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DEBATE

Gun owners, ethics, and the problem of evil

A response to the Las Vegas shooting

Joe ANDERSON, *University of Edinburgh*

This article examines the ways in which American gun owners deploy a particular ethical system in their responses to instances of mass gun violence. I argue that anthropology is uniquely situated to provide a better understanding of how this ethical system is produced, thereby allowing us to move beyond the falsely dichotomous terms of the gun control debate. Recently returned from a period of fieldwork with a gun rights activist community in San Diego, California, I use ethnographic data to show that owning a firearm brings with it an ethical system that makes the prospect of giving up guns in the aftermath of a mass shooting even less attractive to my informants. Furthermore, this article focuses on what has been called “the problem of evil” by demonstrating how my informants order the world into “good guys” and “bad guys.” This opposition becomes personified into a more general notion of good versus evil, thereby placing particular people in the category of the human and others in the category of the inhuman, or monstrous.

Keywords: gun culture, mass shootings, Las Vegas, ethics, National Rifle Association

The largest mass shooting in American history. A record broken three times in the last ten years (*Los Angeles Times* Staff 2017). Following the tragic Las Vegas shooting on October 1, 2017, the American news media were left asking a series of familiar questions: How could this have happened here? What could we have done? News personalities and pundits frame the American public as split into two camps, one that favors stricter gun control and another that wants unfettered access to firearms. Analysts are recruited to argue one or another side of this dichotomy, moving public discourse no closer to a realistic solution to gun violence. Recently returned to the United Kingdom from San Diego, California, where I was conducting an ethnographic study of a gun rights activist community, I am also left with a series of difficult questions: How could this have happened in such a familiar



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ethnographic setting? As an academic committed to understanding gun ownership in the United States from an analytical perspective, how can I also retain a genuine emotional connection to a tragedy on such a huge scale?

These questions inevitably circle around the ethical—not only what it means for anthropologists to engage with the ethical systems we study, but also how our own ethics uncomfortably rub up against an almost compulsive (even therapeutic?) need to layer real-world events with analysis. Just as David Berliner (2016) argued in a previous *HAU* debate on contradictions, I found that fieldwork thrust various ethical challenges upon me as I came to know and like people whose ethical systems contrasted, but overlapped, with what I might have considered to be my own. This forced me into a unique state of awareness of a personal ethics that usually bubbles beneath the realm of conscious thought. The recent explosion of work in the anthropology of ethics suggests that I am not alone in these concerns. But, despite this growing focus, there is still an unwillingness to take seriously the ethical systems of those who we are often guilty of “othering” within the United States. This is particularly obvious when it comes to that remarkably mainstream American phenomenon—gun ownership.

There has been little ethnographic work done on this topic, and none that deals with the way in which the ethical permeates the practice and ideology of gun ownership. Over a period of four years, I have spent fifteen months living with gun owners, attending gun rights activist meetings, and learning to shoot with informants. Throughout this time, I avoided looking too deeply into the topic of ethics, as I worried that any description that associated gun ownership with the pursuit of an ethical life might be seen as “dealing with the enemy.” Instead, I followed others in focusing on the associations between gun ownership and nationalism (Cox 2007; Springwood 2007), gender (Kohn 2004; Arjet 2007; King 2007), “whiteness” (Song 2010), and embodiment (Springwood 2014). However, as I listened to my informants talk about their need to defend their families and the wider public from threats, and took part in a number of defensive shooting courses that explicitly discussed the ethical hurdles involved with carrying a gun, I started to pay attention to how a particular ethical system was being produced through gun use.

In this article, I use ethnographic data to show that owning a firearm brings with it an ethical system that makes the prospect of giving up guns in the aftermath of a mass shooting even less attractive to my informants. Through the relentless cultivation of what might be called a “gun-carrying habitus,” my informants come to inhabit an ethical subjectivity that orders the world into “good guys” (gun owners and the people they protect) and “bad guys” (gang members, drug dealers, mass shooters). Furthermore, the construction of that system of ethics relies upon a personification of the opposition between good and evil that ultimately defines who fits within the category of human and who is relegated to the inhuman, or monstrous, realm. This helps us to understand why advocates of gun ownership react to mass shootings by reaffirming their need to possess firearms. Because if inhuman monsters like the Las Vegas shooter roam the world, you sure as hell want to be able to protect yourself and your community from them.

Despite the federal funding ban on the social effects and extent of America’s gun violence problem, qualitative researchers, and anthropologists in particular,



are well positioned to fly under the radar of government bureaucracy. I will argue that now is the time to talk about guns. But rather than lamenting the inefficacy of a political class beholden to corporate interests (the firearms industry) and powerful lobby groups (the National Rifle Association), I call for innovative research on this topic that includes gun owners in the conversation about violence prevention, thereby moving beyond the stale bipartisan terms of the gun control debate.

Terminology and “ordinary ethics”

In my use of the term “ethics,” I allude to the body of work by Michael Lambek and contributors in *Ordinary ethics* (2010b) that seeks to relocate the domain of the ethical from its imprisonment within minds and written codes, toward a more dynamic concept primarily found in action and practice. This allows anthropologists to observe how ethical systems permeate the everyday lives of social groups. Inspired by Foucault, James Faubion (2011: 3–5) suggests that humans are not born ethical subjects, but must creatively sculpt themselves within an environment of social and conventional ethical institutions. Gun owners engage in this practice daily as they move through the world, guarding public spaces with the knowledge that they might have to use deadly force if they encounter a “bad guy” like the Las Vegas shooter. This takes a great deal of reflexive ethical thinking, but also involves sculpting one’s physical capacities to respond effectively to threatening situations.

