

A Contribution Towards a Critical Theory of School Shootings

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Abstract

The paper comments on school shootings from a socio-critical perspective and offers provocative conclusions on the reasons for young people to go on killing sprees. In order to achieve this, the author applies the psychological theory of the “abstract free will” and analyzes how a modern individual’s consciousness must be shaped to commit lethal violence at school. It transpires that individuals, who deal psychologically with the requirements of the capitalistic society, apply the criterion of successful decency to their material and social efforts. Even though this is common among modern individuals and accompanied by adequate psychological and moral “techniques,” some radicalize the ideal they have constructed of themselves and the society they live in.

How many times have we heard the words “senseless shooting,” “senseless violence,” or “senseless killing” in reference to the various school shootings that have taken place in recent years? Quite the contrary is argued in this text and that the actions in Columbine, Erfurt, or at Virginia Tech make sense in the light of a critical analysis of how a private individual’s consciousness is shaped in a society based on competition and the rule of law as its major organizational principles. The present analysis therefore exceeds the limitations of the existing literature on school shootings, which merely describes the phenomenon and is thus not able to provide a thorough explanation (for a literature review see Bondü & Scheithauer 2011). There, the unspecified listing of factors that are thought to contribute to the occurrence of such rampages defies the formation of a convincing theory.

In recent years the frequency of school shootings has increased. A fact that forces us to consider the rationale of these terrible events that leave behind dead people and a stunned public. Even though killing rampages don’t make sense to us immediately, after digging a little deeper and putting the puzzle pieces together, it appears that school shootings not only follow their own rationale but also offer grounds for severe social criticism.

The criticism, however, touches upon a delicate topic: morality. In this essay I propose that the consequences of radically applied morality are decisive for making sense of the “senselessness.” In other words, and as a practical consequence of this, as long as those living under capitalist rule behave like so many little “ensembles of social relations” (Marx 1969: 14), they and their applied morality have to be the object of criticism. Accordingly, it is argued that those individuals running amok are the radicalized followers of generally accepted norms and values. In this paper school shootings are thus understood to be the most radical by-product of the applied principles of democratic capitalism in its subjectified form of appearance.

In our modern democratic societies, the free will of the individual is the basic principle of law and, therein, a matter of fact. By conceding its citizens the right to act as legal entities and, thus, as persons with their own interests and purposes, the state substantially restricts the free will of individuals living under its rule. The legal act of accepting the individuals’ free will, which already exists prior to and independent of this acceptance, is virtually identical to the submission of this will to the interests of the authority guaranteeing such rights. Thus, the legal acceptance of the individuals’ will is both the most abstract and also most comprehensive form to submit the specific content of this will to bourgeois rule because “the positive form of command in the last resort (has) a prohibition as its basis” (Hegel 2001: 54). For this reason, no sphere of capitalist life is excluded from legal regulation and, as a result, the state provides the exclusive conditions in which the individual is able to exert his/her free will. Because the individual’s will is accepted, *per se*, none of its particular interests are acknowledged by the state. The bearer of such a will is free to accept the state-imposed restrictions as the quasi-natural condition for the application of his will. And the modern individual accepts these legal conditions as the starting point for his calculating behavior to advance in the different spheres of life. Therewith, the will is “abstractly free” because by incorporating the legal requirements of the capitalistic state into his formation of will, the private individual abstracts from these restrictions and acclaims the realm of freedom. This affirmative stance towards the capitalist state is deeply rooted in the re-interpretation of the restrictions implied in civil liberties as the sphere in which individuals would be free of subjection to political rule. By submitting his existence to the requirements of the prevailing politico-economic interests, the modern individual cultivates a specific way of dealing with the consequences of living in capitalism. An individual who wishes to prove him/herself

in the survival of the economically, socially, and politically fittest, declares him/herself responsible for the outcome of his/her efforts. Thus, the economic, social, and political requirements are transferred to a psychological level. This transfer, however, is identical to ignoring the objective interests and purposes attendant as baggage with the capitalist order. Moreover, a person who is willing to cope with the vicissitudes of life primarily from a psychological point of view translates every experience into his/her particular balance of self-worth. There are consequences of the re-interpretation of objective constraints into a problem of how to deal with them subjectively. Because the material aspirations of modern individuals only exist in the form of proving themselves in the competitive system of capitalism, people accept the struggle within the hierarchy of occupations as their sole means for material well-being and, therefore, demonstrate their *abstract free will* (Held [ed.] 2003-2009: paragraphs 1-4).

