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Guns don't kill people...: good guys and the legitimization of gun violence

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Building on literatures that examine why firearms are appealing and to whom and employing Weber's concept of "legitimate violence", this paper utilizes an online concealed carry forum to critically analyze how firearm proliferation is rationalized in the U.S. The analysis focuses on three specific examples of violence—the Parkland, Florida, and Philando Castile shootings, and stories of children who find guns and shoot themselves and/or others. This work is a critical examination of the social construction of "legitimate violence" that deconstructs the discourses embedded in the "pro-gun" notion that the answer to gun violence is more guns.

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Introduction

The last five years have witnessed three major developments in the social meanings of guns in the United States: considerably more people are being killed and injured by firearms (Mervosh, 2018); there has been a significant increase in mass public shootings (Berkowitz et al., 2019); and there has been a rise in the number of public protests attended by heavily armed private citizens, a disproportionate number of whom are white men. One of the largest such events occurred in January of 2020, when a crowd estimated to be around 22,000 people swarmed the Virginia capital to protest Democratic lawmakers' proposed gun restrictions. According to media reports, many of the attendees were draped in semi-automatic rifles and military-style gear, organized militias marched down streets, and a ubiquitous bright orange sticker read "Guns Save Lives". The protesters gathered in Richmond from across the United States to voice their opposition to a range of gun control measures proposed by the state's lawmakers, including banning semi-automatic rifles, making background checks universal, limiting handgun purchases to one per month, and the creation of so called "red flag laws" that would allow the police to confiscate guns from someone considered threatening to themselves or others.

While these protests have their genesis in decades-old political antagonisms between those looking for solutions to gun violence and those arguing that all gun control is fundamentally unconstitutional (Spitzer, 2015), placing them in the context of the recent and significant increases in gun violence suggests that we must find new ways to understand what motivates those who are opposed to policies that could save lives. Building on literatures that examine why firearms are appealing and to whom and employing Weber's concept of "legitimate violence", I critically analyze the discursive frames used to rationalize the proliferation of guns as a response to gun violence in the U.S.

Literature

The idea that any and all gun control policy must be resisted because it represents a fundamental threat to liberty is part of what Horwitz and Anderson (2009) call an "Insurrectionist" belief, according to which government must be kept in constant check by a heavily armed and vigilant citizenry. Such a view rests on a myth that the Second Amendment grants individuals the right to own firearms for the purpose of violently overthrowing government, a position that is unsupported by the historical record: "Neither the Second Amendment nor an inchoate right to armed revolution allows for violent opposition to the policies of a democratically accountable government, even if some citizens view those policies as tyrannical" (Horwitz and Anderson, 2009, p. 110). As the authors explain, the Second Amendment was written not to empower individuals to resist government but to give states the right to form *government-organized, democratically controlled* militias.¹ Importantly, the Supreme Court's 2008 *Heller* decision—the first to interpret the Second Amendment as granting individuals the right to bear arms—does not preclude the state from enacting gun control laws.

There is a clear Insurrectionist thrust in the rhetoric used by "pro-gun" protesters, but Insurrectionism alone cannot explain why an overwhelming majority of them are white men or how they reconcile anti-government discourse with an almost obsessive deployment of the Second Amendment. Moreover, how do Insurrectionists understand gun violence, and why do they insist, despite robust public health evidence², that "guns save lives"? To address those questions, one must consider the meanings that adhere to guns as tools of "legitimate violence" and white male authority.