I also repeat challenges by Thomas Csordas (2013) and Steven Caton (2010) that the anthropology of ethics needs to deal more directly with what has been called, presumably ironically, the “problem of evil.” Csordas argues that anthropologists have too often avoided using the term “evil” because of its association with Christian theology, and urges the discipline to attend to the ways in which the concept is still relevant to the groups of people we study (2013: 526). Furthermore, following David Pocock (1985), I suggest that once evil has been located and defined, it can give a guide as to what constitutes the categories of human and inhuman. My informants engage in this kind of ordering, and it is obvious in a biblical metaphor often used to describe the distinction between two categories of human, and one inhuman, in the analogous “sheep, sheepdogs, and wolves.” The sheep in society are willing to go on acting as if life isn’t dangerous (a clear reference to advocates of gun control), but they require sheepdogs (gun owners) willing to live a harder life to keep the wolves (mass shooters and other violent criminals) from taking weaker members of the herd. And so even political opponents are worth saving as long as they aren’t the ultimate source of evil—“bad guys.”

I will briefly look at responses to the Las Vegas shooting by gun rights activist groups in order to demonstrate how a particular ethical system is deployed in the aftermath of such events, before going on to show how the dichotomous construction of good versus evil is reaffirmed through the shaping of a “gun-carrying habitus.” By understanding what evil looks like to gun owners, one can understand more fully why they respond the way they do when that evil rears its head in the form of mass shootings.

Responses to Las Vegas

Whenever a major mass shooting occurs, the inevitably sensational media coverage pushes the issue of gun control into public discourse, which is immediately followed by a response from gun rights organizations denying any need for a conversation. Just days after the Las Vegas shooting, the executive director of the gun rights association I was researching issued a statement in response to the tragedy.

I am sickened and saddened by the horrific mass murder that happened Sunday night . . . in Las Vegas. Reading about it, hearing about it . . . put a lump in my throat all day yesterday . . . we are also seeing elected officials . . . [and] “journalists” . . . using this tragedy as an opportunity to advance their political agenda.

This was followed by a quote from a board member of the organization: “There is no legislation that will strip evil from an immoral man.” A statement by Wayne LaPierre and Chris Cox from the National Rifle Association (NRA) followed the next day echoing many of these themes: condemning the evil of the shooter, rebutting calls for a conversation about guns, and taking a tone of disgust that anyone should try to politicize this tragedy—while politicizing it.

In the aftermath of the evil and senseless attack in Las Vegas, the American people are looking for answers as to how future tragedies can be prevented. . . . Banning guns from law-abiding Americans based on the criminal act of a madman will do nothing to prevent future attacks. . . . The NRA remains focused on our mission: strengthening Americans’ Second Amendment freedom to defend themselves, their families and their communities. (La Pierre and Cox 2017)

“Senseless” is a key word here. An evil that is beyond explanation, or verbal analysis, literally absent of sense, locating the perpetrator in the realm of the inhuman. These responses may sound self-serving, but contained within them are many of the themes that constitute the ethical system I describe below.

Ethical subjectivity and a “gun-carrying habitus”

If, as Lambek (2010a, 2010c) suggests, the ethical is to be found in action and practice, how do gun owners make themselves into ethical subjects through gun use? In March 2017, the gun rights activist group I was researching organized their annual fundraiser for a national leukemia charity. This event took place at a firearms training institute outside of Las Vegas and revolved around a handgun course that teaches the intricacies of defensive shooting. I travelled there with an informant and main firearms instructor for the year, a sixty-two-year-old woman called Patti. We became friends during my stay in San Diego and she enthusiastically took on the task of teaching me how to shoot.

We arrived at the training facility at 6:30 am on the first day of the course and after learning the basics of gun safety and handling were ushered into a lecture called “The five stages of mental awareness.” This theory of physiological and psychological states is popular among the firearms instructors I encountered, who use it as a

guide for how gun users are likely to feel while armed. It is an attempt to prepare gun owners for the kinds of automatic bodily responses that arise from situations of high threat. The lecture was given by a female instructor who explained how each color code in the hierarchy relates to carrying a gun.



“Condition white is characterized by a lack of awareness of your surroundings . . . we are an easy target, an easy victim.” Next, condition yellow means being aware, checking the environment for threats but remaining relaxed. This is the condition in which the gun-carrying individual should be at all times. The instructor was adamant that this is not paranoia, simply awareness of “dangerous people on the streets.” Condition orange involves acknowledging potentially suspicious activity and forming a tactical plan to respond to any emerging threats. Condition red is when a “specific threat has been perceived and it is real . . . set a mental trigger . . . if the bad guy turns towards you with a gun, you are ready to shoot.” Finally, condition black is a combat mind-set and the instructor defined it as:

The ability to concentrate on the one thing you need to win, not just survive. You want to conquer, destroy. You’ve got to work on developing this mind-set. Realize the world is a violent place. Understand your opponent, because they are not like you and me. They would cut off your head for your jewelry. . . . Visualize. Create movies in your head about you and the bad guy. You have to see yourself winning.

While there are a number of themes to dissect here, victimhood immediately stands out as a stark opposition is drawn between the kind of people who aren’t ready for attack (victims) and those who are (defined as those willing to carry a gun in public). In this orientation to the world, the non-gun-wielding citizen is coded as irresponsible and weak, both physically and morally. This hierarchy of mental

states helps gun owners to define their experiences of arming, and I often observed my informants weighing up which condition to be in, deciding whether to bring their gun to particular events or places.

Utilizing tools like the five stages of mental awareness and their own experiences of carrying a gun in public, my informants convert their self-reported bodily perceptions of danger and responsibility into a morally charged guardianship of the spaces within which they move. Carrying a gun becomes a socially regulated way of attending to and with the body, forming particular “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas 1993). The act of attending to the body in this way becomes ethically charged with the associations of victimhood (bad) and willingness to violently defend (good), as the perceptions that arise from carrying a gun produce the very conditions necessary for ethical action. This forms what one might call a “gun-carrying habitus.” This habitus is sculpted by the course in gruelling eleven-hour days of shooting drills that left rough calluses on my palms and my limbs aching. By day four, however, I was able to execute the drills with calm precision and the firearm I was using seemed to fit comfortably in my hand.