At an early stage of their lives, modern individuals are introduced and subjected to competition within their education system. In addition to competing for grades and social prestige the competitiveness of individuals comes along with appropriate “techniques” to succeed in the educational selection process. Aggressive behavior patterns like bullying, assaults and extortion are the unwanted manifestation of the accepted calculating behavior towards curriculum, teachers and schoolmates. Moreover, students are forced to teach themselves how to deal psychologically with the consequences of competition during their respective educational career. Students are supposed to learn how to maintain a positive attitude towards themselves separated from any specific success they may or may not have. The acquisition and maintenance of *self-esteem* has therefore become an educational objective in its own right. Consequently, many institutions have started to promote actively the development of “ego-strength” in recent years. However, in the light of this ambitious program, it is no coincidence that some students fail to cope with the insufficient success they suffer in one form or another. The socially accepted forms of how to deal with the outcome of competition are, however, ignored only by a minority of students. Some of them radicalize their desire for being a respected protagonist of successful decency and reject the societal judgment of their efforts in the different spheres of life, i.e., educational/professional, political, and private sphere. Here, the category of successful decency refers to the two basic principles of life in our modern societies: (1) the rule of law; (2) competition.

The fact that killing rampages of young people generally take place at schools is no coincidence. Schools are purposefully selected as the site of offense because this is where adolescents become familiar with the pattern of competition and the education system's corresponding criteria of achievement. This state-organized "training" for becoming willing competitors, however, is not reduced to the education system and, so, students apply the criteria to the private and also political sphere. Adequately provided with the mental equipment through their respected educational careers, many students have to deal with the rather insufficient outcome of their educational and/or social ambitions. Students who do not accomplish what they strive for frequently perceive the difference between the *ideal* they have constructed of themselves and reality as an injustice. For them, the ideal of decency and success falls apart; they do not take advantage of their submission to the principles of democratic capitalism in a way they feel they are entitled to. Bringing forward one's rejected interests in this aggressive way, however, is anti-critical because individuals complaining about the injustices that the world offers accept the criteria of meritocracy but merely reject the output of their application.

By translating all positive and negative experiences of their life into a balance of self-worth and by continuously comparing their own psychological diagnosis with the psychologically interpreted results of competition, modern individuals perpetuate the "cult of self-esteem." The *ideal of oneself*, which is attended to the concept of self-esteem, is defended against any objective disproof (i.e., failure to meet the criterion of successful decency). This is, however, paradoxical because an individual cultivating his/her ideal of him/herself aims to deal subjectively with the consequences of a socio-economic system beyond his/her control. Self-esteem is, therefore, a psychological technique to conform to the requirements of the capitalist society. However, because an idealist re-interpretation of one's own achievements and potential capabilities is not sought, even able, to change the imposed conditions of life, self-esteem is, *per se*, at risk.

Individuals applying the standard of successful decency to themselves do not determine the systematic obstacles hindering their interests but frequently move on to the level of interpreting rejected interests as an *insult* to their entire personality. Individuals perceiving the discrepancy between their own feeling of self-worth and societal judgement in this aggressive way sometimes interpret this situation as intolerable. The perception of such an insult as an *honour offense* leads individuals to

the idea of correcting the discrepancy of ideal and reality by means of violence. This practical correction, of course, cannot effectively change society's judgement but enforces the congruency of both judgements and, thus, results in the rehabilitation of the individual's honour. Without any material considerations on the shooter's behalf, a particular person or "society" itself is confronted with the shooter's damaged feeling of honour. It speaks for itself that this act is based on a false critique of competition and its consequences. Why do people resort to violence as their ultimate means for rehabilitating their damaged honour?

The firm conviction of the moral self-perception does not allow any criticism, which generally results in various *compensation* efforts. Although common ways to compensate the moral self for his failure to meet the criteria of success properly are socially accepted and desired (e.g., fandom, sports, honorary positions, and family life), unlawful compensatory efforts are denied. The latter often incorporate physical violence, applied when reality is to be consistent with the ideal of the individual. However, compensation has an immanent deficit: it does not change objective reality and the compensatory efforts of bourgeois individuals are therefore *delusional*.

The content of socially acceptable conformity varies from "I just want to be respected by the ones I love" to "I am worth more than I am honoured and will prove my significance to the rest of the world." Individuals running amok radicalize the latter and feel the need to achieve *within* the capitalist society what this society "owes" them. The forced acceptance of their personality, however, results in a practical paradox: the acceptance is merely the product of physical violence and, thus, not the outcome of successful decency. How are these two aspects reconciled?

The *absolutization* of its specific psychological self-perception implies an individual's existential commitment to prove his "worth." With this step he has completely separated himself from any material calculations. When the idealistic self-perception is challenged in the form that the higher values one identifies with (e.g., justice) are in his mind denied their required *respect*, he perceives this as an attack on his entire personality. For a moral self that is challenged in this most abstract and radical way, the rehabilitation of his personality is a question of honour. He aims to obtain the definite proof for the validity of his ideals to such an extent that this ambition remains his final *purpose in life*. Thus, committing suicide, as so many gunmen on a rampage have done, is the ultimate act of individuals, who – after having rehabilitated their honour in the light of their idealistic self-perception – cannot allow

others to disprove the validity of *their* applied standard of successful decency. The killing rampage has purposed what it was aimed to deliver and those committing suicide demonstrate to what an extent their behavior is calculated. This calculating behavior becomes apparent when everything is planned in great detail, suicide notes are composed, and the social environment, the family, friends, and others are systematically deceived (Huisken 2002).

