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How to talk (and not to talk) about school shootings

## **Guest Editorial by Nancy Scheper-Hughes**

Nancy Scheper-Hughes is Chancellors Professor of Social and Medical Anthropology, Emerita at University of California, Berkeley where she continues to teach seminars bearing on social political issues including violence, free speech, hate speech, censorship and self-censorship. She is currently living in Santa Fe, New Mexico where she is completing two books, *Naked Life and the Medically Disappeared: A Buried Subtext of Argentina's Dirty War* and *Kidney Hunter: Trafficking with the Organs Traffickers*. She is a frequent guest speaker in the US, Europe, Latin America, and Australia.

Yes, as we all know, we have been here before.

Twenty years ago, the nation was shocked by the Columbine High School shooting. On 1 June 1999, the day after the massacre, President Clinton gave an impassioned speech in the Rose Garden in which he announced a national campaign against youth violence.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign was to mobilize businesses, volunteer organizations, the media and advertising to develop violence reduction programmes. Attorney General Janet Reno said she vowed to clamp down on the advertising, film, recording and video games industries. She urged parents to be attentive to what their children were absorbing: 'We need to know more about how children learn of their existence'. The head of the Federal Trade Commission pledged to oversee the impact of advertising on child behaviour and to work with the business community to monitor what children saw. President Clinton and Hillary Clinton declared a national epidemic of youth violence, in which the Columbine shooting was an extreme example.

Clinton's vigorous campaign encouraged city officials, churches, schools, mental health services and families to unite against youth violence. Wall Street advertising executives recruited youth leaders from inner cities to interrupt *flare-ups* in school playgrounds and street corners, using gang slang ('*squash it!*') and hand signs to '*cool it!*' A 'Just Say No to Violence' campaign enlisted schoolchildren to cover city walls with painted handprints memorializing those who died in gang wars and street violence. Teachers introduced 'behavioral self-management' through meditation and mindfulness to sensitize their at-risk pupils (i.e. poor black and Latino children) to 'senseless homicides, drugs, and racist rap music'.

Clinton's campaign also established an academic advisory board headed by a prominent educational anthropologist, John Devine, who engaged with very different premises. He noted that school shootings were *not* a black issue but that inner city schools had become a pathway to prison for inner-city children. He defined the problem as institutional and structural violence based on race, poverty and social exclusion. Our committee consisted of 20 prominent urban social scientists, including myself. We identified certain variables

missed by the president's campaign. We differentiated 'mass shootings' in suburban schools (mostly white and rural or suburban) from youth homicides in poor communities. While guns were a problem, police 'legitimate' homicides of Black and Latino youth was even worse. We questioned criminological labels such as '*death by cop*', then a euphemism for '*suicide-by-cop*' (Geberth 1993), which attributed police homicides to suicidal victims who had provoked the police to shoot them.

In our report, we explained the 'code of the streets' and the 'search for respect' that led to a cycle of retaliatory deaths. We linked hypersensitivity to imagined insults to a culture of shame, defeat and self-hatred honed by the US prison system. We described the lethal association of white male honour with 'stand your ground' legislation that allowed homeowners to murder a suspected intruder, even if mistakes were made (Spies 2018). We made connections between a militarized society and violence in homes, streets and schools. We linked the 'epidemic' of violence to our country's relentless wars abroad that came home to roost in social 'epidemics' of homelessness, drug addiction, PTSD, and domestic violence among war vets.

We identified youth who were both dangerous and endangered, victims and perpetrators. We drew parallels between state schools and prisons, and we rejected calls for enhanced security systems – video cameras and metal detectors – in state schools or using armed guards to police school corridors and bathrooms. Finally, we wrote of the dangers of access to guns and weapons of war for troubled youth and alienated young men. After many edits, we delivered our final report to the president's office. It was not well received.

Our conclusions went against the grain and the report was sent back for another round of editing to remove any passages concerning access to weapons. Our proposal to pay gang leaders to surrender guns, a tactic used widely and somewhat successfully in Brazil, was deleted. Censorship and self-censorship ruled the day. But even the highly redacted report delivered to the President and his staff was shelved. One can barely find it online, hidden in digitized government archives. The report was bureaucratically '*disappeared*'.