On day two, we attended a lecture titled “Moral and ethical decisions associated with the use of deadly force.” The gruff, moustachioed instructor started by making a distinction between morals (“what you personally think is right and wrong”) and ethics (“the morals of the community”), and explained that

you press the trigger based on your morals, but are judged by the community's ethics . . . think carefully so that you know what you are prepared to do in the moment. If you press that trigger, that's gonna stay with you forever, but it's not the end of the world. You not coming home to your family is the end of the world.

The justifications for shooting people are nearly always framed in terms of the need to protect innocents (coded as female, i.e., granddaughter, daughter, wife) from other men, or “bad guys.” The instructor went on to define more specifically who the “bad guys” are: “Some scumbag is in your house, learn to sniff out bad guys, they probably stink. They probably live under the bridge in the bad part of town . . . they will kill you for the fried chicken in your refrigerator.” He advised us to check around once we have dealt with the immediate threat during a gunfight because “rats travel in packs.” Associating “bad guys” with rats reinforces this idea of a “senseless,” uncaring evil that creates and dehumanizes an exemplary “other,” which is characteristic of my informants' approach to imagined threats in society. The next two days reinforced these ideas in drills that aimed to commit lessons about ethical action and bodily states into muscle memory, making my informants capable of an automatic response should they encounter a bad guy “on the streets.”

In many of our long conversations, Patti echoed these ideas as she thought reflexively about the ethical challenges that arise from carrying a gun in public:

Well you can force yourself into complacency, but it's not something you ever want to become complacent about. It's the decisions you have to make, like, what is the line that has to be crossed before I do something about something. Does it involve my people only, my family only? Does it involve anybody? . . . It's all about the training you've had and the decisions you have made. . . . A lot, a *lot*, of thought has to be involved.



When I asked what might justify shooting someone, a similar opposition between “good guys” and “bad guys” emerged:

The bad guy wants to impose their will on you; they’ll find a way to do it because they are, by definition, a sociopath, they are going to find a baseball bat, their fists, their intimidation in size. . . . The mark of a true psychopath is when they get their hands on a gun . . . and all of a sudden it makes them feel powerful. Whereas a nonpsychopath, or normal human being, when they receive that level of power or opportunity to be able to be equal, it humbles you. Because . . . you’re saying, OK, now I have a lot more power than the other people around me, but I don’t want to impose my will on people, I just want to make sure no-one imposes their will on me . . . and you understand that responsibility. And people on the bad side, don’t get it that way, they say, wow, I can make somebody do what I want.

The very inability of a person to feel and accept the ethical responsibility of carrying a gun in public is evidence of their psychopathy and therefore proves that they are a “bad guy”:

It’s the same exact interaction for all gun owners, because it has the ability to project power, but you want to project power in a reasonable, sane way. You’re not one of the bad guys, you’re trying to protect against the bad guys . . . you still don’t want to sink to their level. You know, if the threat is over, if someone’s running away, you don’t want to shoot them in the back . . . when the guy drops his gun and puts his hand on his face, you’re not going to shoot him in the head because you are not a psychopath.

Good guys know how to be compassionate even in threatening situations—they deploy their weapon and training in order to protect loved ones and the community. Bad guys, on the other hand, utilize the force-maximizing properties of a firearm to bend others to their will and wreak havoc, because their perceptions of holding a gun are not accompanied by an ethically principled sense of personal responsibility.

Conclusion: Analysis as ethics

Following Thomas Csordas (2013), I suggest that the anthropology of ethics requires a theory of evil in order to understand the “good” that people strive toward. Gun owners create a category of evil that constructs the very notion of what it is to be human, and they deploy these categories in an ethical system shaped by a “gun-carrying habitus.” Five years prior to the attack in Las Vegas, in a response to the Sandy Hook school shooting that left twenty children dead, the NRA’s executive vice-president, Wayne LaPierre, claimed that “our society is populated by an unknown number of genuine monsters . . . the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun” (LaPierre 2012). According to the NRA, our lecturers in Nevada, and the testaments of many of my informants, evil exists in the world in the form of “bad guys”—a category of inhuman monsters and psychopaths. Only well-trained and ethically prepared “good guys” can defend against the

perpetrators of these evil acts. With monsters like the Las Vegas shooter walking the streets of America, why would gun owners be inclined to hand over what they see as the most effective tool for keeping the wolves at bay?

In trying to understand my own emotional connection to Las Vegas, I have found myself reaching for a familiar source of comfort in writing this article—the analytical gaze. In doing so, I have taken an approach that shows how ethical orientations emerge in the act of training with a firearm, which in turn produces particular responses to mass shootings. Extending this analysis to include my own response to Las Vegas, it is impossible not to see this article as an example of “ethics in action.” Writing represents a personal coping mechanism that not only helps me to process the pain of this event, but also tries to deploy what expertise I have in order to help others understand America’s complex relationship with guns, and to hopefully move beyond the stale bipartisan debate about gun control.

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Les propriétaires d'armes à feu, l'éthique et le problème du mal: Une réponse à la tuerie de Las Vegas

Cet article examine le système éthique auquel ont recours les propriétaires d'armes à feu aux Etats-Unis lorsque survient la question de la violence de masse associée à ces armes. Je suggère que l'anthropologie est dans une position privilégiée pour nous apporter une meilleure compréhension de la production de ce système éthique, qui nous permettrait de dépasser la fausse dichotomie des termes du débat actuel sur le contrôle des armes à feu. De retour depuis peu d'une période de travail de terrain avec une communauté de militants pour le droit aux armes à feu à San Diego, en Californie, je montre que posséder une arme à feu amène à développer un système éthique dans lequel renoncer aux armes à feu suite à une tuerie semble moins désirable que jamais. De plus, cet article s'intéresse à ce qui a été appelé "le problème du mal" et analyse la catégorisation du monde à travers les catégories de "bonnes" et de "mauvaises personnes" effectuée par les gens auprès de qui j'ai travaillé. Cette opposition se rapporte aussi aux notions plus générales de bien et de mal, plaçant certaines personnes dans la catégorie de l'humain et d'autres dans la catégorie de l'inhumain, ou du monstrueux.

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up of predominantly male, Second Amendment activists from middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds, the other a pro-LGBT firearms training group.