White male authority and "legitimate violence". A growing body of scholarship has explored the degree to which whiteness and masculinity are implicated in the social meanings of firearms. In a context of economic decline in which it is increasingly difficult to satisfy traditional notions of masculinity, some men are turning to guns (Carlson, 2015; Cassino and Besen-Cassino, 2020), objects that allow them to be "good guys", figures who are noble, prepared, and willing to confront the world's dangers to protect the innocent, especially women and children (Stroud, 2016). Elisabeth Anker (2019) argues that gun use has to be understood within a larger context of political and economic precarity beyond one's own economic well-being. The United States is in what Anker (p. 22) calls an "era of 'waning sovereignty'" in which previous signifiers of American strength are crumbling, provoking some to feel "confused and unprotected" and compelling them to seek "new promises of security". Guns represent a perfect antidote to this predicament, not only because they make people feel more secure against crime—despite the empirical evidence—but because they serve an important role in terms of identity for some gun owners, a disproportionate number of whom are white men. As defenders of dependent women and children, their patriarchal authority is legitimized, and in their defense against racialized others, they are able to fight back against a culture that they imagine is degraded by the racialized/poor/criminal class (Stroud, 2016). To this extent, they are not simply defending themselves as individuals, they are also defending an American mythos of exceptionalism rooted in their conceptions of white male sovereignty. As Chad Kautzer (2015, p. 175) explains, according to this formulation, "Freedom is identified with the right to self-defense and the right to self-defense is identified with possession of a firearm". As notions of popular sovereignty have always done in the U.S., this is a right that buttresses domination via race and gender.

Despite the Insurrectionist thrust in much pro-gun rhetoric, the state plays a central role in defining who is able to use guns to obtain freedom. Weber (1946, p. 78) argues in "Politics as a Vocation" that "the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e., considered to be legitimate) violence. If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be". It is because the state maintains a "*monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force*" (p. 78, emphasis in original) that political order is maintained and democratic processes can be insured. Robert Spitzer (2015, p. 21) says that absent this arrangement, "politics quickly devolve[s] into violence—precisely what occurs when regimes in the modern world are shaken or toppled by violence without stable regime replacement or succession and when weak regimes lack the ability to quell violence and mayhem within their countries". While this is true in general terms, when considered in the specific and racialized context of the U.S., it is clear that "legitimate violence" is routinely used by the state to reinforce race and class hierarchies (Wacquant, 2009) and to deny people of color access to democratic processes and institutions.

It is also the case that, despite maintaining a monopoly over legitimate violence, the state sometimes allows other institutions or individuals to have access to the means of such violence, though "only to the extent to which the state permits" (Weber, 1946, p. 78). When the state grants access to the means of "legitimate violence" to private citizens through liberalizing private gun ownership and the carrying of guns in public places, particularly given the legal cover of stand your ground laws (Light, 2017), gun use in general and concealed carry licensing in particular represent a claim to state-sanctioned power, to literally and symbolically being empowered by the state. Interviews with those who are licensed to carry guns make clear that this status is

part of what makes concealed carry appealing (see Carlson, 2015 and Stroud, 2016).

Beyond its role in expanding the scope of firearm access and use, the state is also critical in shaping the social meanings of firearms in other ways. Jennifer Carlson's (2019) deft analysis of how chiefs of police view the significance of private citizens being armed in public suggests another mechanism by which the state is implicated in reinforcing race/class hierarchies. When chiefs believe that police are doing battle with people of color/"criminals with guns" while being supported by white men / "good guys with guns", one mechanism by which "the zone of capacities for legitimate violence among private actors become sanctioned by public actors" is exposed (Carlson, 2019, p. 639). These meaning systems have various material consequences, including the lost lives of people of color, many of whom are killed because they were thought to be armed when they were not (e.g., Stephon Clark), while others were presumed to be "bad guys" even when they were legally armed (e.g., Philando Castile and E.J. Bradford). This article extends Carlson's effort to "racialize the Weberian presumption", by examining the racialized / gendered discourses that *gun owners* employ to rationalize widespread access to firearms, if only by the "right kinds" of private citizens. This analysis creates an opportunity to reconcile how "pro-gun discourse" can operate simultaneously through Insurrectionist rhetoric and a deep investment in the state, and continues the work of interrogating the cultural construction of "legitimate violence".

