

The shooting in Oregon

Alienation, adolescence and violence

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The wave of school shootings by teenagers in the US—there have been at least seven such incidents in the past 15 months—is the symptom of a deep social disorder.

When the shootings occurred in Kentucky, Mississippi and Arkansas, the media attributed them to a “Southern gun culture.” On April 24 a 14-year-old student allegedly opened fire at a graduation dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania. Thursday's shooting took place in Springfield, Oregon, according to the *New York Times*, “a mostly white, blue-collar, timber town turned bedroom community of 50,000 people.” The day before, in an incident that will not make any national headlines, an eighth-grader, one day before his fourteenth birthday, fatally shot himself in the head in a middle school in Reed City, in northern Michigan, with a .22-caliber rifle.

Increasingly, even a growing number of politicians and other officials have been forced to acknowledge the depth of the problem. In response to the Springfield killings, the Governor of Oregon, John Kitzhaber, commented: “All of us should look at how we have failed as a society and how this could happen in the heart of Oregon. It has been a priority to build prison cells and prison beds—after the fact. These actions in no way prevent juvenile violence.”

These words are primarily meant for public consumption. Neither the governor, even if his statement is sincere, nor anyone else in high places will take a close look—or sanction anyone else taking one—at the more profound issues involved in such violent acts. It would be too unsettling.

The notion that incidents such as the Springfield shooting are incomprehensible or inexplicable is deliberately encouraged in the media. “We’ll never understand why these things happen,” is a common

refrain.

Of course, a tragedy like this has its particular and unique characteristics, but what a critical analysis can do is identify the areas that should be investigated and offer an approach.

Because a serious approach is first of all necessary. Despite the availability and prevalence of individual ‘therapies’ of all varieties, from the serious to the sham, no country is so lacking in social introspection as the US. The answer to every problem, if one were to pay attention to the media and the bestseller list, lies in a quick fix. A self-help guide, a support group, a machine, a pill—the answer is always easy, always at hand, and generally guaranteed to make someone wealthy.

No headway will be made in grasping the essence of the Springfield tragedy and other similar ones, much less preventing them, unless they are viewed as the outcome of a complex interaction between social life and individual psychology. Human beings are the products, in the broadest sense, of their social relations.

In recent years an ideological campaign has been mounted against the conception that the social environment plays a significant role in shaping a person and that society has a responsibility, therefore, for what someone—including the criminal and the emotionally disturbed person—makes of himself. Instead the model advanced is that of the isolated individual who must make his way entirely unaided in the world, and whose value as a human being is determined by the degree of success he has selling his abilities in the marketplace.

Within the latter ideological structure, any discussion of the backgrounds of individuals, or the pressures and tensions at work upon them, or the unfair and impossible binds in which they find themselves, is impermissible. Those who have made a killing on the

stock market are not reticent about declaring the present state of the world the happiest of all possible states, and, that being the case, attributing mental disorder to defective genes or chemical imbalances, or Original Sin.

A number of interrelated processes are at work making it likely that the Oregon tragedy will not be the last of its kind.

Alienation in social relations has reached new heights. What does this mean concretely? Individuals increasingly feel themselves cut off from their fellow beings and indeed perceive other people as alien and even hostile to them. What does it take to kill another person, or group of people, as happened in Oregon? The youth reportedly shot four bullets into the body of a fellow student lying at his feet. This must mean that he no longer recognized his victim as someone like him, as one of his kind. Without, of course, consciously intending to, official society has encouraged such mental states.

Every effort has been made to cultivate a soulless society governed entirely by money and profit, to eradicate the elementary concern one human being feels for another. Intellectual life, culture, the pursuit of knowledge for the benefit of mankind as a whole, are held in low esteem. Individualism, greed and ruthlessness are venerated. This has had a material impact on the quality of human relationships.

Both for ideological and fiscal reasons, help is more and more denied those in emotional need. Services are cut, or even proclaimed unnecessary. Family life is strained, in many cases, by the need to juggle two or three jobs. The individual young person is often on his or her own. For the adolescent, undergoing, under the best of conditions, a difficult physical and psychological transition, every social tension is exacerbated.

In the Oregon case apparently there were warning signs. Why weren't they heeded? Antisocial, even violent impulses are not so unusual at that age. But less and less attention is given to children. Childhood, as a stage in life, is increasingly threatened--by the advertising and entertainment industries, by the encroachment of the business world, by the judicial system and its "tough love."

The youth who carries out such an action has, in his own mind, come to the end of the line. He thinks there

is no way out. He is not in a position to understand what is affecting him, and the adults charged with reading the warning signs don't have any idea either.

At no time in life is one more susceptible to social pressures than in adolescence. One's heart and soul are open wounds. The 15 year old in Oregon had been suspended from school, pending expulsion, the day before the shooting for bringing a stolen gun to school. "He was mad at himself," a friend of the boy told CBS News, "He knew he got himself in a bad situation. And he was kind of worried how it would shame the family, I guess." When the boy was grabbed by schoolmates, after the shooting, he reportedly told them, "Kill me! Just kill me now!"

It is impossible to believe that such young people have any consciousness of the consequences of their actions. They are often described as being calm, or in a trance-like state. Reality for such individuals has become so psychically unbearable, for whatever reason, that they have entered into a different realm. Killing is in many of these cases a form of self-killing. The relentless social pressures have, of course, the most devastating impact on those who are most psychologically fragile, as a surging ocean will find the most vulnerable section of a seawall through which to make its breach.

And over all this tragedy and desperation preside the hypocrites in editorial offices and legislatures, who preach family values and morality to those who feel that society is crushing the life out of them. One can only urge those who are disturbed by the Springfield events, who sense that they must speak to larger social issues, to take a serious and critical look at the state of society and begin to consider the political implications of the present situation.



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