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DEBATE

Good gun, good guys

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Comment on Anderson, Joe. 2017. “Gun owners, ethics, and the problem of evil.” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (3): 39–48.

Reading Joe Anderson’s essay on the ethical condition of bearing guns in America, in the wake of not only the Las Vegas shootings but also the subsequent shooting on November 5 2017 of twenty-six members of the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, gave me pause. The Texas shootings produced a hero—or, perhaps, allowed a hero to show himself as such. When the gunman emerged from the church (after seven minutes of methodically gunning down infants, the elderly, the pregnant, the praying), he was confronted by Stephen Willeford,¹ who, in his house a block away, had heard the shots in the church, grabbed his own gun, and run barefoot to the scene, where he shot the gunman twice and flagged a passing vehicle to chase him down. The two shootings, so near in time, provided a cast of characters that both emerges from the ethical practices taught in Anderson’s gun rights clubs in San Diego and the shooting ranges members go to, but also exceeds them. Hidden behind the monsters and heroes, evil and good, that populate the gun bearers’ discourse and embodied awareness is a gray zone of good and evil.

To say that the shootings produced a cast of characters is not a simple turn of phrase. The world created by gun carrying, for these activists, resembles strongly an old Hollywood western, populated by black hats and white hats, with innocent and threatened widows, daughters and children standing on the sidelines. (“Create movies in your head,” they are told in “awareness” training at the shooting range.) The sharp-eyed newcomer enters town, or the saloon, and scans the gruff men sitting around tables and slouching at the bar: they will be on the side of good, or evil. Squinty eyes, cracked teeth, dirty beards, betray their monstrous

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1. I do not use the names of the mass murderers in this essay, but do recognize Mr. Willeford by name.



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characters. Black-hatted men today are replaced by a new cast: drug dealers, Central American gang members, the dark people disproportionately represented in the United States' prisons, betrayed to the public now by the color of their skins rather than of their headwear. And Democratic Party politicians, whose monstrosity is, perhaps, revealed in caricatures of the likes of Nancy Pelosi in California. But beyond the surface reminder of Hollywood films, there is an element of Erving Goffman's "interaction rituals," in which people adopt or are thrust into roles whose meaning is constituted by framing—here, the frame is the gun, which produces a set of roles predicated on good and evil. At the core of these dramatic social events, in the saloon (or bar), on the street, at the door of one's home, or in the midst of a mass shooting, remains an underlying character, a person-subject with the "key" (as Goffman used the term) that allows him (or her) to step up into the frame and also to sharpen its contours. Someone whose character is possibly more murky but is cast into sharper contrasts of good and evil with the presence of the gun. Without the gun, as one woman tells Anderson, you can relax at the bar and not have the responsibility of dividing the world into heroes and monsters.

Goffman, ages ago and in a time when Hollywood wasn't dividing the world into good and evil (i.e., 1974), and borrowing from a range of phenomenologists and pragmatists, gave us the term "frame analysis" to account for how people perceived and acted within "reality." Because these frames never actually are reality, even as people construct them as such, they can be multiple, they can fail when reality—or another person's framing—disrupts them, and they can be transposed from one situation to another with various effects (parody, quoting, reformatting, playing, and, here for the gun groups, moralizing). In order to focus on one frame, people use "keys." The central key to the ethical framework accomplished in the gun rights activists' training and talk is the gun itself. As the woman above said, with the gun you become hyperaware of a world populated by good and evil, and you become responsible for successfully diagnosing each situation in those ethical terms. In that narrative frame, the gun holder becomes a specialist diagnostician, a sociologist in her own way, and the good guys expand to be the innocents who need protecting from the monsters who pass among them.

The gun is key to sustaining the frame: those who have guns divide the world into heroes/good people and monsters, and the gun does this through two operations. One is the power of the gun to create dualities: life and death, attacker and victim, hero and perpetrator of monstrosities, knowledge (to wield the gun, to distinguish monsters) and ignorance. Good and evil: both armed with guns. (Is the gun like the god of the Garden, when used by the wrong people bringing sin and false knowledge into the world, but maintaining order when godly?) The activists gain knowledge of good and evil through the power of the gun. Without it, they fade into the everyday world of sheep (about whom more in a minute), failing to see the moral frame. They learn to understand the gun not only through their activism, and perhaps fear, but also as they face off against the odd blank opponent in the shooting range, who (as they are coached to see) threatens them with . . . a gun. The gun must be in the frame to create this reality where good and evil face off, although the target, defined in terms of organs and thoracic cavities, has no face—perhaps necessary to imagining monstrosity.



Frame analysis is fun because it invites us to see the world through another's frame, a classic anthropological enterprise. This gun-toter's frame includes, necessarily, "sheep" who are potential victims of monsters and protected by the special knowledge of the gun-toter (embodied but also instructed verbally). They are innocent of the power of the gun, not exercising that critical awareness that diagnoses good and evil, simply enjoying the nightlife in a bar or a concert in Las Vegas, or perhaps praying in a church, failing to see the frame of good and evil. (In that sense, they may include Democrats, who fail to understand the evil that preys on American lives, whether through too-generous welcoming of immigrants or indulgence of miscreant inner-city youth.) They are lost in the "everyday," a term/space that is easily transposed to focus on the domestic or the morally neutral (or honest good) drudgery of work. This morally neutral space (or a space of nonheroic good) remains largely outside the frame created by the key of the gun, in the activities of the groups Anderson describes. This is significant: these spaces would muddle the frame altogether.

