

We Are All Psychoanalysts



Huu Canh Tran

by Theodore Dalrymple

Immediately on reading of the recent mass shooting in Monterey Park that resulted in eleven deaths, or twelve if you count the perpetrator of it, I looked up the town on the internet, never having heard of it before. I was immediately directed to a site that informed me of the ten best things to do there, and also a video clip extolling the place as one of the best three in America to live, among other reasons for its record of safety. In the circumstances I did not laugh, but I could not repress a wintry smile.

At that time, no one knew who the perpetrator was, and therefore I began to speculate as to his likely characteristics. As the shootings occurred at a celebration of the Chinese lunar new year, I assumed that he (of course, it was a *he* and not a *she*) was a youngish man, white or black, who was protesting at the rapid increase in the number and

social ascent of Asian immigrants and their offspring in the United States. When the identity of the perpetrator was revealed, I thought it would most likely be a white supremacist or a black anti-Asian racist, resentful at the success of the Asians.

I could scarcely have been more wrong, except for the sex. The perpetrator was a 72-year-old immigrant from China to America called Huu Canh Tran. From the little I have read of him, he seems long to have suffered from a paranoid personality that may have tipped over into a frank psychosis. He was a man who thought himself wronged, laughed at, and possibly even conspired against (paranoia has the minor consolations that at least the sufferer is significant enough to have enemies and his failure in life is caused by others, not himself).

I was relieved that the killer was not as I had imagined, for if he had been, it would only have reinforced the racial paranoia of our times, ever more suffocating, ever more corrupting. It would have been grist to a thousand mills. This is curious: The effect, anti-racism, grows ever stronger as the cause, real racism, grows ever weaker. But perhaps this should not altogether surprise us, for as Tocqueville noticed, oppressive regimes do not provoke protest or revolt when they are at their worst, but when they are trying to improve themselves. Thus, it is with the diminishment of real racism that anti-racist rage is expressed, becomes general, and reaches its height. Such rage has the additional virtue that it is an easy way to be virtuous, or to believe oneself such, and it makes no demands other than expression of the rage itself. Moreover, the expression of righteous, or self-righteous, rage is always a pleasure in itself.

The unhappy and disgruntled such as Huu Canh Tran rarely rejoice in, find much pleasure in, or are reassured by the sight of people enjoying themselves. On the contrary, such a sight further embitters the already embittered. Why should others enjoy life when I am so wretched, when the world has

been so unjust to me and made me miserable? The fact that they are enjoying themselves only goes to show how insensitive and unfeeling they are. If they had any idea at all of what I was suffering, if they cared, they could not enjoy themselves in that callous manner. In short, they deserve to die.

All this, of course, is mere speculation. Even if the perpetrator left behind him an elaborate explanation for what he was going to do, how would we know that (a) he was being truthful and (b) even if he were entirely sincere in what he said, and believed utterly in the truth of what he was saying, that the proffered explanation would be the *real*, the true explanation? We could not be sure.

In everyday life, we often ascribe motives to people that they do not ascribe to themselves. We say that the *real* reasons that they do what they do are very different from the reasons that they themselves give for their conduct, and we do not necessarily assume that the difference between the reasons that we and they ascribe are because they are lying. On the contrary, we think that we know their reasons better than they know them themselves. To that extent, we are all psychoanalysts.

Sometimes, of course, our explanations of a person's behavior coincide with his own explanation. We see a man run for a bus, and both he and we think that it is because he wants to catch it. We see a man eat a sandwich and conclude that he is hungry, the very reason he himself gives for eating it.

But the further removed from everyday behavior an action is, the more are the explanations given by the onlooker and the actor himself likely to diverge. When it comes to mass killings such as that which was done in Monterey Park, the divergence is likely to be complete.

However much I try to "understand" the mind of a mass killer such as Huu Canh Tran, by which I mean imagine myself in his

place, I find that I cannot—just as well, you might say. When all the data are in, and however minutely examined the antecedents may be, there will remain a gap between the explanation and what is to be explained. It is a commonplace sentiment that there but for the grace of God go I, and in many cases this is no doubt a generous or inspiring thought, a corrective to censorious condemnation, that is to say condemnation that admits of no understanding or extenuation by circumstance. But there are some actions to which this commonplace sentiment cannot apply, and a mass shooting is one of them.

We are condemned by our very human nature perpetually to try to understand such actions, and we are condemned perpetually to failure in the endeavor. And I am glad that we are doomed to failure: Nothing would be more dangerous for mankind than complete self-understanding.

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