The purpose of violent self-expression in this brutal way is usually led by thoughts of *revenge*. When the radicalized individual follows the purposes he feels entitled to realize, he does not show consideration for his fellow citizens. A person that seeks to prove to “the world” the validity of his ideal of himself is usually not selective, and because of that everyone and anyone can be subject to his violent ambitions. Such an individual does not care about the particular stance of the victim to himself. Usually, the victims had not even known the gunman personally, but were idealized representatives of “the world” that the perpetrator aimed to attack. The project to enforce “the world” to pay respect to a personality who does not meet the accepted criteria of achievement in the capitalist society – no matter whether this is true or only perceived as such – is all-encompassing and therefore everyone is a potential victim. The delusion of feeling entitled to satisfy one’s desire for revenge because one acts in accordance with higher values results in the idea that the perceived annihilator of these values (i.e., in his mind the rest of “the world” and their representatives) is allowed to be eliminated through violent means. For radicalized students “the world” is equated to the social environment they spend most of their time with: the school. Moreover, here they are required to prove themselves in competition (e.g., on the academic level through grades, but also on the social level: who wears the coolest clothes? etc.). Even though the perceived *entitlement* to utilize means of violence is the “logical” conclusion of individuals believing in the idea of being defenders of universally valid values, they are not original in doing so. In fact, they imitate what the bearer of monopoly of force, the capitalist state, does when he enforces law and order within his territory or sends his armed forces to foreign countries: use of force as the *ultima ratio* of policy makers. The monopoly of force and the armed forces are generally used for the protection or enforcement of higher values, such as freedom, democracy, justice, and humanity.

In the viewpoint of an individual running amok, *his values* are restored, and therein, the killing spree is never “senseless,” as generally perceived by the media,

politicians, and even academics. The rationale behind school shootings infers from the delusional ambition of an individual to violently conflate success and decency against the reality of his life.

Given this, the circulating ideas about killing spree at schools, no matter whether these ideas are of academic or non-academic origin, that they are the result of various contributing factors, e.g., easy access to guns, social isolation, or lack of self-esteem, must remain insufficient as long as the applied abstract free will of modern individuals is disregarded (Newman 2004; Robertz 2004; Langman 2009). In other words, people actively apply their moral standards to the capitalist world they are living in, and only those believing in the idea of themselves as keepers of universally valid laws will consider a killing rampage as their appropriate means for retaining the identity of ideal and social reality. It is therefore important to stress that the mindset of perpetrators of lethal school violence rests upon the same ideals and values as the capitalist mainstream society. The idea of “structural risk factors” as being the third and last group of risk factors in addition to (bio-)psychological and psychosocial factors in a heuristic model for the description of a pathway toward a school shooting ignores this general consensus (Bondü & Scheithauer 2011: 304). Moreover, as if individuals would live in a socio-economic “vacuum,” the contributions of the “social structure” are of no specific interest and, thus, the assumed natural condition for any particular act of will. Even in works explicitly aiming to analyze the “social roots” of school shootings, the foundations of modern societies are not adequately reflected. Instead, an insufficient “frustration tolerance” and level of “self-esteem” are criticized (Newman 2004). By negating the fact that the intellect of individuals is formed in a social environment with particular organizing principles and purposes, the behavior of (potential) perpetrators cannot be adequately analyzed working backwards from the effect to the cause. Accordingly, the listing of numerous factors aims to compensate the deficits of insufficient theory formation. Although no factor itself causes a certain pattern of behavior, a fact for why authors dispute over the actual effect of specific factors, it is implicitly assumed that the combination of contributing factors “causes” the decision on planning school shootings (Bondü & Scheithauer 2011). However, how exactly the consumption of media violence, social isolation, and access to weapons, among other things, contribute to the occurrence of school shootings must remain vague, because the efficacy of any factor does not exist as long as the necessary content of the will has not been formed in the mind of the future

perpetrator. Thus, it has been the goal of this essay to develop a theory of school shootings whilst taking account of the socio-economic principles of modern capitalist societies, i.e., competition and the rule of law, and the mindset resulting thereof. The abstract free will and the specific use of an individual's intellect under capitalist rule are the decisive links to understand the phenomenon of school shootings and exceed the limitations implied in analyzing mere factors without being able to determine its actual contributions.

Finally, what can critical thinkers learn from the tragic phenomenon of killing rampages at schools? What is the practical conclusion to be drawn from the events in Columbine, Erfurt, or Virginia Tech? From a psychological viewpoint it is important to be highly sceptical about the concept of self-esteem and the idea that this psychological instrument would be of importance for individuals living in capitalism. Moreover, the concept of self-esteem as a necessary component of mental health should be challenged because its ultimate purpose is to separate theoretically the individual's good and bad experiences from his ideal of himself and, therefore, the society in which he lives. The theoretical indifference towards systematically conflicting interests within the capitalist societies is implied in this dealing with one's own experiences psychologically. Individuals that merely behave like so many little "ensembles of social relations" (Marx 1969: 14) are the *sine qua non* for the practical execution of even the most radical moral attitude towards life.

References

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