When I look at this ethnographic account, I see another picture. I focused on the sheep and the faceless target at the shooting range, and my reality is keyed not by the gun but by a set of (similarly faceless, similarly herd-like) statistics regularly distributed in media and in antigun literature. That shooting target, made into threatening evil by the shooting instructors, looks to me like the trainee learning to use his gun, faced not by evil but by his mirrored self. Two-thirds of gun deaths in America are suicides, mostly middle-aged males. That small granddaughter saved by the grandfather ("why to own a gun"): according to the *Washington Post* (Ingraham 2017), toddlers (under four) in America shoot someone on an average of at least once a week, and probably (because of underreporting) much more often. Many of those shootings, too, are "suicides," where the child accidentally shoots himself (the numbers are almost entirely male, for four-year-old gunslingers). But as for most other shootings, mass or otherwise, the victim is most likely an intimate of some sort—a cousin, sister, neighbor, friend. Fifty-four percent of what are classified as "mass shootings" are domestic or workplace (Koerth-Baker 2017), in locations keyed as sites where heroes defend the innocent in the gun rights group's discourse. I tend to privilege these numbers as better revealing "reality" than the constructions created by the gun activists. I look for solutions in writing new laws, a solution that replicates my reference to statistical "norms" (or deviances). But if these numbers are as faceless as the target on the shooting range,² where do lines between good and bad get drawn?

I don't know these gun activists: where I live, visible gun activism focuses on hunting, not defense (although I'm sure there are plenty of those who pursue that latter line, and nearby Liberty University, a Christian school, promotes gun ownership for reasons I can't quite fathom). But I will make an assumption: that we share a solution to the problem of both mass murderous monsters and the prevalence of suicide and domestic shootings, a solution offered up by media, and in very common public chat over these events. While the M-13 gang

2. The idea of "face" was also core to Goffman's work, where he described an interactionist form of selfhood as "face-work."

now prowls even rural Virginia, and represents a kind of cartoon satanic evil drawn up in our recent election, the violence perpetrated by ex-husbands and mass murderers is most often attributed to mental illness. (The Las Vegas shooting has yet to be so resolved, but as I write, I read in the newspapers that a mass shooting has been prevented by the detaining of someone mentally ill—a precautionary detention.) Mental illness makes monsters of our selves, but also blurs the idea of good and evil. In an America where forms of mental illness seem to be proliferating (the autism spectrum, widespread depression among teenagers, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders), we have become intimately familiar with them, and come to experience mental illnesses as everyday, as our friends and family struggle with them.³ Mental illness resolves a mythic (structuralist) opposition between victim and perpetrator (good and evil), where the perpetrator of mass violence (the young shooter of younger children at Sandy Hook, the crazily irate husband in Texas, the postal worker enraged by unfairness at work) is also a victim, of sorts. We are all potential monsters; we are more Quasimodo than Manson, especially as we gain a “face”—a biography, a personhood, a connection to everyday intimacies.

In the end, it is not the people who are good or evil, innocent or monstrous: it is the gun, too ready to convert the everyday ambiguities of human intimacies into evil monstrosity. And this is true in both frames—in Anderson’s fieldwork, it is carrying the gun that activates an awareness of good and evil, and in my corner of America it is the gun that allows our inner mental disturbances to erupt in horrifying ways. The gun is an exceptionally powerful key, one that gives entry into the ethical frameworks in which we both interpret and navigate everyday life. But it is also a thing in its own right, with an agency of its own:⁴ Goffman’s theories always rested on the human agents managing, misleading, recasting, and contradicting each other. “Thing theory” has, for some time now, drawn our attention to the power of material items in social life, but not to their power to delineate good and evil. Here we have a thing, the gun, with the power to create not only heroes and monsters, sheep and victims, but also knowledge of good and evil.

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3. Of course, drug companies drive some of these diagnoses (diagnosed both by professionals and by the lay public). Interestingly, one nondrug solution to some of them is the “therapy pet”—where innocence and good becomes located in the animal, not the social.
 4. I want to thank Keith W. Adams for clarifying to me my argument.



Koerth-Baker, Maggie. 2017. "Mass shootings are a bad way to understand gun violence." *FiveThirtyEight*, October 3. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/mass-shootings-are-a-bad-way-to-understand-gun-violence/>.

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DEBATE

Gun media, emergency penalty, and the comparative ethics of gun ownership

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Comment on Anderson, Joe. 2017. “Gun owners, ethics, and the problem of evil.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (3): 39–48.

Joe Anderson’s article makes a plea for anthropologists to study US gun ownership and, as a contribution to this study, proposes to think of gun ownership as a cultivated ethical subjectivity. This approach is fruitful as it allows Anderson to identify several themes to gun owners’ subjectivity. By my count, there are at least six: the attribution of senseless evil to mass shooters (which in turn depoliticizes firearms as material objects); the importance to arm “good guys” against “bad guys”; the necessity of a “situational awareness” that constantly evaluates the (perceived) danger of a situation; the othering of criminals (with racist undertones); a self-ascribed duty to protect (often but not always tinged with chauvinism); and a suspicion or not outright rejection of any attempts to regulate guns. This subjectivity is cultivated, moreover, through, for example, courses and the public carrying of weapons. Gun rights groups such as the National Rifle Association and Gun Owners of America also do a lot of the epistemological and logistical work of entrenching this subjectivity.¹

I am in broad agreement with Anderson’s thesis—not to mention his plea—and my comments herein are offered in a constructive spirit of broadening the

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1. For example, the NRA, through its NRA Outdoors brand, offers the class “Tactical carbine class presented by Sig Sauer [a major manufacturer of small arms],” which promises to make students proficient in the AR rifle platform and enable them to “analyze complex defensive situations” (NRA Outdoors n. d.).



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conceptualization of the ethical system of gun ownership. I will focus on three particular issues: first, the cross-cultural and international existence of this subjectivity; second, the medium of dissemination/cultivation of this subjectivity; and, third, the enmeshment in US gun culture of a suspicion of the administrative state and what Iturralde (2008) describes as “emergency penalty,” as I will discuss below.

First, Anderson’s focus is on the United States, and he does not make any particular claims for or against the exceptionalism of US gun control or gun violence. But such a comparative stance is a constant feature of the broader gun debate, so it is worth addressing whether or not this ethical subjectivity, in whole or in part, is particular to the United States. Available research suggests not, with qualifications. For example, Carlson compares gun cultures in the United States, South Africa, and India and concludes that there is a global gun culture premised on a “responsibilized subject . . . which is marked by private individuals’ capacity and desire to perform sovereign functions . . . that the state has typically monopolized” (2014: 336). In my own research on gun control in the Gambia, I have argued that some—by no means all—Gambians view guns in a similar light (Hultin 2015).

