

The Jonesboro murders: Why?

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The shooting death of four young girls and a teacher in Arkansas at the hands of two students, aged 11 and 13, was a horrible event. No account, particularly one written without a thorough knowledge of the lives and mental states of those responsible, can fully explain the tragedy, much less provide consolation for those immediately involved.

If the Jonesboro shooting were an isolated incident such an explanation would perhaps not even be necessary. But, unhappily, it is the latest in a series of mass killings.

On December 1, 1997, a 14-year-old boy opened fire on a student prayer circle at a high school in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three students and wounding five. Exactly two months before, in Pearl, Mississippi, a 16 year old allegedly killed his mother, then went to school and shot nine students, two of whom died. In Bethel, Alaska, on February 19, 1997, another 16 year old shot and killed a high school principal and a classmate. On February 2, 1996, a 14-year-old student turned an assault rifle on his algebra class, killing two classmates and a teacher at Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Washington.

Such deadly rampages are not confined to schools. Only three weeks ago a Connecticut state lottery accountant gunned down four of his bosses, before turning the weapon on himself. The number of cases of shootings in postal facilities, auto plants and other work locations is rapidly mounting. Nor are the shooting sprees merely an American phenomenon. In March 1996 16 schoolchildren in the Scottish village of Dunblane were gunned down. Less than two months later in Port Arthur, Tasmania, a gunman opened fire and killed 35 people. New Zealand, a country of just three and a half million people, has experienced a spate of such incidents since 1990. In Australia and New Zealand alone 70 people died in 11 mass murders between 1987 and 1993.

In the wake of the Jonesboro incident a variety of self-styled experts and social commentators have weighed in with their explanations. In general, these explain very little. Superficial references are made to a "Southern gun culture." Some commentators blame television and film violence. The religious right rails about the breakdown of so-called Christian values. Many speak about the absence of

individual responsibility.

The response of federal and state officials centers on the question of how to more efficiently lock up minors and turn schools into fortresses. Here pig ignorance goes hand in hand with a reactionary social outlook.

Attorney General Janet Reno, as we reported yesterday, is looking into the possibilities of trying the two children in Jonesboro under federal law and of charging the 13 year old as an adult. Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and state legislators are considering reviving a proposal, which failed in the legislature last year, to allow adult trials for youths as young as 12.

The US Senate passed legislation March 26 permitting a laboratory that designs components for nuclear weapons to share its security technology with the nation's schools. The technology includes electronic ID cards, tamper-resistant video cameras, anti-theft equipment that could be used for books, musical instruments and gym equipment, and warning systems to help prevent false fire alarms.

It is a commentary on the ideological climate prevailing in the US that an Arkansas county sheriff had to correct reporters who referred to the two young boys in custody as "guys." "They're not guys," Sheriff Dale Haas told the assembled press, "they're children."

The more intelligent among the official opinion makers are genuinely fearful of probing the Jonesboro shooting too deeply. What might they find? They themselves may very well sense that they would uncover such deep-going problems as to call into question the basis of the existing social order. After all, it would be difficult for anyone possessed of a degree of intellectual integrity and objectivity not to conclude that the Jonesboro killings, and similar events, point to something fundamentally wrong with the society that gave rise to them.

The principal of Westside Middle School, Karen Courtner, made the entirely legitimate point: "This is not about the weapons used or how many there were. It is about our society, what is happening to our children everywhere." The Jonesboro shooting is a product of modern social reality. One cannot get too far with an analysis unless one asks: what is the nature of that reality?

There was a period of several decades, identified with the postwar economic boom, during which attempts were made to ameliorate the harsh reality of class society. What Marx said of capitalism, that “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation,” remained true as a general historical proposition, and was the palpable everyday reality for much of the world’s population. But in the advanced countries, following the tumultuous and threatening events of 1914-45, policies of social reform succeeded to some extent in softening the sharp edge of capitalist social relations. For some time now, however, the historic crisis of capitalism has forced the abandonment of these reformist attempts.

We live at a time when the essential character of the existing social order is openly reasserting itself in every part of the world. Jobs and living standards are under attack. The “decent job” is, for tens of millions, a thing of the past, along with the eight-hour day. Workers juggle two and three jobs, where they face unrelenting pressure, in an attempt to stay above water.

The worship of money, profit and the market has resumed its rightful place as the quasi-official national religion. Greed and ruthlessness are openly celebrated. Society as a whole is geared entirely to the needs of business. A man or woman is valued by the size of his or her bank account or stock portfolio. Society, in Marx’s words, has “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’”

This is not purely an economic question. The psychological cushions have likewise been removed. Any sense of social solidarity, any notion that society has a responsibility for the well-being of its citizens—all of this has come under ferocious attack. If one is poor, it is because one is worthless. If one experiences failure, it is only one’s just desert.

The refusal to offer aid and comfort to those who are in difficulty is official policy. Compassion and mercy are derided as signs of weakness.

What must those who are suffering, economically or psychologically, think and feel? The ground has opened up under the feet of so many and all they can see beneath them is the abyss. Life takes on a hellish, unbearable quality. It is surely not accidental that the majority of the mass killings have taken place in those countries where the most systematic and largely successful efforts have been made to dismantle the welfare state—US, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Society promises, but withholds pleasures

Access to money and all that it supposedly brings with it are dangled in front of the population, but made available only to a few. It is noteworthy that the shootings took place the day after the Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood, an extraordinary display of wealth, glamour and packaged sexuality. Is it so difficult to imagine how an overweight, unstable 13 year old, suffering from “girl trouble” and probably other problems as well, might be driven to despair by the notion that he would never be able to enter the golden world of beauty and riches with which the media tantalizes him?

But such frustration and rage turn murderous only under quite definite social conditions. To blame film and television violence, for example, directly for the mass murders is superficial in the extreme and opens the door to state censorship and attacks on democratic rights. Human behavior is far more complex than the expression “copycatting” could possibly convey.

However, the filmed violence and brutality is a manipulated and amplified expression of tendencies existing within the society itself. Corporations “ax” masses of employees without mercy. Tens of thousands of potential civilian casualties in Iraq are dismissed as “collateral damage.”

What is a human being worth in this society? A criminologist quoted by *USA Today* commented, in regard to the various youthful perpetrators of school killings, “The only real common thread is that they saw the way to get rid of their problems was to get rid of other people.” Is this not the outlook that guides US foreign policy and the affairs of corporate America?

Defenders of capitalism proclaim the virtues of the market. They long for a society where profit and loss are the only means of determining the value of any activity or human being. The greatest strides in that direction have been achieved in the US. What would such a society, guided only by selfishness and violence, look like? The events in Jonesboro give some indication. Those who died and those who did the shooting are victims alike of the market society.



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