

Why, Yet Again, the "Senseless" Violence?

by Louis René Beres (November 2014)

Credo quia absurdum. "I believe because it is absurd." Every day, it seems, brings the latest in a seemingly endless national stream of incomprehensible mayhem and mass killing. Almost always, the shootings, bombings, or stabbings are the work of more-or-less conspicuously disturbed individuals.

Nonetheless, while both analysts and laypersons correctly seek answers amid the dense thickets of mental illness and psychopathology, too little serious attention is paid to underlying fractures of *American culture*. As these formative spheres of personal and cultural disorder are closely intersecting, we should now finally inquire: *Is there something insidious about the wider network of American social life that makes individual human breakdowns more usual, and more catastrophically violent?*

History may offer pertinent insight. In 1936, at a speech by the nationalist general Millán Astray, at the University of Salamanca, in Spain, the hall thundered with the general's favorite motto, *Viva la Muerte!* "Long live Death!" When the speech was over, Miguel de Unamuno, rector of the university, rose and lamented: "Just now I heard a necrophilous and senseless cry...this outlandish paradox is repellent to me."

The cry that was repellent to Don Miguel, the great Basque philosopher, was the driving passion of the *Falangists*. Today, it is the singularly common ethos of America's mass murderers, both the more-or-less visibly distraught adolescents, and also the would-be religious "martyrs." What precisely can we learn from such a potentially decipherable commonality? No question could be more urgent.

To begin, macabre sentiments can animate and disassociate certain distressed young people. In their own impenetrably bitter circles, there can exist a determined will to kill certain very specific others, or, instead, certain generally unknown other people, *en masse*. But whatever the preferred killing venues – a high-school cafeteria, a university, a runners marathon, a movie theatre, or an airport, there always emerges a uniformly irresistible urge to unleash starkly lethal violence, and to do this *in crowds*.

The discovery of regularities is always the beginning of every science. We already know that

for some recurring segment of the perpetrators, there exists an overriding wish to express potency. For others, we may also already ascertain, the murders are intended to secure a blessedly sanctified "martyrdom." For still others, moreover, there may be some "conveniently" obliging intersection of these two consuming goals.

Far better, suggests the twisted reasoning here, to be remembered, even after such an abruptly abbreviated life, as a killer who displayed *power*, than to be disregarded in a much longer life that would otherwise have remained *weak*. For this group, perceived weakness is simply beyond endurance. In all such cases, it is only through death, ideally, self-inflicted and simultaneously meted out to others, that the mass killer can adequately ensure a "living" memory. Usually, but not always, when he ultimately "explodes" (in what is sometimes only a mock paroxysm of rage), this killer will choose to disregard any meaningfully identifiable targets or hatreds.

For the most part, there is no calculable connection between the killer's often incoherent set of grievances, and the myriad names of his targeted victims. Yes, of course, he may have somewhere recorded a particular loathing of certain individuals or institutions, but the most genuine object of his murderous antipathy is *innocence*. Now devoid of both sympathy and empathy, he openly despises the pristine blamelessness of his victims; after all, their innocence too-painfully reminds him of his own failed struggle for personal autonomy, dignity, and respect.

Although it is no longer shouted out loud, "Long Live Death" remains a living mantra in America, not expressly, to be sure, but as a persistently lurid undertone of all those many who feel devastated by life. We wonder, as we should, about the recurrent mass killings, and, as corollary, about the expanding locus of their contemptibly vulgar defilements. But, in all candor, we ought really not be all that surprised.

Sometimes, people, young people especially, are more afraid of being alone and inconsequential than of anything else, even death. For a few, almost always young males, the paralyzing fears of social or professional rejection can become so numbingly overwhelming that they effectively crowd out an otherwise more widely presumed sacredness of human life. Here, as an imagined compensation for every palpable "injustice," even the grotesque murder of schoolmates or anonymous young children, may appear fully appropriate and manifestly "just."