In applying Weber's concept, it is useful to take up his question "When and why do [people] obey"? (p. 78). He explains that obedience is achieved not by force but by three "inner justifications" that serve as the state's "basic legitimations of domination" (p.78). These are: the authority granted by "heroism or other qualities of individual leadership", which he calls "charismatic authority"; "domination by virtue of 'legality'... based on rationally created rules" (legal authority); and "the authority of the 'eternal yesterday'... exercised by the patriarch" ("traditional authority") (pp. 78–79). When one considers the role of the police and military in compelling obedience to the state, it is clear that all three legitimizing frames are routinely deployed to glorify these institutions and thus legitimize the various forms of violence they enact. Tradition / patriarchal authority and charisma/heroism are offered as cover in the face of criticisms, while domination via legality is on poignant display in the wake of police killings.³ What remains unexamined are the discourses used to rationalize access to the means of "legitimate violence" among *private citizens*. What roles if any do the legitimizing frames of charismatic, legal, and traditional authority play in justifying widespread access to guns? How might these discourses also serve to justify domination?

Methods

The analysis that follows utilizes an online gun forum that I visited routinely as part of a larger project on concealed carry that was completed in 2015. During that earlier research, I spent a great deal of time on the site as a way to learn more about the values, norms, and assumptions that shape gun ownership and what I came to think of as the "concealed carry worldview". This was a critical supplemental data source⁴—indeed, an additional ethnographic location (Hallett and Barber, 2013)—that informed the larger qualitative project, and I have regularly returned to it over the years as a way to stay up-to-date about how forum members respond to gun politics, including their reactions to gun violence cases. As public debates around gun regulations have grown more heated, and particularly so after the Parkland, Florida high school shooting, forum members' commitment to a

central paradox—that the only solution to gun violence is more guns—demanded further investigation.

Participation in a politically-oriented online forum allows one to engage with like-minded others in a "discursive performance designed to express a political identity" (Marichal, 2013). While such a source is useful in examining how people engage in and reproduce politicized discourse, it is unclear whether and how they might live these identities offline. However, the extent to which someone does or does not *actually* embody these discourses "in real life" is much less theoretically relevant in this instance than examining the online performance itself. In the same vein, what some might consider a weakness of a forum analysis—that we cannot always know the race, class, or gender of the poster—is irrelevant in examining what particular racialized/classed/gendered discourses accomplish, in this case: whether and how they serve to rationalize the proliferation of private gun ownership as a form of state-sanctioned domination.

The following analysis applies Weber's justifications of legitimate violence to three specific cases of gun violence discussed in the online forum: the way that Broward County Sheriff Scot Peterson responded during the Parkland shooting; the events that led to the Philando Castile shooting; and cases when children find guns and accidentally shoot themselves or others. This analysis is guided by the following research questions: What discursive frames are used to rationalize gun violence such that firearms are offered as *the answer* to gun violence? What do such cases reveal about the forms of domination supported by private citizens' having widespread access to the means of "legitimate violence"?

Rationalizing gun violence

Heroes will protect us. Just as heroism legitimizes the capacity for violence by the police and the military and thus compels people to submit to domination by the state, a similar dynamic is at work with respect to firearm ownership and concealed carry among private citizens, where heroism is taken to be a central element of what makes "good guys with guns" different from regular people. As a respondent in an earlier study (Stroud, 2016) explained in referring to "good guys" as "sheepdogs": "They're always going around protecting the sheep because it's in their nature. They're the heroes...the ones that do what has to be done". The hero frame works well in hypothetical scenarios where one can imagine storming into danger and saving the day, but what happens in real life?

One of the most sensational facts to emerge from the Parkland shooting is how Scot Peterson, the on-site Broward County Sheriff's deputy and only armed person at the school, responded when shots first started. A detailed account of the shooting by the *South Florida Sun Sentinel* ("Unprepared and Overwhelmed", 2018) reveals that Peterson established a position outside of an adjacent building and failed to approach the sound of gun fire, despite undergoing active shooter training in which officers are taught to quickly approach the sound of gun fire so that they may "confront the shooter" (Oppel and Sinha, 2019). Peterson has since been roundly criticized and in June of 2019 was charged with eleven counts of neglect of a child, culpable negligence, and perjury—the first time a law enforcement officer has ever been held criminally liable for a failure to adequately respond to a mass shooting (Burch and Blinder, 2019).

