

Mass Murder, Violence and the U.S. Social Structure

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Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

C. Wright Mills had warned about the excessive bureaucratization in the social sciences during his time, but he could not have envisioned the tremendous amount of fragmented analyses that occurs when attempts to understand the structure of U.S. society.

The focus on recent mass murders in public places such as at the Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Connecticut are clear examples. According to the [Gun Violence](#) 2017 website, there were 346 mass shootings (446 deaths/1803 injuries) incidents and as of September 22, 2018, there are 42,123 mass shootings for 2018 (10,628 deaths/20,805 injuries).

Mass murders create a public stir, an outcry for all the obvious reasons such as because they tend to occur in public places like schools, which violates a sense of safety, the innocence of the victims are not contested, and there is a tremendous amount of media coverage of the tragedy.

The definition of the problem that accompanies these incidents are usually narrow and focused on the perpetrators as troubled individuals and/or relate to gun regulation. However, a deeper analysis of mass murder does not view mass murder as a separate category from murder and violence and moves beyond a focus on the individual and/or gun policies to an understanding how social structure shape individual behavior.

According to Mills, the state is the most dominating form power in world history and, as such, a major fact in the life of every man and women.^[10] The most important relations in the U.S. are with the state and its corresponding interests of the military and corporations that are accepted by politicians and the public.^[11]

The focus on recent mass murders in public places are clear examples of fragmented analysis because it does not include other tragic cases of violence such as the fact the 14,070 people were murder in the U.S. (figures for 2016). Just as the circumstances and innocence of the victims play a role in the media coverage of the mass murders in the U.S. so does the race, class, and geography of the victims.

Some mass murders are considered tragedies that are difficult for the media to ignore, as lead stories that pull on every emotional string, generating sympathy because this type of violence is a shock and is not supposed to afflict the middle class, mostly white America. Of course, the Pulse Night Club in Orlando and the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston stand as examples that challenge this dichotomy.

Nevertheless, the deep embedded socialized thinking is murder is an urban phenomenon that occurs in streets of cities such as Chicago with the most and Baltimore with the second

most, respectively, 650 and 343 murders in 2017. However, the cities with the highest murder rates in 2017 were St. Louis at 64.6 and Baltimore at 55.2., and if the murder rate was aggregated to specific low-income and non-white neighborhoods they would be much higher.^[1] This “murder inequality” tends to normalize murder in the inner cities as something that the lower classes and mostly non-whites engage in as the consequence of supposed “deflected” culture or biology. Thus, the perception is that it is not a problem with the structure of society but a problem of the individual or “kinds-of-people.”^[2]

However, on the contrary, murder in the inner-city, largely fits the definition of state crimes of omission. The concept of state crimes of omission is important because it focuses on state’s “failure to protect the rights and to serve the needs of all persons subject primarily to the territory of a particular state.”^[3] Essentially, this miscarriage creates chaos and the conditions of despair, anxiety, and animosity that are associated with violence, self-destruction, and crime to name some of its byproducts. As a result, increased policing and the militarization of policing of poor and racial minority communities is a consequence of unequal relations and its enforcement.

In addition, the focus on mass murder is highly selective because it only concerns itself with mass murder in the U.S. and not the state-sanctioned mass murder or the murder that occurs around the world – i.e., the killing of 4 or more individuals (not including the murderer). The mass murders that occur as regular, routinized state violence in which the U.S. government is an active participant such as in its “war on terror,” which murders are conveniently left out of media coverage and removed from outcry and critical discussion.

War and Mass Murder

In fact, the U.S. state [only keeps records of its own dead](#) and does not keep count of the countless number of people deemed civilian or combatant for that matter. In 2015, the [International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War](#) release one of the only comprehensive studies on the number of Middle Eastern people killed since September 11, 2001. This study’s conservatively estimated that the “war on terror” has directly or indirectly killed around 1 million people in Iraq, 220,000 in Afghanistan and 80,000 in Pakistan, totaling around 1.3 million. These figures do not include the other nations like Somalia, Syria, and Yemen where the U.S. has either operated counterinsurgency operations or bombing campaigns. As in foreign occupations and counterinsurgency operations, the distinction between innocent civilian and insurgent is not of considered vitally important to the foreign force, as **Nick Turse** (2013) illustrates with the U.S. war in Vietnam.^[4] Both the murder victims of the U.S. state and the murder victims on the streets of the U.S. are seen as undeserving of public sympathy. However, the recent mass murders in the U.S. are viewed as entirely different and seen in an exclusive category of murder and violence.