Eureka! While each person normally shrinks from annihilation, a perversely implemented fusion of homicide and suicide can sometimes augur a deeply reassuring celebration of death. Sinister, to be sure, but also eagerly anticipated, such fusion can seemingly offer would-be

mass killers a perfectly fitting path to “revenge.” For most of us, of course, this sort of reasoning makes no sense whatever, but all that really matters is that it should make sense to the prospective killers.

Crime and mass murder are taking a hideous but utterly predictable turn in America. Whatever the source, and wherever the venue, violence and death, most notably if brazenly brutish and cold-blooded, are distinctly “in fashion.” While this worrisome development is not unprecedented, increasing numbers of these dreadfully tormented persons who live among us, are eagerly drawn to all that can beat, batter, and tear apart other living human beings.

Let us be candid in these primal queries. Is the killing really any wonder? Virtually every American hero these days is acknowledged and acclaimed for his (or her) power to take away human life. Almost every Hollywood male superstar (and, occasionally, even a female star), polishes his name as some sort of assassin, sometimes as the “good guy,” but at least occasionally, as the “bad guy.”

In the end, neatly codified changes in the law won’t matter much. The core problem for America, at least from the compelling standpoint of all “lone-wolf” mass murderers, is not fundamentally legal, political, religious, or institutional. It is, rather, that we inhabit a relentlessly imitative and dreadfully conformist society, one that is deeply troubled, fervidly anti-individualist, deliriously unhappy, and obscenely dysfunctional.

For those who would fail to “fit in,” or who would “merely” see themselves as failures, the resultant anger can launch incremental or sudden emotional breakdown, and thereafter, quickly spiral into assorted specific and non-specific hatreds.

Today, almost every young person, often quite desperately, wants to be well-respected and suitably “connected.” Already, however, this fragile person understands that our vaunted American individualism is essentially a lie, and that any heroically “rugged” attempts to defy mass society must inevitably end in humiliating failure.

In a country where everyone is eventually measured and defined by what he can buy, it is easy to acknowledge that tangible rewards will come only to those who have first learned to surrender.

Some observations are obvious, but such “surrender” will still need to be better understood in a much broader context. Each of the recent mass shooters, stabbers, and bombers was more-or-less psychopathic, of course, but this does not mean that each had planned his chosen annihilatory spasms in some sort of hermetically-sealed civilizational vacuum. On the

contrary, such meticulous plans are never conceived in a neatly detached private universe. They stem, instead, from those critically precise components of individuality that have already been forfeited.

In all of the recent cases of American mass murder, pertinent mental distress and disorientation were dangerously intertwined with a much larger national landscape of ubiquitous rancor and enviable cruelty. By intersecting with their own personal demons, this fractionated and fragmenting landscape of violent harms provided the operational environment within which otherwise unimaginable crimes could be concocted and then carried out.

Where, exactly, has America gone wrong? It is a question that will not be answered in politics. It is surely a question that will not be tackled meaningfully in any coming elections.

At its heart, the problem of young people who systematically and dispassionately murder blameless others, stems from a society that proudly loathes the individual. Driven by an almost irresistible need to conform at all costs, we Americans have learned not only to tolerate mass society, but to glorify it. In consequence, functioning under very carefully scripted rhythmic urgings to worship every inane and distracting technology, we are now generally more attentive to our multiple “apps” and “devices” than to our fellow citizens.

For us, social networking has already become much more than a helpfully pleasing key to exciting relationship opportunities. More of a symptom than a cause, it has effectively become the new American *religion*, a genuinely common expression of obeisance and submission to mass expectations. To act in any manner against these expectations, therefore, is not just unacceptable. It is *blasphemy*.

For the most part, whether in business or in education, any American who would dare to affirm personal value or merit apart from the “team” is promptly pushed aside. It is, nonetheless, precisely this sought-after absorption by the group that deeply corrodes personal responsibility and authentic community in these United States. On occasion, as we have now witnessed all too many times, it may seamlessly transform cruelty and mass killing into an incomparably welcome vision.

