

## Making Sense of the 'Senselessness': Critical Reflections on Killing Rampages

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How many times have we heard the words “senseless shooting,” “senseless violence,” or “senseless killing” in reference to the Tucson tragedy of January 8, 2011 and to similar events in recent years? Quite the contrary is argued in this text and that the actions by Jared Loughner and other gunmen on the rampage make perfect sense in light of a critical analysis of how a private individual’s consciousness is shaped in our capitalistic society.

Of course, the tragedy of Tucson is another sad event in the long list of killing sprees in the United States and elsewhere. This, however, should not prevent us from considering the rationale of these terrible events that leave behind dead bodies and a paralyzed public. Even though shootings don’t make sense to us immediately, after digging a little deeper and putting the puzzle pieces together, I claim that a killing rampage follows its own rationale no matter if it takes place at a school or university, or aims to kill a member of Congress and her supporters. Moreover, for those already critical of the capitalistic economy and its complementary political system, the issue of killing sprees offers even more grounds for criticizing the current state of affairs in our modern society.

The criticism, however, touches upon a delicate topic, especially among those leaning to the left: morality. In this essay I claim 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 damaged by the capitalistic order behave merely like so many little “ensembles of social relations” (Marx 1969:14), they and their applied morality have to be the object of criticism. In addition, and I accept that this is a provocative hypothesis, it is argued that those running amok are nothing but the radicalized forms of appearance of those backing the accepted norms and values of the capitalistic society. Whereas Lenin and many other leftists argue that the values of the bourgeois society provide a potential leverage for agitating those suffering under the ruling politico-economic system, it is my conclusion that, quite the opposite, these values and norms form a barrier to social change and, periodically lead to terrible actions, such as those in Tucson, Columbine, or at Virginia Tech.

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 capitalistic 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 or 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. The modern individual accepts these legal conditions as the starting-point for his calculating behaviour. 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 his realm of freedom. This affirmative stance towards the capitalistic state is deeply rooted in the re-interpretation of restrictions as civil liberties. By submitting his existence to the requirements of the ruling politico-economic interests, the modern individual cultivates his specific way of dealing with the consequences of living in capitalism. He wants to prove himself in the system of exploitation and, therefore, declares himself responsible for the outcome of his efforts. Consequently, the political, economic, and social requirements are transferred to a psychological level. This transfer, however, is identical to ignoring the objective interests and purposes attendant as baggage with the capitalistic order. A person who is willing to cope with the vicissitudes of life merely from a psychological point of view translates every experience into his particular balance of self-worth. This re-interpretation has its consequences.

Because the material aspirations of modern individuals only exist in the form of proving themselves in the competitive capitalistic system, 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 2003-2009). Before applying the "rationale" of this will to the case of the Tucson shooting, I will succinctly exemplify the intrinsic logic of people running amok with the phenomenon of school shootings.

At an early stage of their lives, modern individuals are introduced and subjected to competition: the education system. Moreover, students are forced to teach themselves how to deal psychologically with the consequences of competition during their respective educational careers. Students are supposed to learn how to maintain a positive attitude towards themselves separated from any specific success they may have or not: to develop their *self-esteem*. For this reason, 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 radicalise their desire for being a respected protagonist of successful decency and reject the societal judgement of their efforts in the different spheres of life, i.e., political, economic, 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. Students are confronted with a competitive education system and its corresponding criteria of achievement. This state-organised "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 get what 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 objective situation of an individual's situation in capitalistic society is of no interest to such a person. Moreover, the *ideal of one-self*, which is attended to the concept of self-esteem, is defended against any disproof (i.e., failure to meet the criterion of successful decency). This is, however, paradoxical because an individual cultivating its ideal of itself can never correct its objective situation. Self-esteem is, therefore, a psychological technique to conform to the requirements of the capitalistic society. However, because an idealist re-interpretation of one's own achievements and potential capabilities is not aimed, 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 only with the shooter's damaged 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 or her failure to meet the criterion 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; the compensatory efforts of bourgeois individuals are therefore *delusional*.

