

The malignant resentments that erupted into mass murder in Virginia

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The Virginia Tech tragedy, which led to the brutal deaths of 33 people, is an event that needs to be considered soberly and at length. But even before funerals have taken place and the dead properly memorialized, government and university officials are urging students, faculty and the population at large to “move on.”

Some of this is all too typically American and pragmatic, but much of it is distinctly self-serving. Those at the top of society are instinctively hostile to any in-depth examination of why this terrible incident took place. The same politicians and editorialists who insist that “how we got into Iraq is not the issue any more, but only how America can be successful now we’re there” are also opposed to dwelling on the roots of the Blacksburg, Virginia, mass murder. For a simple reason: American society is responsible for those deaths.

Lives have been ended, the lives of family members have been shattered. Thousands of people will never be the same.

Consider the case of Regina Rohde, 23, who survived the massacre at Columbine High School in April 1999 (the eighth anniversary of which falls Friday), where her classmates Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 people and eventually themselves, and is now a graduate student at Virginia Tech working on a master’s degree in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences. She was on the latter campus Monday when Cho Seung-Hui opened fire in two buildings. Rohde told a reporter: “It takes a lot of time to pick those pieces back up again and continue on. Normalcy never comes back. It’s a different definition of normal.”

The appeals to “move on” from officials combine callousness and stupidity. This has become a terrible cliché, repeated again and again, and directed against critical thought and feeling. No, people should not “move on.” ‘Enough, back to business!’ Here is the backwardness and indifference of the entire social superstructure, which cannot and will not look the reality it has created in the face. It is part of the ongoing refusal to analyze or understand. The attempt to transform every mass gathering at the Virginia Tech campus into a “pep rally” has something perverse and unseemly about it.

“Normalcy never comes back,” nor should it. Everyone in America and around the world knows this is not the last such atrocity. This could happen in any part of the country, it is a matter of the nation’s social pathology.

The coarsest and most ignorant response, not unexpectedly, comes from the editors of the *Wall Street Journal*, mouthpiece for

the speculators and swindlers who have looted trillions from the US and world economy. The *Journal*’s April 18 editorial argues that the Virginia Tech disaster is “the kind of traumatic event that unleashes a torrent of pop sociology and national psychoanalysis, so allow us to weigh in with a more fundamental explanation: There are evil and psychotic people in the world willing to do great harm to others if they aren’t stopped.”

On the contrary, much of what we know about Cho and his descent into madness underlines the *social* character of the Virginia Tech tragedy, its intimate and all too painful connection to the present state of American society, both in terms of the eventual gunman’s own disorientation and the inability of the university system or community at large to care for him.

No one can argue in this case that there were not warning signs. It seems that Cho, the product of an arranged marriage between a man 10 years older than his apparently reluctant bride, did not have a happy upbringing. As a child, Cho was nearly mute; some in the family thought he might have mental problems. His parents ran a used-book store in South Korea, which was not profitable, and lived in a cramped basement apartment. They emigrated to the US in 1992 with very little.

The boy had difficulties in his new American school. He “was picked on, pushed around and laughed at over his shyness” (Associated Press) as a schoolboy in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Centreville, Virginia. In high school, Cho earned A’s in mathematics. When he started college, according to the *Guardian*, “his mother took his dormitory mates to one side to explain about her son’s unusual character and implored them to help.”

He spoke to others, his roommates, classmates and professors at Virginia Tech as little as possible. He sometimes referred to himself as “Question Mark” and spoke in whispers. One of his dormitory suite mates told CNN that “he was just like a shadow.”

Difficulties came alarmingly to the surface in 2005. He annoyed two female students with his messages and attention. His sullen and angry conduct in class provoked the ire of one of his professors, who insisted that he be removed from her course. When Cho indicated in December 2005 that he might kill himself, a temporary detention order was obtained from a judge and he was taken to a mental health facility. A doctor evaluated him and reported that he was mentally ill but no imminent danger to himself or others. There is no record of any follow-up or subsequent treatment.