The response to the Parkland incident on the pro-gun forum was swift—the first post appeared just as news of the shooting was breaking—and closely followed: the initial thread⁵ ultimately consisted of 304 replies and was viewed just under 20,000 times; in total there were at least a dozen separate threads devoted to Parkland. The first eleven posts mostly focused on updates to the number of dead and wounded and expressions of sympathy, but

the twelfth, appearing just four hours after the shooting, stated, “One teacher that was ARMED could have stopped it quickly”. A couple of hours later another read, “Once again, evidently no armed school staff. When will they learn? Oh, they had a sign up? That works”. These sentiments exemplify the common pro-gun position that the only solution to school shootings is having more armed security officials and/or teachers on campus (precisely how many would be enough is a topic debated later on the forum).

In the months that followed discussions about Parkland stayed active and conversations ranged widely. When news of Peterson’s actions emerged forum posters unleashed a barrage of criticisms against him; one of the earliest stated, “Scot Peterson is an enabler, a coward, and a liar”, while another said, “He wasn’t a good guy with a gun, he was just a guy with a gun”. In response to a question about how sheriffs are trained, one forum member wrote, “To heck with training. A man –A REAL MAN—protects the innocent. They don’t come much more innocent than school children”. A post that appeared in June of 2019, following Peterson’s being charged, said, “If you are not someone who runs to gunfire, but runs away, that’s just the way God and life made you. Pretending to be the one who will run to gunfire, and having the world see that that is a lie is a fate worse than anything”. It included a screen image of a tweet written by a Parkland victim’s brother that showed Peterson’s mug shot and text that read “[Scot Peterson] allowed seventeen people to be murdered on his watch. He lied afterwards and had no remorse for his inaction. Retweet for the world to see this coward”. Shaming Scot Peterson for not having the courage and bravery to run toward danger—for not being man enough to save the day—is critical for those who see arming “good guys” as *the* answer to gun violence; by focusing on his failures, the fantasy that armed heroes can save lives remains intact. This was evident in one of the most vehement anti-Peterson tirades to appear on the forum:

Sad, sickening, infuriating, no...That doesn’t come close to describing it. I can’t express what I want to say on here without violating several forum rules. I knew there was a litany of incompetence, but I had no idea it was an epidemic. As a former [law enforcement officer], I am appalled, at the inaction, of the Coward County [Sheriff’s Office]. I can’t believe the pure cowardice of the deputies, and school security monitors. Some school teachers and coaches, reacted properly, and are heroes, but so many lives could have been saved, if there had been at least one person [who] had acted, to stop it before it started. But instead let’s blame the gun, a civil rights organization, or the Constitution itself.

The civil rights organization referenced in the final line is presumably the NRA, which (incorrectly) refers to itself as “the oldest civil rights organization in the country” (Hargis, 2017). This post is the most explicit to frame gun violence as a problem best remedied by armed heroes acting in defense of the innocent and not as a problem rooted in the wide availability of firearms.

It is impossible to know the exact consequences of Scot Peterson’s failure to rush to the sound of gun fire and enter the building where the shooting occurred, but according to the timeline of events provided by the *Sun Sentinel*, nine students were killed within two minutes of the shooter’s arrival on campus, and it is unlikely that Peterson could have engaged him any sooner than three or four minutes into the event, when he was on the third floor and firing into a crowd of students and teachers; by that point twelve people had been killed. For the families of those who died on the third floor, the what-ifs of Peterson’s inactions are likely maddening, but focusing on his failures to be a hero—including somehow safely and effectively engaging a shooter who was firing into a crowded hall—also serves a crucial function in directing criticisms away from a number of critical questions:

Why was a young man who had a history of making threats about shooting his classmates able to purchase a semi-automatic rifle with thirty-round magazines? Why did law enforcement have few available legal tools to put him on a “no purchase list” or to remove his guns when he was known to be dangerous? Why is it that the only moment when a legal intervention was possible was when the shooter arrived on school grounds armed and ready to kill? The condemnation levied against Peterson decontextualizes gun violence and bolsters the “good guy with a gun” narrative according to which society simply needs more armed heroes, a discourse that affirms and even celebrates patriarchal protectionist forms of violence (Stroud, 2016), to say nothing of its potential impact on students of color, who are already disproportionately harmed by discipline and policing in schools (Rios, 2011). Legitimizing and encouraging the proliferation of firearms while rationalizing gun violence as inevitable rests on a central fallacy and a dangerous solution: since there is nothing that can be done to prevent these cases, all that we can hope for is to have enough armed heroes with the courage to shoot back.

A good process will keep you alive. The state’s capacity to exercise domination via legality happens whenever bureaucratic or other legal process arguments are used to rationalize state power, for example in the idea that the criminal justice system is a fair arbiter of right and wrong. “Rationally created rules” are used to legitimize the killings of unarmed people and, in rare cases, even those who are legally armed, as happened when Philando Castile—a legal concealed carry holder—was killed by police officer Geronimo Yanez during a traffic stop in a Minneapolis suburb in the summer of 2016. Reactions to this case on the forum are instructive for what they reveal about how some posters understand and manage the risks associated with carrying a gun in public, and they provide a fascinating and tragic example of how important colorblindness is in rationalizing firearm proliferation.

The first thread related to Castile’s death was posted the day after news of the shooting was released and contained very little information, only a link to a news report and a notice that a concealed carry holder had been shot by a police officer during a traffic stop. The next three responses agreed that the situation seemed problematic, and yet most implicitly supported the officer. One poster wrote, “I really hope there’s another side to this story. If not, it looks bad”. By the fifth post, the focus turned to describing how someone with a concealed carry license should interact with law enforcement and pleas that people not jump to conclusions about what happened. The eleventh post stated, “Race does appear to be a factor here”, and “I hope this piece of garbage thug in uniform gets a murder charge for what he did”. A debate ensued as various people said that this poster was jumping to conclusions; he later explained that though there are many good police, there are also many who are not well-trained or capable:

[The] ugly truth is that because of affirmative action, reduction in standards and degradation of proper training protocols to cater to said reduction in standards, people who have no business being a Law Enforcement Officer end up with a job they are not prepared to handle.

In blaming affirmative action for Castile’s death, this poster manages to turn what originally seemed to be a concern about racial injustice into a diatribe against affirmative action that relies on racist discourse which presumes that an officer of color was unqualified for the job. The poster’s primary concern is not justice, but sound process.

In a separate thread on this same topic, the conversation focused almost exclusively on how Castile erred by not responding appropriately to the police officer. One poster wrote:

The biggest issue here appears to be a miscommunication between the officer and the driver. Here is my take: The officer gave two commands—to produce the license and not to reach for the gun. He didn't know where either of those items was located in the vehicle. The driver understood and believed he was complying because he reached for his driver's license, which in this case was apparently near his gun. When the officer observed the gun, he believed the driver was attempting to draw it and he responded with (an awful lot of) deadly force. Here are my suggested takeaways to avoid a similar situation:

1. Do not keep identification on the same side where the gun is holstered.
2. When advising the officer you are armed, tell him where the gun is and where the identification is.
3. Do not reach for ID with the hand that's on the same side as the gun.
4. Keep hands on the steering wheel and do not move until you are certain that both you and the officer have the same understanding of what you are about to do.

With both hands on the steering wheel, engine off, keys on the dash, and if after dark with interior light on, say, 'Out of respect for your safety, I want you to know that I am lawfully carrying a handgun in a belt holster behind my right hip. My identification is in my left rear pocket. How would you like me to proceed?' When I am sure I understand his response, I move only the left hand slowly to withdraw my wallet and I take the license out of it with hands held high in full view at steering wheel level. I've never had any issues when following this practice.