The mental content of socially accepted 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." Persons running amok radicalise the latter extreme and feel the need to achieve *within* the capitalistic 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 *absolutisation* 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 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 behaviour is calculated. This calculating behaviour 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 radicalised 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. Most times, the victims had not even known the gunman personally, but were idealised 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 our capitalistic society – no matter whether this is true or only perceived as such – is all-encompassing and therefore everyone is a potential victim. The delusion to feel 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 with violent means. “The world” is equated in these individuals to the school, as this is the place where 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 best clothes? etc.). The perceived *entitlement* is the “logical” conclusion of individuals believing in the idea of being defenders of universally valid values. In doing so, modern individuals are not original. In fact, they imitate what the bearer of monopoly of force, the capitalistic 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 a person running amok, *his values* are restored, and therein, the killing spree is never “senseless,” as generally perceived by others.

Given this, the circulating ideas about killing rampages, 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, inflammatory political rhetoric, or lack of self-esteem, must remain insufficient as long as the applied abstract free will of modern individuals is disregarded (Newman 2004; Langman 2009). In other words, people actively apply their moral standards to the capitalistic 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. Accordingly, the idea of Sarah Palin’s infamous “It’s time to take a stand”-map influencing Jared Loughner in any way is absurd. Whereas liberal columnists, such as Paul Krugman (2011), emphasize the current political environment that they contend encourages outrage and violence, more conservatives, such as David Brooks (2011), point out that the suspect is mentally ill. The explanations seem to divide along liberal and conservative lines. However, without taking the applied will of the shooter seriously, it is simply impossible to make sense of the “senselessness.” Loughner’s choice of victim, however irrational, was politically motivated. So, what kind of person kills others for his political beliefs?

Analog toward the description above, it is important to emphasize that a gunman is convinced to execute “just violence.” Being entitled to assassinate a member of Congress because she violated the higher values and beliefs Loughner identifies with, justifies – in his point of view – the brutal violence of his action. Loughner, who attacked the U.S. federal government and religion in several videos on YouTube, developed his own incoherent views on a

necessary political revolution. He was prepared to fight “the longest war in the history of the United States,” called for a new currency, a return to the former gold standard, vehemently criticized the current job employment situation, and backed Arizona’s restrictive immigration laws. In addition, he felt that Gabrielle Giffords, who he had met once in 2007, is “stupid and unintelligent” (*Daily Mail* 2011).

According to former classmates, Jared Loughner became increasingly erratic in recent months after being suspended by a local community college because of his rambling outbursts on the internet. He was told by the college authorities that it would be necessary for him to obtain “mental health clearance” before returning to the college that Loughner described as a “torture facility.” In fact, he did not participate in any program stabilizing his mental health but further radicalized his political views and, finally, felt entitled to commit his crime for the good of his beliefs. The practical execution of his radical moral attitude towards life is what we have to deal with these days.

Finally, what can open-minded thinkers learn from the tragic phenomenon of killing rampages? What is the practical consequence to be drawn from the events in Tucson, Columbine, 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. What might be irritating for most of us in the first instance, the idea of self-esteem as a necessary component of mental health, should be challenged

because its ultimate purpose is to theoretically separate the individual’s good and bad experiences from his ideal of himself and, therefore, the society he lives in. The theoretical indifference towards systematically colliding interests within the capitalistic societies is implied in this dealing with one’s own experiences psychologically.

From a philosophical point of view we should be sceptical about any political ambitions that emphatically rely on aspiring to higher values and norms. This not only refers to capitalistic states that wish to impose their version of “freedom” and “democracy” on other societies but also to those leftist intellectuals, organisations, and parties agitating for their political goals with the argument of realising universally valid values. The idea that it would be necessary to connect with the values of the working class, which is in line with Lenin’s approach, has to be challenged (Held and Hill 1989). The same counts for the idea of Marx being a moralist. If anything, Marx taught us the power of scientific reasoning and in the tradition of his approach we should be critical about the regular attempts to psychologically deal with the consequences of a politico-economic system that offers the vast majority of its members poor perspectives for their material well-being. The moralist world view of modern individuals, if we like the idea or not, is a major cornerstone for making sense of killing rampages. In other words, those who reflect on the most radical protagonists of successful decency should not ignore the societal foundations from which they emerge.

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