Turse explains how the U.S. forces in Vietnam operated under what was called the cross-over point – i.e., a strategy that involves “the killing of more enemy than the Vietnamese could supply.” (FN) The adoption of a model was based on bureaucratic efficiency designed to maximize the body count of the “enemy,” which ultimately led to a war against an entire people. The Vietnamese, for example, were engaged in a national liberation struggle and the notion that the U.S. was fighting against the spread of communism overlooked this point. The body count became the marker of success and the rationale that if it is Vietnamese and dead; it is VC (i.e., Vietnamese Communist).

Within this situation, circumstances of these killings didn't matter, the unarmed farmer fleeing U.S. troops or villagers (women, children, and the elderly) were all seen as the enemy. This is very instructive because it demonstrates the power that top officials have within the U.S. government and military institutions have on the rank-and-file of its armed forces to dehumanize a people and legitimize such a system of killing. Although the "war on terror" is different on many levels to what occurred in Vietnam, what appears very similar is the way in which the institutions within the U.S. state have also dehumanized a people and legitimatizes a system of killing Arabs and Muslims as "terrorists." These institutions do not only have the capacity to convert its armed forces into carrying out these types of orders, but many individuals in society find themselves within the dominant institutional orders – i.e., the political, corporate, and military institutional orders, which are coordinated in meeting their overall objectives of the state.

Terrorism

The "terrorist," self-radicalized or otherwise appears to similarly be depicted as the mass murderer in that both devoid of all rational motives. The psychological and the political realms are difficult for the media and the U.S. state to navigate in an attempt to deny any political understanding of the causes behind such actions. Similar to the perpetrator of U.S. mass murder is the narrative of the "terrorist" as a pathologically deranged individual. However, only in the sense that the "terrorist" political grievances tend to be articulated in religious beliefs and are associated geographically with the Middle East, which has experienced U.S. state interference.

To see the "terrorists" as a rational calculated actor whose use of violence to attain a political goal would mean taking their grievances seriously and seeing their actions as a form of **Chalmers Johnson's** (2004) calls blowback to U.S. foreign policies. If we closely examine the category of violence and include the "terrorist" we can see that their actions are also traceable to the actions of the U.S. state. The "war on terror" has included military invasions and occupations, drone assassinations, and the kidnappings and torture of Arabs and Muslims. As a result, many Muslims, as well as others, view this as a war on Islam insomuch that it is like all imperialist projects because it utilizes ethnic-racial ideologies to justify foreign expansion.



What appears to be strikingly clear is that the focus on mass murder in the U.S. does not only produce fragmented analyses but is diversionary. This can be seen in the aftermath of a mass murder the focus is on the killer, his mental health, and his so-called easy access to guns, or assault weapons. An emphasis on the individual clearly distracts attention away for the U.S. state, which ultimately absolves it of any culpability for the creation of the conditions that engendered this particular behavior. Recently, this can be seen in the guided public discourse along very narrow parameters in which the victims, their families, and

some politicians advocate for enacting universal background checks, “red flag” gun laws, age requirements for assault weapons, and/or banning modifications.

Even the activism that target politicians who receive NRA endorsements and campaign contributions appear diversionary and misguided in the sense that it does not address the arms industry as being an essential element of what C. Wright Mills referred to as permanent war economy in which interlocking interests between the political, corporation, and military elite comprise of what **Fred J. Cook** (1962) called the warfare state. In other words, as we will see, this is but a tip of the iceberg in understanding how deeply embedded war, war-making, violence, and coercion are in the social structure. The above changes may seem vitally important in terms of preventive measures, but they do not address what it is about U.S. society, or more specifically what is it about the social structure that creates the conditions in which individuals feel the need to kill their fellow citizens at such alarming rates.

It is difficult to view these tragedies as simply the problem of particular unhinged individuals, and how to keep guns out of their hands. In fact, Mills provides an example of distinguishing between personal troubles and social issues of social structure when he considered unemployment,

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief, we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, this is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within a range opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunity has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.^[5]

Mills’ focus on the social structure was because he believed that individuals “must be aware of that malaise and the frustrations they experience in their inner lives are linked to the big picture of society, to those problems residing at the level of social structure.”^[6] So if we consider in a population of approximately 323 million people (figures for 2016), there were [15,070 murder victims](#), with 11,004 killed by firearms and 4,066 killed by knives, blunt objects, and other means of murder can one reason that this is a personal trouble related to a particular individual?

