

Preface

Because guns do not have a teleology, people use them for a range of purposes, from good to evil. Gun owners are human, so we see the full range of human triumphs and tragedies among them. Gun culture is part of American culture, so America's flaws also stain gun culture. This recalls Immanuel Kant's observation, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." But media and scholarly attention are disproportionately drawn to the evil, tragic, flawed, and crooked.

Reflecting my liberal "tragic optimism," my approach to guns has a different point of departure.¹ Rather than focusing on crime, injury, and death with firearms, my work is based on the proposition that guns are normal and normal people use guns. This is not an article of faith or a belief statement for me; rather, it is based on my empirical observations of guns and gun owners over the past 13 years. When I say guns are normal and normal people use guns, I mean it in two senses. First, guns and gun ownership are common, widespread, and typical. Second, guns and gun ownership are not inherently associated with deviance or abnormalities.

In today's binary world, this observation codes me as "pro-gun," and not just in the view of their cultured despisers. One of the students in a pistol course I was observing at Gunsite Academy in Arizona said to me, "It is nice to have someone working on this from the pro-gun side." I was taken aback by this comment because I have never seen my work as "pro-gun." What I write about guns is based on my search for truth, not a political position. I am pro-understanding.

Understanding is the heart of this book. It is the foundation of critical thinking, empathy, and learning. It contributes to effective communication, decision-making, innovation, and problem-solving. The human desire to understand is intimately connected with curiosity, defined by the great pragmatist philosopher William James as "the impulse toward better cognition."²

In fact, my curiosity-driven search for understanding is how my journey into the world of guns began over a decade ago. I was gun curious, both personally and professionally.

Curiosity is the sociological enterprise's driving force. In his classic 1963 book, *Invitation to Sociology*, Peter Berger declared, "It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this: things are not what they seem." Social reality is complex and difficult to apprehend at first glance, and with each new discovery about some aspect of the social world, new complexities are revealed. Consequently, sociologists must constantly question what we see, not accept seemingly obvious answers, and pursue the truth even though it is ultimately elusive. Berger warned those considering his invitation, "People who feel no temptation before closed doors, who have no curiosity about human beings, who are content to admire scenery without wondering about the people who live in those houses on the other side of that river, should probably also stay away from sociology. They will find it unpleasant or, at any rate, unrewarding."³ I accepted the invitation to sociology long ago; the curiosity in *Gun Curious* reflects this.

My understanding of American gun culture now includes 13 years of personal experience as a gun owner and 12 years of sociological research. It incorporates hundreds of hours of fieldwork, innumerable conversations with gun owners, immersion in various old and new gun media, and extensive engagement with scholarly analyses and cultural criticisms of guns. *Gun Curious* tells the story of this surprising journey inside American gun culture.

When I embarked on my personal and professional exploration of guns, I thought back to the great German-American sociologist Reinhard Bendix, whom I had the good fortune to meet at UC-Berkeley not long before he died in 1991. Though I was a mere undergraduate and he a distinguished faculty member, Bendix graciously spoke with me about the sociological enterprise I was just joining. He referred me to a passage from the philosopher Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus* that I have attempted to embody in my work in the ensuing three decades and that I hope is the animating spirit of *Gun Curious*:

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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In his influential book *Gun Fight*, a history of the conflict over the right to keep and bear arms in America, UCLA law professor Adam Winkler observes the polarization of our contemporary public discourse

about guns.⁴ Each side warns of threats from the other. Gun owners are reduced to being “gun nuts” and gun control advocates are “gun grabbers” at heart. My journey, by contrast, has taught me that there is a broad and deep middle of the American population between the most conspicuous advocates at the two extremes. These less visible individuals, neither enthusiasts nor critics, are often simply curious about guns.

I can relate. I am a “card-carrying liberal” Asian American sociology professor from the San Francisco Bay Area who, for the first forty-two years of my life, never saw, touched, or fired a real gun. In 2011, I transitioned from gun curious to gun owner. Social scientists and the media too often portray gun owners as bigoted zealots and ignore people like me who represent the normality of gun culture in America. This story weaves together my personal experiences and sociological observations of becoming a gun owner to take readers on a journey through gun culture in a way no book yet has. In doing so, I explain America’s unique relationship to firearms for readers motivated by sympathy or antipathy or just plain curiosity about guns in the United States.

Gun enthusiasts are, of course, a natural audience for *Gun Curious* because it tells our story fairly and factually. I hope firearms skeptics will also read this book to better understand why gun ownership makes sense to tens of millions of Americans. Interested outsiders, including the gun curious, should appreciate how this book richly describes an unfamiliar but intriguing social world. Recalling Peter Berger’s admonition, people who are content to believe what they have always believed about guns, gun owners, and gun culture should probably not read this book. But I invite those whose minds and hearts are open to learning something new to join me on this journey.

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Open minds and hearts are as important now as ever. Despite my liberal optimism, I cannot help but share the common feeling that cultural and political divisions are engulfing the United States. Guns and gun violence are a common flashpoint.

Case in point: Like many Americans, I reluctantly watched events unfolding at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston in May 2022. The National Rifle Association held its annual meeting and exhibits just days after the slaughter of children at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, and not two weeks following the massacre at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. The two sides in our polarized gun debates were on full display. Inside the convention center, Ted Cruz, Donald

Trump, and others planted the flag for gun rights. Outside on Discovery Green, David Hogg, Beto O'Rourke, and others rallied the crowd for gun control.

Neither side could hear the other, being literally divided by Avenida de las Americas and the convention center walls. But a figurative divide was even more significant: neither cared to hear the other. Both sides took the multifaceted reality of guns in American society and simplified it to fit into their one-dimensional containers.

While this culture war over guns rages among cultural and political elites, many everyday Americans want answers that go beyond slogans like "from my cold dead hands!" and "protect children not guns!"

As a liberal professor who became a gun owner in my forties, I have a foot in each of two worlds that see guns so very differently. Being "betwixt and between" statuses helps me to see the issue from both sides and positions me to act as a translator from one side to the other. *Gun Curious* shows why guns make sense to those of us who own them, how I understand the risk of negative outcomes associated with firearms, and what responsible gun ownership can look like in the twenty-first century.

This book takes the normality of guns and gun owners as a starting point, but also has implications for how we approach the wicked problem of gun violence. Addressing gun violence in the United States systematically and comprehensively requires Americans with diverse values and beliefs to have empathetic conversations across our differences about guns. We cannot repair this American divide until we begin to talk to each other with the goal of mutual understanding.

To be clear, *Gun Curious* does not provide immediate policy solutions to the problem of gun violence in the United States, much less its most idiosyncratic form seen in Uvalde and Buffalo. It does, however, speak across the divide evident in Houston that inhibits the conversations we desperately need to have right now.