

The Oregon school shooting and America's brutal society

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The killing of nine students and the wounding of seven others by 26-year-old Chris Harper-Mercer at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon on Thursday have once again revealed something deeply dysfunctional in American society.

Harper-Mercer opened fire on students in multiple classrooms in the campus's Snyder Hall. He was subsequently killed in the course of a shootout with police outside the hall.

In coming days, more information will emerge about the particular psychological motivations—and illness—that led to Thursday's events. Some details have begun to come out. Social media accounts belonging to Harper-Mercer indicate that he held a confused mix of right-wing nationalist ideas. A Myspace account had numerous pictures glorifying members of the Irish Republican Army. The name he chose for an online dating website, IRONCROSS45, is apparently a reference to a medal awarded by the Nazis. In his dating site profile he identified as a conservative Republican but noted organized religion as one of his dislikes.

In a recent blog post, Harper-Mercer reveled in the attention Vester Flanagan received when he killed two news reporters on live television in August. He then encouraged readers to view the video of the killing that Flanagan had posted on social media, saying, "It's a short video but good nonetheless."

The killings at Umpqua Community College are the latest in a seemingly endless series of horrific tragedies. The website shootingtracker.com, which has tracked mass shootings in the United States since 2013, reports that there have been at least 296 incidents so far this year in which multiple people have been killed or wounded by gunfire.

A recent study by Harvard researchers Amy Cohen,

Deborah Azrael and Matthew Miller found that between 1982 and 2011 the average amount of time between mass shootings in which more than four people were killed or wounded was 200 days. Since 2011 the number of days between shootings has fallen to an average of 64, meaning there has been a three-fold increase in the rate at which such killings occur.

The list of mass killers includes: 22-year-old Jared Lee Loughner, who shot Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords and killed six people on January 8, 2011; 24-year-old James Holmes, who killed 12 and wounded 58 in a movie theater on July 20, 2012; 20-year-old Adam Lanza, who shot dead 20 first graders and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012; 22-year-old Elliot Rodgers, who killed seven and wounded seven on the UC Santa Barbara campus on May 23, 2014; 21-year-old Dylan Storm Roof, who shot and killed nine people in a church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 18 of this year.

Even such a limited accounting gives a picture of a truly sick society. No economically advanced country comes close to the number and frequency of mass killings in the United States.

In a rambling press conference held in the wake of Thursday's shooting, US President Barack Obama struggled to account for yet another mass shooting during his tenure in office. "Somehow this has become routine," he said fatalistically. "The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine. The conversation in the aftermath of it. We've become numb to this." At a press conference the next day Obama reinforced his loss for an explanation, superstitiously blaming all violence on "original sin."

As he has done many times before, to the extent that he offered any explanation, Obama blamed lax national

gun control laws, a problem that he said could be solved by the passage of the correct piece of legislation. “We know that states with the most gun laws tend to have the fewest gun deaths. So the notion that gun laws don’t work, or just will make it harder for law-abiding citizens and criminals will still get their guns is not borne out by the evidence,” he argued.

Obama’s proposed solution to mass shooting—mainly aimed at increasing the power of the state and the police—will do nothing to actually address the underlying social issues that give rise repeatedly to such tragedies.

While each shooting has its own peculiarities, a phenomenon that occurs with such regularity must have deeper causes. What is the social environment that produces them? Decades of the suppression of class struggle and the promotion of individualism. An ideology that explains individual failings or successes as the product of personal characteristics, leading to deep disillusionment and alienation.

A general sense of hopelessness pervades among a generation of young people, who, if they were lucky enough to go to college, are saddled with a trillion dollars in student loan debt, with no prospect of a decent paying job that provides them with a good standard of living.

As for pervasive violence, this applies first and foremost to the state and the ruling class that controls it. Over the last two and a half decades, which encompass nearly the entirety of Harper-Mercer’s life, the United States has been at war in one country or another more or less continuously, resulting in the deaths of more than a million people and displacement of millions more. The shooter has grown up during the “war on terror,” which has been used by the ruling class to foster an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion, and to justify all manner of violent actions by the state.

Under Obama’s drone assassination program, open murder has become the official policy of the US government. The president and other government officials publicly boast of “taking out” people placed on their kill lists, including American citizens. While the US government keeps secret how many people it has killed with drones, conservative estimates based on public reports indicate that thousands, including women and children, have been summarily executed without charge or trial.

Domestically, a society riven by growing economic inequality has at the same time been increasingly militarized, with military service glorified at every possible moment as the highest service to the nation. Police forces have been armed to the teeth with armored vehicles and assault rifles making them indistinguishable from military units. Killings and brutality are routine, with nearly 900 people murdered in encounters with the police so far this year.

The United States remains the last economically advanced country that imposes the death penalty. Since 1976, 1,416 people have cruelly and inhumanely been put to their death. So far this year there have been twenty-two such state-sanctioned murders.

The solutions routinely advanced in the wake of such shootings will do nothing to address the causes of mass killings that are rooted, in the final analysis, in America’s brutal society.



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