Furthermore, while much writing on guns in the United States bemoans the outsized influence of the NRA, what is often overlooked is that many other countries have gun rights groups—and, like in the United States, they often have multiple groups with slightly different politics (though typically to the right of the political center), a different emphasis on matters such as conservation, and different relationships with the domestic arms industry. For example, Canada has the National Firearms Association, the United Kingdom has the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Germany has Forum Wafferecht, Sweden has Jägarnas Riksförbund, Switzerland has ProTell, South Africa has the Black Gun Owners’ Association, and so on. These groups espouse some, but not all, of the same ideas pushed by organizations such as the NRA, both in terms of specific laws and in terms of ethics (in Anderson’s sense). For example, Switzerland’s ProTell describes itself as defending the rights of responsible citizens and being against all forms of restrictions on individual arms (PROTELL n. d.), and Sweden’s Jägarnas Riksförbund opposes licensing requirements for suppressors (Jägarnas Riksförbund n.d.).

While a systematic analysis of these different organizations and their role in each country’s gun debate is much beyond the scope of this response, it seems likely that what they do not share is what Salter (2014) refers to as the “paramilitary aesthetic.” This leads me to the second point of this response: the medium of dissemination. The United States has a strikingly robust gun enthusiast media, which is also a major vector for the ethical subjectivity of gun owners. Jacobs and Villaronga (2004) estimated that gun enthusiast magazines had a readership of around twenty-five million Americans, or around two-thirds of the readership of “men’s interest magazines” such as *GQ* and *Playboy*. This is a dated statistic, but there is no reason to believe the overall picture has changed. In fact, although magazine circulation has generally stagnated or declined since 2004, circulation of gun magazines has in fact increased (Bazilian 2013)—not to mention the proliferation of online media. The US gun media is suffused with a libertarian ethos coupled with a paramilitary aesthetic and laced with paranoia and machismo (Witkowski 2013). Gun media everywhere spend a great deal of time on guns as material objects—with reviews and testing of guns, gear, and accessories—as well as legislative updates. US gun media

also exhort their readership, to a point generally not seen in other countries, to be, on one hand, vigilant and deadly, and, on the other hand, deeply appreciative of the military and law enforcement (as models of vigilance as well as service). Just in the last month (November 2017), *American Rifleman*, published by the NRA, has had stories such as “Don’t leave home without it—Heckler & Koch’s G36 [a battle rifle used by the German army]” (Keefe 2017) and “One day is not enough” (Sagi 2017) in reference to US Veterans Day. *Guns & Ammo* teaches its readers “Snubnose revolver tactics” (Nance 2017) for purposes of taking down criminals, and *Tactical-Life* features video clips with titles such as “Off-duty Brazilian cop shoots thieves while holding baby” (*Tactical-Life* 2017) alongside “Pat Mac’s ‘no snowflake’ guide to holiday safety and survival” (McNamara 2017).

The prevalence of this kind of language and imaginary leads me to my third point. Gun owners’ embrace of the rhetoric of situational awareness, tactical competency, and appreciation of the institutions of the military and law enforcement appears to sit somewhat uneasily next to their libertarianism. I find it helpful to speak of the joint holding these together as an instance of “emergency penalty” (Iturralde 2008), and in doing so highlight one element of the ethics of gun ownership that Anderson is in part overlooking. Emergency penalty refers to “a rhetoric about social problems that legitimizes the punitive technologies to treat them” (ibid.: 385). It is inherently conservative in that it seeks to preserve a particular social arrangement, configures social problems as problems of law and order, and, by virtue of its definition, legitimizes going above and beyond ordinary means to maintain the arrangement. It is also ameliorative, seeking to address the perceived shortcomings of the modern administrative state. And, as Greenhouse (2012) reminds us, ethical agency is inherent in the opposition to any particular politics. In the case of American gun culture, or at least in its most strident forms, American law enforcement and military personnel are to be admired not simply because of their tactical competency but also because they are seen as the embodiment of this emergency penalty. It is the opening act for the much-discussed militarization of US policing (Salter 2014).

The above points are not to be intended as highlighting shortcomings in or providing criticisms of Anderson’s article. My goal is rather to extend the analytical utility of the perspective of gun ownership as a kind of ethical subjectivity by thinking of three different questions: How widespread is it geographically? How is it disseminated? And how does it relate to political subjectivity writ large? In providing some preliminary and partial answers to these questions, I hope to have underlined the fruitfulness of Anderson’s approach as well as offered suggestions for the next phase in the emergent anthropology of guns and gun control.

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DEBATE

Gun owners, misrecognition, and cultural critique

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Comment on Anderson, Joe. 2017. “Gun owners, ethics, and the problem of evil.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (3): 39–48.

Having written an ethnography of nuclear weapons scientists (Gusterson 1996), I feel a certain kinship with Anderson’s project in “Gun owners, ethics, and the problem of evil.” This project involves making cultural sense of spaces in Western society inhabited by what Susan Harding (1991), writing about US Christian fundamentalists, refers to as anthropologists’ “repugnant cultural other.” Anthropologists, generally liberal, tend to avoid fieldwork with ideologically antipathetic populations in their own societies such as gun owners, weapons scientists, Tea Party activists, Chamber of Commerce lobbyists, antiabortion activists, and UKIP enthusiasts; when they do appear in our ethnographies, they are often subjects of cultural critique rather than relativist sense making.

Breaking the mold, Anderson—like the two other ethnographers of US gun culture I have read (Kohn 2004; Doukas 2010)—bends over backward to see the gun debate from his natives’ point of view. Kohn and Doukas emphasize the aesthetic beauty of firearms, gun ownership as a rite of passage to manhood, and the belief that mass gun ownership offers a bulwark against government tyranny. Complementing their accounts, Anderson argues that gun ownership makes sense in the context of a Manichean worldview in which evil people will wreak havoc unless good people are armed to prevent this. He shows the reader how gun owners, in part through training courses like the one he took, come to perceive their mundane daily terrain of shopping malls, restaurants, and public buildings as a landscape of potential threat.