A fuller picture would extend beyond mass murder and consider all category murder. In 2016, there were 31,076 deaths as the result of homicides, suicides, legal intervention, and unintentional shootings.^[7] More than 85 people a day are killed with guns and more than twice that number are injured with them. It is clear that murder is high in the U.S. when compared to similar high-income nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). For example, in a study that [compared U.S. violent death rates with other high-income OECD countries](#) found that men in the U.S. are approximately 9 times more likely to be homicide victims than their male counterparts in OECD counties, and women are 4 times more likely to be a victim of murder than their respective counterparts. The total homicide rate in 2010 in the U.S. was 5.3 per 100,000 compared to the highest among high-income countries in the OECD, the Czech Republic 2.6 and Finland at 1.9. Yet, this may not rise to the threshold required to think beyond the individual. However, if when we include [FBI UCR statistics from 2016](#), the victim of murder, which includes mass murder

with a reported violent crime such as rape, robbery, and aggravated assault we now have 1,248,185, with a rate of 386.3 per 100,000. Although there are plenty of studies and arguments that suggest that gun accessibility make all forms of violence more possible such as murder and suicide, we should, however, see violence as a more complex phenomenon that does, in fact, include firearms but is grounded in the social structure analysis.

Murder Victims by Weapon, 2012–2016					
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Weapons	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	12,888	12,253	12,270	13,750	15,070
Total firearms:	8,897	8,454	8,312	9,778	11,004
Handguns	6,404	5,782	5,673	6,569	7,105
Rifles	298	285	258	258	374
Shotguns	310	308	264	272	262
Other guns	116	123	93	177	186
Firearms, type not stated	1,769	1,956	2,024	2,502	3,077
Knives or cutting instruments	1,604	1,490	1,595	1,589	1,604
Blunt objects (clubs, hammers, etc.)	522	428	446	450	472
Personal weapons (hands, fists, feet, etc.) ¹	707	687	682	659	656
Poison	13	11	10	8	11
Explosives	8	2	7	1	1
Fire	87	94	71	84	107
Narcotics	38	53	70	75	114
Drowning	14	4	14	14	9
Strangulation	90	85	89	99	98
Asphyxiation	106	95	102	120	91
Other weapons or weapons not stated	802	850	872	873	903

¹ Pushed is included in personal weapons.

Source: [FBI](#)

The above statistics are presented as seemingly unconnected as is how 1 in 5 people in the U.S. are taking at least one psychotropic medication for depression and other forms of mental illness. However, according to an article by Bruce Levine, "[The Politics of Suicide and Depression](#)," rather than looking at the conditions that correlate with mental illness, the U.S. government's Substance Abuse Mental Health Association (SAMHSA) makes public announcements in order to guide more people into treatment. Yet, according to Levine SAMHSA's national survey results actually reveal that:

...suicidality, depression and mental illness are highly correlated with involvement in the criminal justice system, unemployment, and poverty, and occur in greater frequency among young people, women, and Native Americans. Shouldn't researchers be examining American societal and cultural variables that are making so many of us depressed and suicidal? At the very least, don't we as a society want to know what exactly is making physically healthier teenagers and young adults more depressed than senior citizens?

It is clear to Levine that the psychologizing of mental illness is problematic and that the real question should be what is it about U.S. society that makes people so depressed and wants to kill themselves (and for the purpose of this inquiry kill others). Rather than see mental illness as an independent variable in explaining a whole host of problems such as murder and other violent acts, we should also see it as a dependent variable.

Returning to Mills' sociological imagination example cited above on unemployment, which he differentiates between personal troubles and social problems of social structure, arguing that one could not hope to find an explanation for unemployment in an individual when millions are unemployed. In a similar vein of reasoning, using the above cursory view of the murder of self and others (with or without a firearm), victims of violent crimes, and large numbers of individuals taking psychiatric medication one could not hope to find an explanation within the psychology of an individual. One would undoubtedly have to look at the political and economic forces that shape the social structure of the society.

