcomes associated with guns then, as if grasping for words, with exasperation concluded, "Guns are bad." I tweeted from the session that he had just summarized the dominant social scientific approach to guns.

Metzl, of course, is not alone. 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 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. Others who have approached gun culture as normal, like Kohn (2004) and Joslyn (2020), recount similar encounters with colleagues. And I do understand this, because for the first forty years of my life, and the first twenty 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.

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 working 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. Emphasizing deviance and criminal violence as inherent in gun culture or following from it 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 these 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 nonexistent 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 NC 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 close 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 prescientific intuitions and experiences in mind. This "value-relevance" 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 progun nor antigun. I am protruth. 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 studying 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.

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