

Opinion: What we might learn from Newtown

By Scott A. Lukas

Like many people I know, I was deeply disturbed by the events that occurred in Newtown, Conn. Like others, I had emotional reactions to the mass murders. As a social scientist, I am interested in looking at these types of events and placing them in larger social contexts.

After watching some of the coverage and reflecting on the tragedy, I wrote down a series of issues that I believe resonate with the tragedy and other mass shootings. These are intended as initial thoughts on the events in Newtown.



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1. A Culture of Violence: We live in an incredibly violent society and we are unwilling to consider violence at the systemic levels needed to abate it. More dialogue about the scope and context of violence in our society is needed.

2. A Constitutive Crisis: We are unable to look at violence (including gun violence) as a constitutive issue. That is, we are unwilling to look at the deep, fundamental ways that our society (and all of us) are at least indirectly responsible for the violence we saw in Newtown.

3. A Culture of Dysfunctional Masculinity: Strangely absent

from news analyses of Newtown is that the tragedy was an outcome of a dysfunctional masculinity (that we also saw in Columbine, Virginia Tech, École Polytechnique, and many other shootings).

4. An Epic Crisis of Mental Health: As a society, we do not take mental health seriously. We grossly underfund programs that deal with the mental health of young people and we underpay those (like social workers) who are on the front lines of this crisis.

5. An Out-of-Control Gun Culture: Gun lobbies, and some gun owners, have promoted a culture of fear that has resulted in the proliferation of small arms and wonton violence in schools, homes, and public culture. Any critique of the culture is viewed as a form of treason and an attack on the Second Amendment and many individuals are unwilling to look at the statistics that indicate that guns often kill those we know rather than strangers who invade our homes.

6. A Misappropriation of Political Consciousness: Many gun owners have had their political consciousness co-opted by gun lobbies that have convinced them that being a gun owner is a minority political status. In fact, gun ownership is the norm as is the wide public opinion (at least prior to Newtown) that gun control is undesirable. True political consciousness would move beyond the limited rhetoric of Second Amendment defense and focus on the immanent crises before us – the environment, the decline of civics, the encroachment of capitalism, etc.

7. A Capitalist Mentality: For the individuals who have argued for the right to buy assault rifles, they are simply reflecting the norms of capitalism that say, “You may buy as you like, do as you like, without consequence.” Assault rifles are the equivalent of the countless other bric-a-brac produced under capitalism that also produces its own forms of violence. Pro-guns advocate Philip Van Cleave was quoted on Sunday saying that “Guns are fun, and some of them are much more cool

than others. It's just like we have television sets that look cool, and others are much more boxy." (Washington Post) There are countless others who, like Van Cleave, view ownership of an assault rifle as both a right and a consumer choice.

8. A Society Lacking Ethics: The social Darwinism of capitalists, the rhetoric of gun owners who will "protect their homes" at any costs, and the individualism promoted by the media and consumerism has resulted in a society that forgets that ethics are the most important foundation of a society. The total lack of care demonstrated by psychopathic gun-wielding killers is mirrored by tens of thousands of "normal" people who are disinterested in the future of society and whose apathy is the latest pandemic. As President Obama stated recently, there needs to be new dialogue and new direction in terms of civics if the United States has any hope of preventing future heinous acts like those in Newtown.

9. A Non-Research Culture: In the face of studies, evidence, and policy suggestions offered by social scientists and others, we are unwilling to allow research (especially applied forms) to enter the discussion of this and other crises. Even though evidence suggests that guns do not make us safer, that the simulated forms of violence in video games and popular culture desensitizes us from real violence, and that cultures with violence at their core cannot survive, we are unwilling to act on this research and change the course of our culture. Perhaps we could.

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