In an earlier discussion of Kohn’s and Doukas’ work, I wrote that “while such reports from behind ideological enemy lines are certainly useful and interesting



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. . . anthropology surely has more to contribute to the gun-control debate than a warmed-over rehash of NRA talking points legitimated by our discipline's historic legacy of cultural relativism" (Gusterson 2013: 2). My point was that we risk naturalizing the ideology of gun owners if our explication of their worldview is not balanced either by critique or by the juxtaposition of a contrary community's viewpoint, and this argument applies as well to Anderson's article. While it is surely bad ethnographic form, lazily indulging our ideological reflexes, to simply condemn our human subjects, it is also problematic to just recite their worldview without pushing the conversation deeper, probing for friction between belief and reality. After all, Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976) did not just record a set of Azande statements about witchcraft; it was only by arguing with the Azande and recording their responses that he was able to show the full complexity of their belief system.

Thus, in reading Anderson's account of US gun owners, I was fascinated to read their earnest descriptions of their beliefs, but frustrated that the conversation repeatedly ended where I wanted it to begin. They say that guns in the hands of "good" people can prevent bad people from running amok, but how does one know who is good and who is bad, and how does one prevent the bad people from getting guns (especially given the NRA's energetic lobbying against background checks for sales at gun shows)? How could armed citizens have prevented the recent Las Vegas massacre (with which Anderson's article opens), where Stephen Paddock mowed people down with a machine gun from a distant hotel window? And what do gun owners say when it is pointed out that seventeen thousand American gun owners a year commit suicide with their own guns, accounting for the majority of gun deaths (Gusterson 2013)? Are they aware that so many gun owners die at their own hands? Do they see thousands of suicides a year as the sad price one has to pay for cherished Second Amendment rights (much as I see some traffic fatalities as the price we have to pay for the freedom to drink alcohol)? Do they favor more background checks to weed out "bad" people seeking guns? And would further questioning about those "bad" people confirm my sneaking suspicion that the categories "bad person" and "ethnic minority" overlap heavily?

Probing gun owners' beliefs with such questions would enable us to ascertain whether there are deeper levels of thoughtfulness to their beliefs (as I often found when interviewing nuclear weapons scientists), or whether the relationship of their beliefs to empirical reality is fundamentally one of "misrecognition" (Bourdieu 1977). Knowing whether they have racialized their concept of the evil other would cast light on the broader political project of which gun ownership forms part. Responses to these questions would also help determine whether compromise measures to reduce gun violence might be politically feasible or whether gun owners are too dug in for compromise.

My own reflexive (and perhaps ill-informed) presumption is that the NRA is largely funded by the gun industry, which, like the tobacco industry, is willing to play a role in killing tens of thousands of Americans, especially the poor black Americans who are the main victims of gun violence, in order to make a profit; and that the NRA helps prevent politicians from interfering in this apparatus of death and profit by filling its supporters' heads with shallow, propagandistic narratives about crime on the street and liberal governments eager to take away Americans' constitutional rights (Brown and Abel 2003; Gusterson 2013; Hickey 2013). Maybe

my perception here is unfair to gun owners and to the NRA, or maybe it is wrong to confuse gun-owners with the NRA. Unfortunately, this article, scrupulously generous to gun owners, has failed to persuade me otherwise precisely because of its asymmetrical generosity. Warmth always has a place in repatriated anthropology, but so does critique.

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DEBATE

Armed angels

Defying demons with guns

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Comment on Anderson, Joe. 2017. “Gun owners, ethics, and the problem of evil.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (3): 39–48.

For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.
– H. L. Mencken

US Congressperson Tom Delay, responding to the 1999 Columbine shooting, insisted, “Guns have little or nothing to do with juvenile violence. The causes of youth violence are working parents who put their kids into daycare, the teaching of evolution in the schools, and working mothers who take birth control pills” (Bailey 2008: 113). Fortunately, most people articulate more nuanced explanations of mass shootings, citing, for example, mental health, firearm access, and toxic masculinity. Others, such as Dr. David Hemenway, believe Americans refuse to locate the cause driving the spate of rampage shootings and gun violence where it surely must lie, with the ubiquity of guns themselves. “We’re an average country in terms of all the violence measures you can think of, in terms of crime. But where we’re very different is guns,” he said, adding, “We have lots more guns than anybody else, particularly handguns” (cited in Koch 2012: 1).

Pundits follow each chronicled rampage shooting seeking to diagnose the cause of such horrific murders. The October 2017 Las Vegas rampage inspired this set of *HAU* essays, grounded by Joe Anderson’s attempt to introduce a new tack in making sense of mass shootings. He seeks a deeper appreciation of the worldview of gun owners, especially in terms of their emergent ethical model of good and evil that gives meaning to these spectacular shootings and, importantly, informs their

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resistance to gun control proposals (see also Vasturia in press). Anderson's subjects seem very much drawn to the notion that any number of "bad guys" exist, poised to carry out evil acts anywhere and anytime. Because of the omnipresence of these evil, monstrous Others, "advocates of gun ownership react to mass shootings by reaffirming their need to possess firearms" (Anderson, p. 40).

To better examine the ethical lens through which gun owners engage the complicated landscape of rampage violence, especially when that lens is shaped by a prevailing opposition of *good* and *evil*, the concept of ideology may be instrumental. Specifically, rather than the Marxist notion of ideology as false consciousness, I draw from a conception of ideology as an actively negotiated, ever-persistent framework of assertions and practices—one empowered to define the natural order of the world. Building on Gramsci and Foucault, Stuart Hall saw ideology as "the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (1982: 29). During his ethnographic research—marked by gun safety classes, one-on-one interviews, and shooting range practice—Anderson realized his participants' moral model can be located by engaging gun owners' everyday practices and epistemologies. As such, he approaches the "ethical system" of gun owners very much the way Hall urges us to engage ideology, as dynamically constituted in concert with discourse and representational practices.