The site administrator—an NRA board member and the unambiguous patriarch of the forum—offered his mark of approval replying, "Excellent post". Other responses focused on a separate legal process concern: that Castile was ineligible for a concealed carry license because he was, according to one poster, an everyday user of marijuana.

Protocol when interacting with the police is a regular topic of conversation among concealed firearm holders for good reason: most people recognize that being misperceived as a "bad guy with a gun" is a grave risk. But in their colorblind emphasis that a good process will keep one safe, these posters failed to engage with the way that race shapes who is perceived as a criminal and how this affects both private citizens and the police. This is on display not only in the long procedural list detailed above, which suggests that police only see drivers as threatening if they fail to take specific steps, it is also clear in the many posts written by people who argue that the single most important way to avoid a deadly interaction with police is to follow all traffic laws and not be pulled over in the first place, indicating their deep investment in legal process, and their ignorance about the fact that black drivers are much more likely than white ones to be pulled over by police simply for "driving while black". The whiteness required to be seen as innocent and nonthreatening is ignored, and instead, a focus on process rationalizes the shooting death of a legally armed black man who was pulled over for a broken tail light. Any criticism of the police, ambivalence about concealed carry as a practice, or outrage over the injustice of Castile's death are resolved by focusing on how his own procedural failures are to blame. The fundamental injustice of a system that absolves someone of killing at point-blank range an innocent person whose only crime was a minor traffic violation is buried under the justification that a better process would have kept him safe. This focus legitimizes racialized domination and obscures one of the

gravest social consequences of firearm proliferation: that black men are disproportionately harmed from interpersonal gun violence (Armstrong and Carlson, 2019). Moreover, it allows forum members to evade a central question: whether firearm ownership in general and concealed carry in particular is, in practice, a right reserved for white men.

Fantasies of patriarchal control. The third of Weber's legitimizing frames, that of tradition "exercised by the patriarch" (p. 79), is evident throughout various levels of the state: from the wildly disproportionate over-representation of men at every level of authority (e.g., in politics, the military, the police), to early laws that defined only land-owning white men as citizens, to contemporary legislation that places limits on a woman's ability to make decisions about her own body. In each of these examples it is clear that patriarchy—a cultural system in which men and masculinity are privileged and which is "organized around an obsession with control" (Johnson, 2014, p. 6)—is central to the state's capacity to dominate. The connection between firearm ownership and patriarchal authority has already been discussed with respect to "good guy heroism"—in the idea that a "real man" protects the innocent, for example—but its use is even more stark in reactions to cases when children find unsecured guns and accidentally shoot themselves or others. Forum posts reveal the extent to which patriarchal authority is seen as a resource that will keep people safe but is instead a discursive tool that is employed to rationalize both gun violence and male dominance.

A key feature of the concealed carry worldview, something required to justify introducing more guns into public spaces, is that there is no such thing as an accident. Thus, unintentional shootings are referred to as "negligent discharges"—a euphemistic way of ensuring that people, and never guns, are blamed when something bad happens. Stories of negligent discharges appear with some regularity on the forum, and responses indicate that they serve as important opportunities for members to criticize careless behavior and to define themselves as exceedingly competent gun handlers who always maintain total control over their firearms by comparison. But when children find guns and shoot themselves or others patriarchal authority takes on a distinctively aggressive, even violent cast.

Threads on this theme, which have appeared on the forum an average of four times per year since 2016⁶, consistently contain a small handful of responses by people who advocate for safe storage and criminal prosecution of the adult who owned the gun, while others insist that the real issue is that children lack respect for parental authority. A typical example of the latter is a reply to a post from April 2019 which contained a link to a story about a four-year-old boy who had retrieved a handgun from the console of his mother's car and shot his six-year-old sister in the head, killing her. The sole reply read:

I do not understand this!!! I never childproofed my guns, I gun proofed my children! Both my daughter and my son were taken shooting at [four years old] and shown what a gun does to things like jugs filled with water, etc. They were given a strict warning to not so much as put one finger on my guns or they would get the worst spanking of their life! When my daughter was about five...in an obvious challenge to me, put her index finger and touched the grip of my 1911! At that point I pulled my belt off and wore her out! She never ever did that again. When my son was about seven years old he showed an inordinate interest in his mother's .38, so I took him out shooting. I brought fifty rounds for him to shoot. He shot ten rounds and tried to call it quits—I told him, "oh, no, you got 40 rounds to go!" I made him shoot all fifty rounds! After that he really had no interest in that pistol!

