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Rage and Rampage: School Shootings and Crises of Masculinity

Posted: 04/24/2012 3:01 pm

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Now that we have marked the fifth anniversary of the Virginia Tech shootings on April 16th and the thirteenth anniversary of the Columbine High tragedy on April 20th, we need to better understand how a wide range of school shootings have multiple causes and need to be addressed by a diverse range of responses. While the motivations for the shootings may vary, they have in common crises in masculinity in which young men use guns and violence to create ultra-masculine identities as part of a media spectacle that produces fame and celebrity for the shooters.

The epidemic of school shootings continues. On February 27th at Chardon High School in Ohio, a former classmate gunned down three students and injured six; on March 6, 2012 in Jacksonville, Florida, a 28-year-old male high school teacher, after being fired, shot and killed the headmistress; and on April 2, 2012 in Oakland, California, a 43-year-old former student shot seven people and wounded several others at Oikos University.

School shootings attract maximum media attention and shooters, craving publicity and the public eye, gravitate toward schools. In April 2007, alienated Korean-American student Seung-hui Cho carried out "The Virginia Tech Massacre," in which he was star, director, and producer. His writings and videotaped pronouncements revealed he imitated images from films and enacted a vengeance drama like that of the Columbine School shooters, whom he cited as "martyrs."

The February 14, 2008 shootings at Northern Illinois University featured former student Steven Kazmierczak, who leaped from behind a curtain onto a stage in a large lecture hall. Armed with a barrage of weapons and dressed in black, he randomly shot students in a geology class, killing five before he shot himself. While his motivation is still unclear, he created a highly theatrical spectacle of violence reminiscent of the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings.

School shootings and domestic terrorism have proliferated on a global level. In recent months there have been school shootings in Finland, Germany, Greece, and other countries as well as the United States. Although there may be stylistic differences, in all cases young men act out their rage through the use of guns and violence to create media spectacles and become celebrities-of-the-moment.

Crises in masculinity are grounded in the deterioration of socio-economic possibilities for young men and are inflamed by economic troubles. Gun carnage is also encouraged in part by media that repeatedly illustrates violence as a way of responding to problems. Explosions of male rage and rampage are also embedded in the escalation of war and militarism in the United States from the long nightmare of Vietnam through the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In this context of escalating societal violence, adoption of a more rational policy addressing access to guns is one solution to this problem. It is heartening that people appalled by the Virginia Tech shootings campaigned to close loop holes for gun shows that enable the purchase of firearms without adequate background checks, as did the girlfriend of one of the underage Columbine shooters.

We also must examine the role of the Internet as a source of ammunition and firearms, where anyone can assume a virtual identity and purchase lethal weapons; it is perhaps not coincidental that the Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University shooters both bought their ammunition from the same online business.

Yet escalating gun violence and random shootings is a larger problem than gun control alone. Underlying causes of rampant gun violence include increasing societal alienation, frustration, anger, and rage in schools, universities, workplaces, public spaces, and communities. To address these problems, we need better mental health facilities and monitoring of troubled individuals, and also of institutions.

Schools and universities, for example, have scrambled to ensure counseling and monitoring programs to help troubled students, and offer safety plans on how to address crises that result in violence and have increased video surveillance. Schools themselves should be assessed on how well they provide a secure learning environment and counseling for troubled students. Schools can also teach non-violent conflict resolution and media literacy courses that critique media representations that associate power and gun violence with masculinity and should cultivate alternative images to the ultraviolent images of masculinity circulating in media.

To be sure, in an era such as ours of ongoing war and poverty and societal violence, rage shootings will no doubt be a problem for years to come. It is essential, therefore, that we address the issue of crises of masculinity and social alienation, and not reflexively resort to using simplistic jargon -- "he's just crazy" -- to explain away the issue. Mental illness is a complex phenomenon that has a variety of causes and expressions.

It is also important not to scapegoat the Internet, media, prescription drugs, or any one factor that may very well contribute to the problem, but is not the single underlying cause. Rather, we need to admit to the urgency of the problem of school shootings and enact an array of intelligent and informed responses that will produce a more peaceful and humane society.

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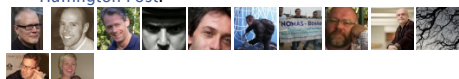
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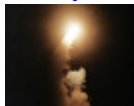
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