The results from my own research with a similar cohort paralleled those in Anderson's study. A fifty-nine-year-old man invited me into his rural Illinois home, into the downstairs living room, where a gun cabinet featured a dozen or so rifles. He grabbed a .9 mm pistol, popped out the magazine, set it on the coffee table, and opened the firing chamber to ensure it contained no rounds. "Here, take this," he said, handing me the pistol. "Some of the best practice comes not at the shooting range, but here, at home. Don't get so caught up in target shooting cause you will need to really use your gun at home, and your enemy will be nearby, probably approaching you" (Springwood 2014: 459). Afterward, he talked about his role at the Presbyterian church as a lay preacher who teaches the congregation about the role of angels in our lives. "Empirical evidence for the reality of angels does exist," he argued, "but science cannot explain it." His "lectures," as he called them, were stories about angels coming to the aid of people in need. These narratives were often morality tales about how each person has their own guardian angel, one who shields them from evil, often armed "bad guys."

* * *

The NRA has actively deployed all of the tenets of a progun ideological framework. In particular, with the encouragement of the NRA and its publication, *Armed Citizen*, gun owners are animated by a worldview in which vectors of danger, fear, and armed enemies are closing in (O'Neill 2007). Such a world demands perpetual vigilance, as noted by Anderson in this issue, and argued elsewhere by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri:

It is increasingly difficult for the ideologues . . . to name a single, unified enemy; rather there [are] . . . elusive enemies everywhere. The end of



the crisis of modernity has given rise to a proliferation of minor and indefinite crises, or . . . an omni-crisis. Importantly, desire (for violence) is the structure of feeling animating and propelling this limitless danger and these boundless enemies. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 189)

In the context of this hypervigilance, then, the key ideas and practices characterizing a so-called ideology of American gun ownership include:

- Bad guys who use firearms to murder—especially via rampage shootings—are evil.
- Not only are virtuous gun owners *not* evil, they embody a potential for goodness.
- Guns are essentially—naturally—masculine, and the men who carry them are practicing a frontier mentality in which husbands and fathers must protect women and nation.
- Danger is naturalized, and bad guys who shoot, and especially evil bad guys who enact rampage shootings or terrorism, are constant threats.
- Unarmed Americans put everyone at risk of becoming victims of evil.
- Guns save lives.

This ideology is designed to confront a senseless evil, to highlight the necessity to arm “good guys,” as well as to propagate a fear that progun folks seek to disarm gun owners, taking away their only defense against in-human shooters.

Incorporating ideology—one emergent with social formations and discursive practices—into an effort to interpret and indeed intervene in American gun culture allows us to trace the historically conjunctural and dynamic nature of gun owners’ ethical models. It reminds us that such models are open rather than closed systems, and it will *not* allow us to ignore the ways that the practices of gun ownership are seductive, pleasurable, and even ambivalent. Robert Davidson claimed that analysis of a dominant ideology can itself emerge as an attempt to develop resistant, oppositional ideologies. Specifically, the act of ideological analysis “unmask[s] the mechanism by which ideological apparatuses such as the mass media turn certain values that privilege some and repress others into iron rules. By comprehending its operation, we . . . might be able to oppose its effects.”

* * *

Michael Taussig, one of many anthropologists engaging ideology, wrote:

While much attention is given to “ideology” in the social sciences, virtually none as far as I know is given to the fact that people delineate their world, including its large as well as its micro-scale politics, in stories and story-like creations and very rarely, if ever, in ideologies. . . . Surely it is in the coils of rumor, gossip, story, and chit-chat where ideology and ideas become emotionally powerful and enter into active social circulation and meaningful existence. (1984: 494)

This description, which foretells Anderson’s conceptualization of the gun owner’s ethical universe, is a neo-Gramscian reading of ideology. Such an approach commonly informs anthropological analyses of ideology, most famously perhaps in the work of John and Jean Comaroff. They create a space for cultural critique by distinguishing—more than most scholars—between ideology and hegemony. Following

Gramsci, *hegemony* is a system of power that turns on those signs and practices that are so embedded in the social and mental fabric of society that they appear natural if not unconscious, and it is “not normally the subject of explication or argument” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 28–29).

In contrast, the identities of gun owners as good guys shielding against evil doers are best seen as manifestations of *ideology*, which may be easier to locate and to reflect upon, self-critically. “Ideology originates in the assertions of a particular social group. Hegemony is beyond direct argument . . . it is mute,” while on the other hand “ideology invites argument” (ibid.: 29). Anthropologists more generally will seek to identify the power and social relations that drive these belief systems, and as a result they are well prepared to uncover the racial and class dimensions of gun ideology. Anderson’s otherwise insightful essay, foregrounding a worldview that turns on attributions of evil within inhuman Others, may not leave sufficient interpretive space to engage the diversity of gun-owning actors who complicate any notion of a relatively fixed belief system. Indeed, the ethical universe of American gun owners is always in production, and always contested and uneven. It is, in fact, a highly racialized and racist ideology (O’Brien et al. 2013).

An unwillingness to respond to mass shootings by genuinely contemplating enhanced gun control measures emerges in part from gun owners’ view, according to Anderson, that the perpetrators are evil. Beyond offering victims “thoughts and prayers,” they remain committed to the good-guy-with-a-gun narrative, poised 24/7 to defend family, home, and country from armed evil doers. In order to generate more sympathy among gun owners for enhanced safety measures, a *collaborative ethnography* bringing together a diverse cohort from pro- and anti- gun control communities, poised to listen to one another’s worldviews while coauthoring gun safety public policy recommendations, might allow the United States to move forward. Participants would acknowledge that neither gun “safety” proponents nor even anthropologists are free of ideology. Such a project would surely be multilayered, and to reveal the duplicity and racism of the NRA, it would draw on insights from the critical anthropology of institutions and of networks of political influence. Surely people motivated to enact horrific mass murders will always exist, but we can make it much more difficult for them to carry out such missions of evil.

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