The social tensions underlying the Colorado school shooting

28 April 1999

Dear Editor:

The recent article on the Littleton, Colorado school shooting stands out from the midst of the public commentary because of its refusal to subject this event to psychological reductionism of the most disgusting kind. The relationship between the violent outbreak in the Columbine High School and the current situation in Yugoslavia was well commented upon, although I think even more could be said about other dimensions of the incident.

The media portrayal of this event continues to focus around the frightening re-telling of stories from individual students, the personal dissection of the two young people who carried out the crime, intense emotional drama, and above all the constant refrain--one can never understand why. Frankly, if one chooses to look at this tragedy from within a social context, I don't think most people will find it difficult to "understand why."

One recent newscast interviewed students who constructed crosses to serve as markers for their dead peers. They made fifteen white crosses and two black ones, the last to be for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Even in death it seems that the immediate reaction is to return to denoting otherness onto these two youth, so that they are separated out from the rest of society, away from all that which is normal-- -they and all they represent exist outside and away from the rest of the world. Is it not possible that this conception of social atomization and disconnection had much to do with what put these two young men in such a frame of mind that they felt compelled to lash out so destructively?

There is something absolutely essential to the very locations where all of these events are taking place. Suburban communities that have seen rapid increases in their population over the past 10-20 years, they are predominantly populated by people whose socio-economic situation, with both successes and failures, bears very clearly the mark of the last decades.

Largely Protestant communities, the city maps are dotted with housing developments, thousands of little compartment like uniform images of the American Dream--the pursuit of the individual life style. Homes bear the most striking resemblance to one another and yet are separated by carefully measured and boxed off pieces of land. McDonalds cover the main streets and malls are the only place for young people to go. Here, they can spend hundreds of dollars in the naked and grotesque pursuit of things by which they attempt to identify themselves. It is in this plastic prepackaged domain, oriented around the worship of wealth, material gain, and the lowest levels of thought, cut off from the best and most challenging elements of human creativity, separated from anything other than oneself--that people cannot help but feel the most intense and absolute alienation. Whether or not young people can identify their feelings as such, personal realities and human desires come into conflict with this. How does one find human relationships not oriented around the interaction of individualism, separateness, and at the same time, intense conformity?

The younger generations residing in such places are indelibly marked not only by acuteness of the cultural wasteland around them, but by the sense that there is something seriously inhuman about this. But in such an environment, where exactly is one supposed to find even the remotest inkling of ideas that throw off such concepts? Without alternatives, without reprieves, is it any wonder that young people react to this with violence? I think it is uniquely significant that these outbursts are taking place at schools, that Harris and Klebold seemed determine to destroy Columbine High; this is the specific environment in which one is socialized most intensely into their generation, taught

the rules of the game, forced to live in its banality.

Safe from the nightmares of the inner city, it seems the very forces of depravity so often associated with urban centers, so feared by residents of suburbia attempting to have something better, have found their way into this controlled environment. Modern day Anytown, USA represses many social tensions. It can't get rid of them.

Sincerely, AGF Rutgers University

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