

The Atlanta massacre: what it says about America

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The US has witnessed yet another shooting rampage, this time in the exclusive environs of the Buckhead district of Atlanta, Georgia. By now the basic facts are well known: Mark Barton, a 44-year-old chemist-turned-stock market day-trader, killed his young wife and two children (from a former marriage) last Tuesday and Wednesday, and on Thursday went on a shooting spree at two brokerage firms.

When Barton was finished, nine lay dead at the offices of All-Tech Investment Group and Momentum Securities, and another seven had been critically wounded. Some hours later, cornered by the police, Barton took his own life.

To all appearances, Barton, a devoted father and Boy Scout master, was a fairly typical middle class resident of the quiet Atlanta suburb of Morrow. But his benign countenance masked a man in agonizing despair. He was reportedly in the midst of a painful separation from his wife, and deep in debt as a result of losses from his stock market ventures. He had ceased trading at All-Tech since April, evidently because securities bets gone sour had wiped out the \$40,000 minimum required to maintain his account with the day-trading firm. Some press reports estimate his losses at more than \$80,000.

“I have been dying since October,” he wrote in a computer-generated note left at the apartment where he killed his sleeping wife and children. “I wake up at night so afraid, so terrified that I couldn't be that afraid while awake. It has taken its toll. I have come to hate this life and this system of things. I have come to have no hope.”

Barton's note goes on to explain that he killed his children, whom he loved, to spare them “a lifetime of pain.” He loved his wife as well, but in some way held her responsible for his “demise.” His message concludes: “I don't plan to live very much longer, just long enough to kill as many of the people that greedily sought my destruction. You should kill me if you can.”

This is clearly a man whose mental and emotional being had collapsed. It may not have been the first time Barton snapped. Although never indicted, he was the prime suspect in the brutal slaying of his first wife and mother-in-law six years ago. Barton took out a \$600,000 life insurance policy on his first wife shortly before she and her mother were found slashed to death at a campground in northeast Alabama. He continued to protest his innocence of that crime, making a point of it in the confession-suicide note he left with the bodies of his current wife and children.

Much has been made in the media of Barton's vocation as a day-trader, and there can be little doubt that the frenzied, pressurized life of a small-time market gambler played a significant role in his undoing. Some reports say he often traded thousands of shares at a time, rooted in front of a computer screen, in accordance with this particularly alienated form of social practice, in an attempt to cash in on the momentary fluctuations of various stocks. One industry source said the average day-trader, of whom there are an estimated 5 million in the US, makes between 2,000 and 3,000 trades in the course of a market day. That averages out to more than 300 trades per hour.

And while there may not be a direct causal relationship between Barton's murder spree and the sharp drop in the market on Thursday (down more than 200 points when Barton walked into Momentum Securities), witnesses have reported that the assailant spoke of the day's losses before he pulled out his guns and began firing.

In a concentrated way, the get-rich-quick fever which permeates the bull market—and is promoted by the media as the highest form of human endeavor—dominates the life of such people. In a matter of minutes, a lifetime's savings can be wiped out, and most of those who enter into this form of activity end up on the losing side.

But it would be a form of self-delusion to conclude that

day-trading in and of itself is the explanation for this latest example of social pathology. In any event, the phenomenon of day-trading is organically linked to a complex nexus of economic, social and psychological conditions that make up present-day America.

No less vacuous are the attempts to reduce this latest massacre to a question of gun control (in the manner of Hillary Clinton and other liberal politicians), or the need for even more draconian law-and-order measures (as suggested by some pundits who have focused on the failure to arrest Barton for the murder of his first wife).

Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell has been widely quoted in connection with Thursday's rampage. However the one remark of some honesty and perception which he made, in the immediate aftermath of the shooting spree, has gone largely unreported in the press. Obviously shaken by the carnage, Campbell noted that similar tragedies have occurred with increasing frequency across the country, and that "at least 23" have died in Atlanta alone within the past three weeks. Campbell was referring to a domestic dispute that erupted into the shooting death of six people on July 12.

Something was seriously wrong with America, he said, and he went on to describe the eruptions of violence as a "cancer."

The time, in fact, is long since past when anyone with eyes to see, a brain to think and a modicum of intellectual integrity could deny that America is a sick society. Here is just a partial list of Atlanta-style shooting incidents since the beginning of the year:

* In January a woman walked into a downtown Salt Lake City office building with a grocery sack of bullets and opened fire, killing one person.

* In March a Johnson City, Tennessee man shot his lawyer and another client in an apparent dispute over his wife's will.

* In April a 71-year-old man raked the first floor of the Mormon Family History Library in Salt Lake City with .22-caliber handgun fire, killing two people and wounding four others before police shot him to death.

* Last month a psychiatrist in Southfield, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, was shot by a former patient, who then gunned down a 45-year-old woman and wounded four other people, before fatally shooting himself.

Then there is the wave of high school shootings, culminating in the carnage last April at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Atlanta was the scene of another high school shooting in May, which resulted in numerous injuries.

To this list one could add the fact that two days before the Atlanta massacre the Surgeon General issued a report on the alarming increase in the suicide rate in the US.

It is a damning commentary on the state of American society that, shocking and traumatic as events such like the Atlanta rampage are, they have become almost routine. As one of those who survived Barton's rampage said, "You joke that these things are becoming just another daily event. 'Oh, another mass shooting.'"

In a bizarre and tragic way, these explosions of individual rage and fear are expressions of the acute social contradictions that lie just below the surface of American society. It is not so much that they belie the official picture of a prosperous and powerful nation. Rather they are an essential product of a society that is increasingly riven by class divisions, with the flaunting of obscene levels of wealth by a privileged few existing side by side with an ever more difficult, even desperate, struggle for survival on the part of broad masses.

The glorification of the market, wealth and greed goes hand in hand with a relentless assault on the economic security of the general population. There is no avenue within the political system—little more than a wholly owned subsidiary of big business—for the needs and concerns of working people to find expression. There are no mass organizations that give voice to and fight for the interests of working people. The media and the entertainment industry promote the most backward social conceptions—religious bigotry, chauvinism, selfishness, militarism—and assiduously serve the agenda of corporate America both at home and abroad.

On what is American "prosperity" based? Consider the fact that the immediate cause of the mini-panic that hit the stock market on the day of the Atlanta massacre was a report that wages had risen faster than anticipated—a mere 1.1 percent. That the entire edifice of inflated stock values and the vast fortunes they generate rests on the continued suppression of the living standards of the masses reveals just how brutal, perverse and explosive social relations in the US really are.



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