### ***A new suspect: The mentally ill***

The Clinton campaign put the national spotlight on inner-city black youth, despite the fact that the Columbine shooters were white and middle class. We knew a lot less then about lone wolf shooters and the festering alienation of angry white men. Thus, the default was black youth violence. If violence was the question, Black youth was the answer.

Since Sandy Hook to Parkland Florida, there have been some 200 school shootings and more than 400 victims. Today, the focus is on the mentally ill. This began with Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter who took his own life as well as that of his mother, 20 children and six adults. The 2013 *Report of the State's Attorney for the judicial district of Danbury on the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School*<sup>2</sup> concluded that Lanza had Asperger's syndrome and his 'obsessional and anxious traits' affected his ability to live a normal life or to interact with others'. But many people – including Ludwig Wittgenstein,

the late Robin Williams and Temple Grandin (1995), the autistic scientist who was shy of people, but attuned to the emotions of animals – have shared these same characteristics. Each used their cognitive and emotional differences to build a better world. Mental illness or cognitive differences, including autism or Asperger’s syndrome, is a lame excuse for mass murders. It criminalizes the mentally ill who already suffer from social rejection and stigma. It is a slander to all the creative and good-hearted mentally ill who have a hard enough time trying to fit into a society that so often misunderstands them.

A day after the massacre in Sandy Hook, a Spanish psychiatrist, Lola Morón published an article in the newspaper *El País* in which she challenged the idea that social withdrawal, shyness and isolation could convert a person into a ruthless killer. She argued that the shooter was cultivated by a culture of violence. Morón wrote: ‘I ask myself why the United States media are so bent on finding a psychiatric diagnosis for a murderer who had been living side-by-side with firearms since infancy, and who for the massacre dressed himself in military fatigues. Perhaps the issues have more to do with the naturalness with which the use of arms is “lived” than with mental disorders’ (Calve Ehaug 2018).

Adam’s rampage may have been motivated by his sense of alienation and vengeance against a world that had excluded him, but that is no excuse for mass murder. If Adam had ‘suicidal-homicidal preoccupations’, then so do terrorist suicide bombers (Atran 2003). Taking this a bit further, mass shooters like Adam Lanza and Nikolas Cruz, could be seen as home-grown terrorists. It is time to put aside our psychiatric manuals and to face the reality of evil. As the American comic strip character, Pogo, said: ‘We have met the enemy and he is us’.

The wild West gun culture in the US is rightly attributed to the perverse power of the National Rifle Association (NRA), whose strategy is to expand the unrestricted ownership of guns. The NRA is a sophisticated lobby for arms manufacturers. US legislators and political leaders across political parties have treated the NRA and their lobbyists as a third rail. Even President Obama, despite his moving speeches following 14 shootings during his presidency, did not use his executive authority to ban the high-powered rifles that tore out the hearts of so many schoolchildren under his watch.<sup>4</sup>

Less needs to be said about our current president, whose chaotic, rambling and contradictory responses following the Valentines’ Day high school massacre in Florida show him to be confused at best and a coward at worst, desperately looking from one staffer to another, to cover his tracks. The idea that Trump, of all people, would have jumped into the high school shooting ‘without a gun’ is a childish fantasy, reminiscent of the national folklore about the Kentucky congressman, Davy Crockett, ‘grinning down a bear’.

An epidemic of cowardice has shackled some American politicians across the parties. Following the Tucson, Arizona shoot-out of 2011, in which six people were killed (including a federal judge) and 18 others were seriously injured, former congresswoman, Gabrielle Giffords, one of the injured, wrote in *The New York Times* about her struggle to regain the ability to speak and to use her right leg and arm (Giffords 2014). She expressed

disappointment in the failure of Congress to pass a bill increasing background checks on gun owners, while she also reassured her readers that she and her husband were ‘political moderates’ and ‘proud gun owners’. She asked that identified ‘stalkers’ and ‘domestic abusers’ be prohibited from purchasing guns, avoiding the problem of *public* shootings. She advocated mental health counselling in schools so that ‘dangerously mentally ill might find it easier to receive treatment than to buy firearms’ (ibid.). Governor Jerry Brown told me that in the state of California it has been prisons, not schools or communities, that receive the bulk of state funds for mental health care.

