

The Uvalde massacre and the pathological violence of American life

David Walsh
31 May 2022

The shooting in Uvalde, Texas on May 24 has prompted a great deal of discussion. The scale of the horror and the depth of the public reaction suggest that something of a “tipping point” has been reached.

Many people in the US and elsewhere are raising questions about the event. How could such a thing, the massacre of small children, take place? Parents have been placed in the impossible position of having to try to explain to their own children, potential victims, why incidents like this occur.

At the same time, everyone knows it is only a matter of time until news of the next, and possibly worse, mass killing flashes across television and computer screens. Where, when and how many victims are the only unanswered questions... And the shooting after that. Waiting anxiously for the next shoe to drop has become a way of everyday life in America.

The Texas massacre of the innocents reveals a deep pathology at the core of American society. Vast numbers are sincerely attempting to make sense of how the present state of life in the country unhinges a fraction of the population in this homicidal manner. A politicization and a radicalization are under way.

By and large, however, masses of people do not yet make the connection in particular between the official violence—the endless wars and threats of new and wider wars, the relentless killings carried out by law enforcement, the establishment’s essential indifference to a million dead in a preventable pandemic—and the manner in which the most psychologically susceptible individuals experience, absorb and even reproduce it.

The “susceptibility” is mediated through the political and economic situation, as well as the social and cultural atmosphere. This is not the first violent period in American or world history. What generates a truly damaging “double despair” in certain young people is the combination of their own apparently miserable personal prospects and the barren, repugnant state of the public life they see before them.

The absence of any mass-based, progressive social (or anti-war) movement, even of a reformist kind, has far-reaching consequences. Human beings, except for a handful, do not

live for stock market prices or the latest in military hardware. The ruling class imagines that it can get by with endless sleight of hand. The Democratic Party offers an African American candidate guaranteeing historic change, a female candidate supposedly speaking for an underrepresented half of the population, an “honest Joe” promising the most radical administration since the New Deal. Each of these lies has only deepened cynicism and disillusionment.

The media registers the popular revulsion over the actions of the gunman in Uvalde, attempting always to channel it in the narrowest and, if possible, most socially backward directions. When it comes, however, to American military violence in Iraq or Afghanistan or any number of other places, or its proxy war in Ukraine, the press and television news adopt another tone. In these cases, the glorification of killing and death goes on uninterruptedly, and not only in the fascistic Murdoch-owned outlets.

The *New York Times* recently ran a typically bloodthirsty piece headlined, “Tending Russia’s Dead as They Pile Up in Ukraine,” which reveled in the carnage. It described the efforts of a Ukrainian soldier to collect the corpses of Russian war dead.

The *Times* went on, “This is the best work in the world,” the unnamed soldier said “of the grim satisfaction to be found in collecting the corpses of the invader.” *Business Insider*, the financial and business news website, for its part, recently reported, “A Ukrainian soldier in a liberated town said that killing Russian forces is ‘like a sport now.’” This only echoes US propaganda about its neocolonial “liberating” efforts, peppered with atrocities, torture and mass killings, in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Why should anyone imagine that the daily glorification of slaughtering other human beings as a legitimate and even preferable solution to difficult problems would not communicate itself viscerally to individuals who find themselves in what they take to be impossible personal binds?

Mass death has also been “normalized” over the course of

the past two years through the COVID-19 catastrophe. The population has been told at every turn that it must “learn to live” with the pandemic, that in fact it ought to “get over” any sentimentality about the ill and the dead. The *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the rest have made it their business to paint the maintenance of profits and business as a far more pressing issue. Again, what corrosive impact does this continuous devaluing of human life, the complacent acceptance that many old, poor and otherwise vulnerable people will fall victim to the virus, have on the texture and quality of popular life?

At the same time, the Uvalde episode makes the ruling elite nervous. After all, it gives America a major black eye. On the NBC News website, Jacob Ware, research associate for counterterrorism at the Council on Foreign Relations, commented bluntly May 29: “The school shooting epidemic undermines the U.S. in the eyes of both its allies and its adversaries, damaging its ability to provide leadership on human rights and increasing its vulnerability to enemy propaganda... Tuesday’s shooting is particularly likely to damage America’s standing in speaking out against Russian violence against children in Ukraine.”

Guided by this general concern, the *Washington Post* attempted in an editorial the same day to deflect attention from America’s diseased condition by incorporating the Uvalde events into a universal, presumably inexplicable process in which “young lives” are “cut short.” Young people, the *Post* concluded, “continue to be deprived of their lives and their futures—by neglect, greed, orchestrated hatreds or delusional aggressions—in places from Ukraine to Uvalde, Tex.”

Indeed, there is a link between the deaths in Uvalde and those in Ukraine, in a conflict deliberately provoked and now stoked by Washington, but it is not one the *Post*, the personal property of one of the richest men in the world, chooses to spell out: both tragedies are bound up with the brutal, decayed state of American capitalism and the eruption of its endless violence, at home and abroad.

The pronouncements of establishment pundits on the Uvalde incident continue to be as banal and deluded as ever. The American ruling elite devil will not voluntarily cut off his own claws—he is incapable of even acknowledging them.

Much of the attention has been directed toward the inaction and incompetence, or worse, of law enforcement in Uvalde. While the media no doubt uses this element to divert attention from other troubling phenomena, this aspect of the disaster has legitimately outraged both families in the town and broader layers of the population.

Generally speaking, as Hurricane Katrina and innumerable “natural” and social disasters have demonstrated over the past two decades, the vast military-police machine, bloated

beyond recognition through the “war on terror” and the building up of “Homeland Security,” is useless when it comes to protecting the population. That’s not its purpose. This apparatus is only good as a rule, in the US and on the rest of the planet, for repression, especially for shooting down the poor, the defenseless, the inadequately armed or entirely unarmed.

In keeping with this social reality, one Uvalde parent bitterly complained about being arrested by US Marshals and handcuffed after she urged law enforcement to do something about the ongoing massacre. The woman “said she saw other parents being pushed to the ground, pepper-sprayed, and tasered. ‘They didn’t do that to the shooter, but they did that to us,’ she said. ‘That’s how it felt.’”

A vile, rapacious, ignorant ruling class presides over American society. The political leadership, in both major parties, along with the bankers and corporate CEOs, are hated by every honest portion of the people. The media only exists to inject poison into the atmosphere and obliterate serious thought, shutting up or drowning out critical voices.

But masses of people, undergoing one earth-shattering experience after the other, are concluding that they have had enough.

Inexorably, organically, a movement is beginning to break through the corrupt framework. This finds initial reflection sharply in the voting down of contracts foisted on workers by the unions, the criminal accomplices of the financial oligarchy.

The widespread anger and revulsion are a necessary and welcome development. They already demonstrate that political pessimism is both unwarranted and thoroughly reactionary. But that healthy sentiment needs to be elevated and take on a *consciously* radical and anti-establishment character through the growth of socialist understanding and influence in the working class. Significant progress will be made when the very foundations of capitalism in America are questioned and challenged on a mass scale.



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