This poster believes that children can be “gun proofed” by a strict father willing to enact violent discipline, and he is proud of the fact that he “wore out” his daughter with a belt because she defied him; it is notable that it is he, not his wife, who made their son shoot well past the point of being bored, even though the child showed interest in her gun. Men use guns to assert that they are “family defenders” and so can claim the patriarchal right to rule their families (Stroud, 2016), and posts of this type suggest that this is true not only when they imagine defending their families from crime but also insofar as fathers can establish that they, like their guns, are powerful, dangerous, and must be respected.

Some forum members emphasize the importance of locking up guns or utilizing a trigger lock, but the most common posts are by people who say that they leave their guns loaded and accessible because they want their firearms readily available at all times. When rationalizing this latter strategy, most posters invoke nostalgic memories from their youth when guns hung on the racks of pick-up trucks or their homes had shotguns propped up in the corners of rooms. The lesson from these narratives is that there was a time when children had respect for authority and left guns alone, but now they have no respect in general, and particularly so when it comes to firearms.⁷ This is evident in a response to a post focused on a news story of two children, four and six, who died in separate shootings when they found guns in their homes: “I doubt kids are any more curious than we were but [we] were taught never to touch a gun without dad! This was reinforced with a belt!” In reply, another poster said, “So true ... we did a lot of crazy things as kids but there were certain lines you didn’t cross ... As a 47 year-old man, I can still hear leather clearing belt loops anytime I think of Dad’s belt ... to this day it still makes me cringe!” According to this logic, when children find and handle guns, this indicates a failure of patriarchal authority to adequately terrorize children into obedience and the incredibly dangerous practice of leaving them loaded and unsecured—guns that can be stolen (a central way that criminals gain access to firearms used in other crimes⁸), used impulsively (as happens in most suicides and domestic violence homicides⁹), or in this case, fired by children—is rendered unproblematic. Such a position is used not only to legitimize patriarchal domination but to celebrate it, and to blame not guns or unsafe storage practices but the loss of paternal authority when children die.

Discussion

Applying Weber’s justifications of domination to an analysis of how “pro-gun” advocates on an online forum¹⁰ discuss gun violence makes clear that the same discourses that rationalize “legitimate violence” by the state serve to prop up white men with guns. Indeed, this is how Insurrectionist rhetoric can rest alongside statist claims: the state is important insofar as it enables their status as wielders of legitimate violence *and* as morally superior “good guys”, both of which contribute to their belief that they are undeserving of any forms of restriction or regulation. If “freedom is a gun” (to paraphrase Kautzer), it is less because of what the gun can do in a material sense and more because of how it allows one to construct an identity as not being submissive to the state, which would otherwise maintain a monopoly on legitimate violence. When “armed heroes” fantasize about being able to *act* in a moment of terror rather than rely on the state to come to their rescue, they are placing themselves in the position of “sovereign subject”, as being uncontrolled by outside forces. When an armed white man tells a police officer during a traffic stop that “out of respect for [their safety]”, he will not proceed until the officer fully understands that he is legally armed and will thus wait for clear directions, he is leveling the power dynamic inherent in most police interactions: they are equals because he too has the state-

sanctioned right to carry lethal force. And when a father demands submission to *his* power in *his* home as a means of keeping *his* children “safe”, he is teaching everyone around him—including those who read about his actions on the forum—that patriarchal violence and dominance are important for order. If “freedom is a gun”, it is not because of what the gun can do, it is because of *what it feels like* to live in a nation where the state grants one access to the means of legitimate violence.

