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The Columbine Incident and the Radical Tradition in America: An Interactive Forum

Making No Sense of Young People Killing Other Young People

by David Farber

In 1966, Charles Whitman, a student at the University of Texas, climbed to the top of the administration tower at the Austin campus and opened fire on the young people below, killing twelve and wounding 32 others. Some 100 men, many of them students, used their own guns to fire back at Whitman. Reporters noted that the young men fought back in good cheer. One of the young men succeeded in shooting Whitman to death. Whitman was a white supremacist with ties, seemingly, to the right-wing Minutemen. However, no one has ever been able to connect Whitman's shooting spree with his politics. Undoubtedly, he was an angry, troubled young man for whom the Minutemen represented a possible but ultimately insufficient outlet for his damaged ego and ill feelings toward the world around him.

H. Rap Brown once noted, in defense of his support of armed struggle, that "Violence is as American as cherry pie." Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation*, thinks more subtly about Americans' propensity toward "regeneration through violence." What is the line that connects Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, Leopold and Loeb, George Metesky (the "mad" New York bomber), Charles Whitman, Charlie Manson, and the Littleton killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold? Nicholas Turse wonders if the line runs through Abbie Hoffman and Mark Rudd, neither of whom ever came close to hurting, let alone killing anyone, though it is true that Rudd participated in 1969's "Days of Rage," a form of burlesque violence (during which my father's nice, almost-new car was adorned with a spray painted red "VC" that his insurance did not cover). Turse asks us to consider whether Harris and Klebold (and, I guess, other recent schoolboy murderers) are the Rudd and Hoffman of our day, and whether their murderous rampages might be considered "the radical protest method of choice in America today."

Well, sure, in a sort of silly, academic sense. Violent attacks are always a kind of protest against society—at least if somebody claims that. In his essay, Turse would have done better to have talked up that iconic horror show from the 60s era, Eldridge Cleaver. Back then, he had people believing that his multiple rapes of white women (he was only practicing, he stated, when he raped black women) were a defiant, political act. And, of course, by saying it, it became true. Violent men, if they are "of the people," as various British Marxist historians have taught us, can be construed as pre-political organizers; in other words, highwaymen were the Jedi Knights of the oppressed class in olden-day England. Contemporary hip-hop artists remind us of the bold, people-first acts perpetrated by gun-toting, "ho"-beating "gangstas." A certain sort of multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary academic gilds the lily by dressing up any and all sorts of violent, mean-spirited, rude behavior as politically potent, "transgressive" actions. Proud students have told me of their "political" acts—curse loudly in the subway, thus annoying "yuppies." Screwing around with the bourgeoisie is a long-standing "political" (and fun) practice of the rebellious. And while, from any practical standpoint, most such acts are "bad" politics... well, why not, if one is a "rebel," jolly oneself into thinking that the most brutal or simply self-indulgent behaviors are political? (One time, in college, while drunk, I peed on a police car. Perhaps Homer Simpson and I are also analogous to Mark Rudd and Abbie Hoffman.)

Turse seems to be arguing that deadly performative violence should be considered the pre-political or even pointedly political act of a new generation that lacks a good, left-wing collective social justice movement to join. I know that he is not advocating this position. He is just positing a description. OK, to put it bluntly, I think his description is ludicrous and based on post hoc, ergo propter hoc reasoning. Sixties-era radical youth acted violently; thus, when nineties-era youth act violently, they must also be radicals. It only makes sense in an academic culture in which transgression is by definition political and in which any kind of rage against society can be considered radical. By so reifying "Radical Politics" we risk losing any sense of political process.

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His books include *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994); he is also the editor of *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