### **Radical hope**

The US is the only democracy that allows its citizens to purchase and store private arsenals of war weapons in their homes. Today there is a change in the air. Second Amendment fundamentalists who repeat the NRA’s mantra that more guns in the right hands will stop mass shootings is ridiculed.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the Second Amendment that originally had in mind an organized militia, not individual gun slingers, we have a constitution that guarantees the right to life, liberty and happiness – ‘natural’ rights that have been ripped away from our schoolchildren.

Bill Clinton’s hope that business communities could play a role in preventing mass shootings is playing out today in the voluntary reduction, restriction and boycotting of automatic weapons by some of the nation’s largest sellers of guns and ammunition in the US. Dick’s Sporting Goods, Walmart and the Kroger Company have begun to clear their aisles of automatic rifles and guns. The momentum is growing and Delta Airlines has decided to refuse special deals for NRA members. We hope that a chain of boycotts, driven by a sense of political and moral decency will follow suit.

However, it is the inspirational mobilization of the teenage survivors of the Florida massacre that is waking up an ageing country of voters long asleep at the wheel. The truth is that house guns and automatic rifles kill children as well as animals in a horrific way (Scheper-Hughes 2014). Pity the surgeons who tried to save the young people’s bodies and organs that were destroyed by shrapnel, so that the local emergency department looked like a field hospital in Syria. ‘Bones are exploded and soft tissues are absolutely destroyed’, one surgeon lamented (Kolata 2018).

On 28 February we went to a school play at Santa Fe High School in New Mexico. It was not any ordinary play, but a production of ‘*26 pebbles*’, a dramatization of the voices of children, parents, teachers, clergy and ordinary citizens who were torn asunder by the Sandy Hook school shooting. The drama teacher apologetically introduced the play saying that it was perhaps too close to the horrendous school shooting in Florida. He wanted to cancel it, but his high school students insisted that they could handle it, even though there had been a real threat to the school a few days earlier. The campus of Santa Fe High School is large and the theatre seemed vulnerable. Nineteen high school students acted the parts of the Sandy Hook survivors, their families and the community as they processed the mass killing of small

children in the iconic New England town. The playwright, Eric Ulloa, had conducted interviews with real members of the Newtown community and crafted their narratives into a dramatic presentation revealing a tsunami of contradictory emotions, thoughts and suffering that followed the horrific event. It was a sombre evening. The young actors were ready, but some were visibly trembling. The audience was quiet, the applause decorous and the schoolmates with flowers were shy about giving them to the cast. Cars filled up and quickly exited. Too much burden on the student actors, I thought. But not so. The following day (1 March), the students held a public rally. They yelled, they wept, and they pledged to ‘have a voice’ against gun violence. Among the speakers was a senior student, Sophie Colson, who asked a question that captured the generational divide: ‘Are your guns more important than our lives?’

The Florida student leaders have forcefully articulated their right to be safe from gun violence in schools that should be a children’s sanctuary. They also articulated the right to live in a world that is not cloaked in the fear of another mass killing in their schools. Theirs is the first cohort that has lived with the everyday terror of school massacres. In 1941 President FDR articulated the four freedoms that all people ought to enjoy: freedom of speech, of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Our children have every right to demand that society protect them from fear and provide them with a basic trust in their ontological security in the world. Converting schools into armed fortresses and teachers and custodians into riot squads can only increase their sense of ontological insecurity. Surely there is ‘something rotten’ in a nation state that allows a small minority of adults, the 3.7% of the population who own half of the 300 million guns awash in the country, to override the 2/3 of our citizens who want stronger gun controls and the banning of assault weapons. We now live in a society in which our president behaves like a petulant baby tyrant, and our teenage youth leaders behave like sober and rational adults. ●

1. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?124031-1/media-advertising-youth-violence&start=61>.
2. <http://health-equity.lib.umd.edu/4223/>.
3. [https://elpais.com/internacional/2012/12/15/actualidad/1355599629\\_975246.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2012/12/15/actualidad/1355599629_975246.html) .
4. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/06/12/14-mass-shootings-14-speeches-how-obama-has-responded/85798652/>
5. Justice Ruth Ginsberg’s view of the Second Amendment  
[https://armsandthelaw.com/archives/2013/10/justice\\_ginsber.php](https://armsandthelaw.com/archives/2013/10/justice_ginsber.php).
6. <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/02/589849342/npr-poll-after-parkland-number-of-americans-who-want-gun-restrictions-grows>

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