When Weber wrote about the relationship between legitimate violence and the state, he was focused on identifying the terms under which a population submits to authority; however, he also provided a theoretical frame for making sense of another form of domination: that which occurs when the means of violence proliferate and inflict on a population heightened levels of injury, death, and terror. We are living in what might be called “the era of the mass shooting”, when a majority of high school students worry that such an event might happen at their school (Graf, 2018) and children as young as five are taught to prepare for such violence by singing nursery rhymes with lyrics about locking down their classrooms (Christakis, 2019). Meanwhile, the white male gun suicide rate has increased significantly in recent years (Metzl, 2019), young black men die at extremely high interpersonal gun-violence rates relative to other groups (Armstrong and Carlson, 2019), and cases of black men’s and women’s being injured and killed by the police show no signs of slowing (Zimring, 2019). As a society, we are not simply being dominated by the state, we are also being dominated—though unevenly—by the proliferation of the means of legitimate violence.

Given the seeming intractability of the most visible and vocal segment of gun owners, it might seem that there are few gun owning allies in the search for meaningful reforms that could save lives; however, not only is it unclear to what extent these beliefs are shared by gun owners broadly, but this anti-reform position is not first and foremost about guns—it is instead an assertion of patriarchal white domination. After all, there is no reason that a gun owner’s identity should be threatened by gun control laws. Indeed, if firearms were harder to access, stringent training was required to carry them in public, safe storage laws existed throughout the country, and legal processes existed for removing guns from those who are threats to themselves or others, it would be possible both to craft policies that would reduce gun violence *and* to maintain the terms by which some gun owners—even those who see themselves as “good guys with guns”—understand their own identities. For such a shift to be possible, there must be as great an investment in democracy and justice as there is a commitment to firearms as symbols of freedom, and a much greater willingness to accept the fact that in addition to being protected by guns, we can also be, and too often are, tyrannized by them.

Data availability

The online forum analyzed in this paper is not identified to protect the users’ identities.

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Notes

1 Ironically, among the explanations articulated in the Federalist Papers in support of the Second Amendment is that such militias would be necessary for quelling insurrection (Horwitz and Anderson, 2009).

2 Having a firearm in the home significantly increases the odds that a person will die by suicide or homicide (Anglemyer, Horvath and Rutherford, 2014); there is a much greater risk that a person will experience an accident, suicide, assault, and/or

homicide than there is a likelihood of ever using a gun in self-defense (Hemenway, 2011); and, though the research is mixed, the most comprehensive analyses show a link between the rise in concealed carry and an increase in violent crime (e.g., Donohue, Aneja, and Weber 2018).

- 3 The police are rarely charged with crimes in such cases—even when suspects are shot in the back—and when they are charged, officers are almost never convicted since investigations typically determine that the police followed department procedure or juries find the officer's rationale for use of force credible (Kindy and Kelly, 2015).
- 4 One of the most important respondents in the larger project was a moderator on the forum who informed me that while forum rules prohibited me from soliciting for interviewees, they would be willing to sit for an interview.
- 5 On online forums any member can create a post on a specific topic identified with a subject line, and other members can then reply to each other within that thread.
- 6 The forum posts include cases of children who are severely injured or killed and so represent a tiny fraction of the 86 unintentional deaths by firearm that occur on average each year among children age one to seventeen (Fowler et al., 2017).
- 7 Of course children have died in accidental shootings for as long as guns have existed, but how these cases are understood in the culture—first as blameless accidents, now as failures of parental authority—has changed (see Carlson and Cobb, 2017).
- 8 See Donohue, Aneja, and Weber, 2018.
- 9 See Hemenway, 2011.
- 10 A case study approach that looks at only one data source and uses it to investigate three examples might mean that these claims do not apply to other online forums, particularly those where “pro-gun” people with progressive politics, including commitments to racial justice, might gather. Future research should consider such spaces and should analyze whether Weber’s “inner justifications” operate in similar ways on those sites.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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