

New York Times' David Brooks: Aurora tragedy has nothing to do with American society

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26 July 2012

David Brooks of the *New York Times* produced an especially stupid, and defensive, column July 23 on the mass killing in Aurora, Colorado. According to Brooks, the shooting of 70 people in a crowded movie theater, along with the dozens of other mass shootings that have taken place in the US in recent decades, has nothing to do with the state of American society.

After citing a number of mass killings—selected arbitrarily—that have taken place since the beginning of the 20th century, including Anders Breivik's execution of 69 people at a left-wing summer camp in Norway, Brooks writes: "It's probably a mistake to think that we can ever know what 'caused' these rampages."

What is mysterious about Breivik's crime? The "cause" in that case could hardly be clearer. Breivik is a fascist, allied with other fascists in Europe and America. He carried out a savage and cowardly attack on what he perceived to be "cultural Marxists/multiculturalists."

The *Times* columnist then turns to assessments conducted by the FBI, the Secret Service and various psychologists, who have drawn superficial and obvious conclusions: "Many [of the mass killers] had suffered from severe depression or had attempted suicide. Many lived solitary lives, but most shared their violent fantasies with at least one person before they committed their crimes."

Getting to the heart of his argument, Brooks asserts, "The crucial point is that the dynamics are internal, not external. These killers are primarily the product of psychological derangements, not sociological ones."

He continues: "Yet, after every rampage, there are always people who want to use these events to indict whatever they don't like about society. A few years ago, some writers tried to blame violent video games for a rash of killings... These days, people are trying to use the

Aurora killings as a pretext to criticize America's gun culture or to call for stricter gun control laws."

To whom is Brooks responding? Certainly, there are various liberal voices, including the *Times* editorial board, ineffectually arguing for tighter gun controls, but their comments hardly rise to the level of an "indictment" of American society, or even aspects of it.

Indeed, one of the remarkable facts about the response to the numerous mass killings in schools and workplaces, and now movie theaters, is *how few* efforts have been made by sociologists, psychologists and professional commentators to link the tragedies to social developments in the US. One searches almost in vain for serious considerations along those lines. The *World Socialist Web Site* is very much the exception.

Brooks' insistence that the Aurora shootings should not occasion any serious examination of the society that generated them is echoed by other reactionary voices. George Will, the right-wing pedant--and millionaire--who continues to pontificate on ABC, last Sunday decried the "normal human instinct... to try and explain things like this." Will further declared, "We try to explain these outcroppings of evil in terms of some defect in the social system, some prompting from society, which once isolated could be corrected... The beginning of wisdom about this is to understand the randomness of it."

Taking these confessions of intellectual impotence at face value, Will and Brooks should be obliged to resign their lucrative positions and retire gracefully.

The ignorance here, however, is entirely self-serving. Brooks, Will and their ilk are delighted with a society that has made them rich and privileged. They are up in arms at the notion that something could be wrong with the present arrangement. The idea outrages them, and they fall back on banal and unconvincing arguments.

The contention that the wave of mass killings is simply the product of “internal dynamics” (Brooks), or the given “individual’s twisted mind,” in Will’s words, is absurd. Where does human psychology come from?

Of course, the connection between the general social situation and a given human being’s state of mind is enormously complex, with countless mediating factors. However, individuals are not atoms floating free, but real human beings living in definite social relations with others.

The deepest and most persistent circumstances of people’s lives, the totality of social conditions (economic background and life, education and other experiences), are what decisively shape them. How and under what conditions individuals live, not their biochemistry, play the critical role.

Under the most atrocious conditions, only a tiny percentage of people react by committing suicide or lashing out homicidally against others. Those who commit mass killings have specific psychic histories and serious disorders, but the disorders have their ultimate source in existing social relationships and the prevailing social atmosphere.

A wave may strike every portion of a levee with equal force, but the latter breaks at its weakest point. The most vulnerable personalities succumb to the immense social pressures, each in his or her unique fashion, but the ultimate responsibility lies with the crisis-ridden and decayed social order, not the individual who gives way. This was understood at an earlier period in American history not merely by socialists, but by social scientists, liberal thinkers and journalists of a serious disposition.

Does the recourse to high-powered weapons, military or paramilitary paraphernalia and other gear associated with modern warfare by many of the school and workplace killers have nothing to do with the endless conflicts prosecuted by American imperialism? The atmosphere of official belligerence, the brutality and coldness encouraged by the popular culture, the relentless promotion of individualism, the general indifference toward human life exhibited in every prominent public sphere in the US—all of this operates harmfully on the more susceptible human types.

Certainly since 9/11 the American political and media establishment have gone out of their way to spread fear and insecurity in order to promote their “war on terror.”

One has to add to those factors the vast social chasm, the alienation of wide layers of the population from the political system, the lack of any progressive outlet in that

system or in the mass media for social discontent, the growing sense of hopelessness among the young, in particular. The mix is intensely volatile.

Intellectual bankrupts, Brooks and Will essentially subscribe to a religious view, although they don’t care to admit it. The killings should be chalked up to man’s evil nature, to Original Sin and so forth. These retrograde notions are encouraged by many of Hollywood’s current products, including the *Batman-Dark Knight* series, which propagate a cheap, unthinking misanthropy that nourishes a bleak view of humanity and rejects any prospect of social progress.

An online comment from Focus on Family, the prominent Christian right outfit headquartered in Colorado, is not so shy about the “real cause” of the Aurora shooting: “It is always pointless to try and make sense of the senseless, to try and logically process the illogical... What happened up in Aurora earlier this morning was the product of pure evil. It was the result of a depraved individual taking his free will to the extreme... What is the source of the darkness of the culture? Again, it is sin and evil.”

Pig ignorance hand in hand with social reaction.

Brooks’ article is defensive, halfhearted. The state of American dysfunction, with all its terrible side products, is well advanced and everybody knows it. Who is the *Times* columnist trying to kid?

He concludes his column on a peculiar and rather ominous note. After vaguely noting that “the response” to the mass shootings “has to start with psychiatry, too” and that the “best way to prevent killing sprees is with relationships,” Brooks proposes “a more aggressive system of treatment options, especially for men in their 20s.”

What precisely is Brooks proposing? Should psychically suspicious young men be rounded up and held in preventive detention? Is this the mental health equivalent of “stop and frisk”? Here ignorance and fear seem to combine with disorientation and an instinct for repression.

The political and media establishment can’t take the first step toward honestly looking at American society, not the least because it senses the dire political implications for itself of what would be revealed.



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