Various professors seem to have done all they could personally

for Cho. Lucinda Roy, the head of the English department at Virginia Tech, in particular, took it upon herself to tutor him one-on-one after his removal from the problem class, as well as to warn authorities. She found him deeply troubled, “I was concerned that he was suicidal, that he was depressed. There was a negativity. It was like talking to a hole. There was such an absence when he entered a room. Everything just emptied out and it turned very dark.”

Numerous people individually attempted to help, but, in the end, the university system treated his difficulties in a *pro forma* manner, as it does in so many instances. The university could have done more, without question, but there is no institutional or police solution to generalized social alienation.

A recent study of the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) notes that “Nearly all survey respondents at both national universities and liberal arts colleges reported an increase in student usage of mental health services throughout the past three years.” They go on: “Schools see a growing number of students coming to college with a history of mental illness, increased anxiety after 9/11 and increased awareness of mental health issues.”

The ADAA observes that “While a variety of services are offered, many aren’t staffed appropriately to meet growing demand.” It points out that “Every year, 19 percent of young adults in the general [US] population think about suicide, and nearly 9 percent make an actual suicide attempt.”

A spring 2006 survey, cited in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, of nearly 95,000 students on 117 campuses found that almost half of them felt “so depressed it was difficult to function at least once during the previous academic year; 16 percent felt that way on at last five occasions.” Nearly two thirds felt hopeless at least once. Nine percent had considered suicide. “More than 93 percent had felt overwhelmed at least once by all they had to do.”

Students face immense economic pressures. A low grade, a failed class, a missed academic opportunity, and futures are ruined. The number of students working part-time has increased, along with the competition for jobs. Young people leave college or university with tens of thousands of dollars in debt, a burden that will take years to pay off.

And there is the general climate in the country. The US has been in a continual state of war since 2001, with government officials promising decades or a half-century more of bloody conflict. The Bush administration’s terror threat level has stood at “Elevated” (Yellow) for most of the time since then.

Repeated warnings about the risk of biological, chemical or nuclear weapons being set off in the country, endless threats against foreign governments and individuals, the most bloodcurdling language used by government officials (“We either were going to kill him or capture him, and our policy is we try and capture and not kill and if we’re not able to capture and we can kill, we do it”—former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld)....

No wonder there is stress and anxiety. What is the impact of all this on the most fragile and unstable personalities?

No one in the media dares to make any link between the violence America is visiting on the world every day and the violence it visits on itself. No one in official circles will suggest that the country ought to take a penetrating look at itself in the mirror.

Cho’s videos are very disturbing. He poses with handguns, pointing them at the camera or his own head, holds a knife to his throat or wields a hammer in a menacing manner. In other segments, he rails against the world at large: “You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy’s life you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people.”

And: “You have never felt a single ounce of pain your whole life. And you want to inject as much misery in our lives because you can, just because you can. You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn’t enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren’t enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn’t enough. Your vodka and cognac wasn’t enough. All your debaucheries weren’t enough. Those weren’t enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything.”

Finally, horribly: “This is it. This is where it all ends. What a life it was. Some life.”

This is an extremely disturbed person, but it is clear, if one listens to his words, that conditions in society were playing on his mind. He felt many resentments. This doesn’t justify any of his insane acts, but the resentments have a real basis. He was mentally unbalanced, but that doesn’t mean there was no connection between social life and what he did. And now television analysts begin heaping abuse on his head, as a substitute for taking the problems seriously. “He was a coward,” and so on. This is almost a provocation, an incitement of others.

The resentments are real. Huge social divisions exist on a college campus. Snobbery and elitism exist. With Cho, the resentments were psychotically internalized and developed in a pathological manner. The society denies that social classes exists, it papers over social inequality. The contradictions emerge in a malignant fashion, they explode in this anti-social form.

This is the ongoing price American society pays for the absence of a progressive and revolutionary social movement that offers a way out of the present impasse, for the lack of class consciousness and social solidarity. The emergence of such a movement would have a wonderfully regenerative and healthy effect on the national psyche, and pose a mortal threat to the social and financial status quo. That is why the ruling elite fears the emergence of such a movement a thousand times more than it does a deranged individual with a gun.



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