By viewing mass murder as a personal trouble and/or a problem of gun restrictions is to engage in fragmented analyses that does very little to illuminate the problem of social structure. It is from within the classical tradition that we explain the structure of U.S. society and the variety of individuals that prevail in it. Mills states,

When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman.... [Or] When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father.^[8]

In a similar understanding to Mills' emphasis on the influence that social structure has on the individual, we ask what happens to the individual when a society militarizes permanently overtime and is increasingly reliant on violence and coercion to maintain its political order? In other words, does a nation's dependence on violence and coercion to maintain its global power and national stratification system require a particular kind of individual capable of fulfilling the continuation of the political order? It would appear that such a nation would need to socialize willing and obedient participants and to desensitize its population to the carnage it perpetuates as it continues to monopolize the means of violence and attempts to regulate non-state sanctioned use.

The recent focus on mass murder is a selected analysis that represents fragmented analysis and ultimately serves to divert attention away from the U.S. state. If most violence is properly categorized and conceptualized to include all the categories listed than most of them can be connected to the state. So for the purpose of this inquiry, we will not concern ourselves with the "bad apple" perspective, which is based on dispositional attributions -i.e., the explanation of how defected and deranged murderer who goes on a killing spree or commits violent acts.^[9] Our primary concern should be on attempting to understand the particular impact that the social structure has on the individual. And in so doing, we should attempt to explain the social structure of the U.S. and explore the ways in which the institutions of the state play a role in shaping the character of the social structure that creates the need and the conditions for violence.

The despair that grows up alongside the misappropriation of human and economic resources to human development to feed the military and policing apparatuses create the

fertile grounds for alienation and anomic conditions. By all accounts, these actions constitute a state crime of omissions. It is these conditions that can be considered contributors for such acts as violence, murder, mass murder, and suicide. In addition, all the millions of individuals called on to, directly and indirectly, uphold the institutional rules have internalized the values and norms of the state. In other words, once the genie of violence is let out and is free to roam; it is difficult to put individuals to put it back into the lamp. It is not easy to turn on and off the switch of violence after receiving a constant diet of socialization about the importance of military-police state-sanctioned violence, with all its symbolic glory, honorific statuses, and reverence. After all, violence is one of the important ways that the U.S. state maintains its status quo. As a result, it is an imperative that the social structure produces a particular character willing to carry out the role assigned to it by the state and its authority. Of course, this is a difficult situation for the individual because they need to be able to navigate the blurred boundaries of “legitimate” state sanction violence and “illegitimate” freelance violence. Finally, the historical record of the U.S. state illustrate that the cessation of violence has never been its objective; its goals has always been to regulate and perfect its use.

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Notes

^[1] Mirabile, Francesca and Daniel Nass “What’s the Homicide Capital of America? Murder Rates in U.S. Cities, Ranked.” *The Trace*. April 26, 2018. <https://www.thetrace.org/2018/04/highest-murder-rates-us-cities-list/>

^[2] Some sociological theories are considered kinds-of-people theories because although they go beyond psychological and biological explanations for crime/deviance and focus on the social class, ethnicity, race, geography, and gender, these theories nevertheless tend to blame the victim because they do not address the crimes of the elite, the state, or the capitalist system. See Eitzen, D. Stanley, Maxine Baca Zinn, Kelly Eiten Smith. 2012. In *Conflict and Order*, 12 edition, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, pp. 165, 177-180.

^[3] Barak, Gregg. 2011. “Revisiting Crimes by Capitalist State.” Pp. 35-48 in *State Crime*, edited by D. L. Rothe & C. W. Mullins. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

^[4] Turse, Nick. 2013. *Kill Everything that Moves*. New York, NY: Picador Books.

^[5] Mills, C. Wright. 1959 [2000]. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 9.

^[6] Trevino, Javier. A. 2012. *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills*. Thousand Oaks, LA: Sage, p 165.

[7] National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-Based Injury Statistics Query & Reporting System (WISQARS) Injury Mortality Reports, 1999-2016, for National, Regional, and States, http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html (hereinafter WISQARS Injury Mortality Reports, 1999-2016).

[8] Mills, C. Wright. 1959 [2000]. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

[9] See Phillip Zimbardo's analysis in *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007). He illustrates the various levels of analyses and why his work has evolved to understanding the "barrel maker" – i.e., the political, economic, and legal power that creates the situation that corrupts the individual (pp. 7-120.)

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