“Long live death!”

To the darkly lonely ones who feel unable to belong, to find some sufficiently sustaining acceptance in the group, any group, an inconsolable despair can become overwhelming. The “remedy” for this gravely painful condition, a sort of residual “sickness unto death,” may

have to be discovered elsewhere. That is, it must be sought in certain ritually orchestrated preparations for aptly riveting kinds of mass murder.

Look around. Confronted on every side by synthetic food and synthetic feelings, some of our most vulnerable people can become phobic toward anything that is too deeply personal, and become devoted to anything that will produce mordant excitement. Better to be notorious or infamous, calculates the would-be mass killer in America, than to remain “weak” and invisible. For this wretched but not-to-be ignored figure, the worst case scenario is not to become a despised murderer, but rather to be “normal,” and thus to endure an unendurable lifetime of anticipated neglect and paralyzing insignificance.

Look around. Our “advanced” American society routinely instructs us to become more comfortable with robots, videos, cell phones, and computers than with each other. For all but a handful, any sort of romantic love has already become faintly ridiculous, a distressingly quaint source of personal uneasiness and embarrassment. And why not? Our voyeuristic entertainments, now blurring any remaining boundaries between sex and killing, relentlessly proclaim the enviable triumph of carefully inflicted sufferings.

Look around. We Americans *do* face certain serious geopolitical threats originating from abroad, especially terror attacks. Against these authentic perils, we must remain utterly vigilant. Nothing could be more obvious.

Still, we should not be encouraged to die in manifold other ways, needlessly, gratuitously, *from the inside*. In order to turn away from an increasingly ascendant spirit of death, murder, and internal decline, it is also essential that we should all first *want* to live, and to do so without suffering such excruciating fears of social banishment or community exile.

Soon, we will need to transform our crushing public universe of banal chatter and empty witticism into an environment more generously dedicated to “respiration,” in other words, to *real life*. For too long, it seems, there has simply not been enough air to breathe. In a transformed environment, we could all still learn once again how to avoid “suffocation.” Then, and only then, could we expect fewer recruits to the rapidly growing crowd (Freud would call it a “herd” or “horde”) of mass murderers.

Ultimately, the violent spasms of recurrent American mass killings are the predictable result of a society’s pervasive loneliness, and of its correspondingly manipulated obsessions with death. If an alien were to touch down at any time from another planetary outpost, and begin to seek reliable information about the human condition from available movies, video games, and television, its expectedly dire conclusions would be stark, obvious, and immediate. Even this

not-so-studious alien would have to conclude that our earthling days are gleefully preoccupied with mayhem, rape, and every conceivable variant of human murder (war, terrorism, and genocide).

Somehow, collectively, and before it is too late, we Americans must finally learn to recover a meaningful incentive to *feel*, for ourselves, for others, and, simultaneously, to conspire more openly against the disjointed national exponents of separateness, alienation, and despair. Otherwise, some of those living among us who are most unhappy, and most malleable, will continue to seek their personal significance in carefully planned spasms of human extermination.

Always, true feeling and empathy require good people to behave as *individuals*, not as blindly obedient members. Oddly, perhaps, such preferred behavior is always scandalous, a threatening intrusion into the compulsively profitable worlds of crude commerce, mindless jingles, mass marketing, adrenalized competition, and celebrity adulation. Yet, even in civilizations on the wane, at twilight, worn and almost defeated, dignified life is sometimes given a second chance.

The terrifying and unheroic wail, "*Long live death!*" is literally the estranged plea of a person who has lost his or her senses. To rescue our imperiled American society from its now all-too frequent confrontations with mass murder, we must first learn to reignite a common capacity to discover authentically life-enhancing values within ourselves. Once accomplished, once we have begun to detach our most vital meanings as unique persons from the always-besotted judgments of mass society, a navigable way will finally have been cleared toward a promisingly less lethal collective future.

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