



The Gun Without the Silver Bullet

*VIOLENCE, MASCULINITY AND INDIVIDUALITY IN AMERICA'S GUN
CULTURE 2.0*

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Abstract

The 21st century has seen an escalating public debate surrounding gun control in the United States. The regularity of mass shootings and the polarizing views on the topic have intensified the debate. As the conversation centers around gun violence and -legislation, the role of American gun culture is often forgotten, causing us to overlook the origin and development of the longstanding American tradition of gun ownership. This is extremely important, because whilst the debate is taking place, the composition of American gun culture seems to have changed. According to sociologist David Yamane, firearms are no longer predominantly used as leisure products, instead they are primarily bought for self-defense reasons. Little research has been done to find out what has caused such a change and whether this claim by Yamane is true. As most of the research on gun culture has been reserved for criminological studies, the debate lacks a multidisciplinary- and broader cultural approach. Therefore, this thesis takes part in the academic debate whether gun culture is changing because of alterations in three key American characteristics of gun culture. These characteristics include violence, masculinity, and the concept of individuality. By researching these characteristics and their relation to gun culture, this thesis will argue that there is indeed a transformation in American gun culture and that this is the result of a public sense of decline. It is this multidisciplinary theory of decline which explains how Americans have developed a gun culture of armed citizenry in the 21st century.

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Introduction

Gun Debate vs. Gun Culture

In October 1970, *The American Heritage* published an article by the famous American historian Richard Hofstadter. Published in the same month of his death, the destructive essay *America as a Gun Culture* read: “A nation that could not devise a system of gun control after its experiences of the 1960’s, and at a moment of profound popular revulsion against guns, is not likely to get such a system in the calculable future.” To this predictive statement he added: “One must wonder how grave a domestic gun catastrophe would have to be in order to persuade us. How far must things go?”¹ Whether Hofstadter ever alluded to the size of such a catastrophe is unclear, but his grim prospect was certainly not without truth. Especially in the 21st century, gun violence in the form of mass shootings have dominated the public debate concerning gun control. The gun culture debate in the United States seems to be solely focused around gun violence on the one hand and gun legislation on the other. While the discussion remains highly emotional and politicized, the absence of substantial change in federal gun legislation marks a stalemate in which American politics finds itself. Throughout this highly charged debate, the origins and evolution of America’s relationship with firearms - its gun culture - seems to be completely left out.

Although gun violence is but a part of the broader topic of gun ownership in the United States, or what we call “gun culture,” it has dominated the debate surrounding gun legislation. This is not surprising. Mass shootings such as the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, which left 59 dead and 489 injured, and the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting, leaving 49 dead and 53 injured, show the horrific consequences of firearms in the wrong hands. But while gun violence is the most visible consequence of gun ownership, it does not particularly explain why Americans have this longstanding tradition of gun ownership. It is estimated that 42% of all households in the United States possess a gun according to a survey from the Pew Research Center.² Since the majority will never be used to commit a crime, the criminological aspect of firearms is not enough to explain the ongoing culture of having firearms in the United States. Nevertheless, gun violence has become

¹ Richard Hofstadter, “America as a Gun Culture,” *American Heritage* 21, no. 6 (October 1970), <http://www.americanheritage.com/america-gun-culture>.

² Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, Baxter Oliphant, and Anna Brown, “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” *Pew Research Center* (June 2017): 4.

intricately linked with the debate on firearm legislation and gun culture. This connection sparks the debate surrounding the question whether violence as a consequence of gun ownership is worth the protection of gun rights?

Such similar connections in the American gun violence debate are made with regards to the other side of the coin: legislative justification of gun ownership. Although the Second Amendment is often used as a justification for the right to own and carry a gun, it does similarly not explain the existence of a gun culture. Despite the fact that the Second Amendment was initially created as a measure to defend against a tyrannical government, it had been collecting dust until the landmark cases of *District of Columbia v. Heller* in 2008 and *McDonald v. Chicago* in 2010. These cases gave power to the Second Amendment by extending it with the precedent protection of the individual right to bear arms. It was only after these landmark cases that individuals and lobby groups such as the NRA started to use the Second Amendment in the public debate to defend the individual right to bear arms. Sufficed it to say, American gun culture already existed long before these landmark cases changed the legal and public framework of gun ownership.

In addition, such legislation is not able to attest to the number of firearms present in the U.S. or the percentage of households owning a gun, meaning that it does not give an answer to the question why these numbers are so high in comparison to other industrialized nations. Although some European countries show high rates of household gun ownership such as Finland (38%), Switzerland (27%), Norway (26%) and Iceland (24%),³ their estimated rate of civilian firearms holding per 100 residents (32.4, 27.6, 28.8, and 31.7 respectively) show a stark contrast with that of the United States with its 120.5 firearms per 100 residents.⁴ Therefore, the lack of gun legislation - which is similarly lenient in Switzerland as it is in the United States - cannot explain the uniqueness of American gun culture. Thus, it is insufficient to only look at gun legislation or gun violence in order to understand this unique American phenomenon.

³ Nils Duquet and Maarten van Alstein, "Firearms and Violent Deaths in Europe," *Flemish Peace Institute* (June 2015): 7.

⁴ Aaron Karp, "Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers," *Small Arms Survey* (June 2018): 4-5.

Quantifying American Gun Culture

But what exactly is this phenomenon, this American gun culture, and how is it measured? One way to study such a culture is to focus on numbers related to firearms. These include data on gun ownership, firearm activities, violence, public perception on gun crime and legislation, demography, race, gender, age and consumerism. By building on these numbers it becomes possible to either highlight specific characteristics and sketch an overall picture of the presence and effects of firearms in American society.

According to the 2018 Small Arms Survey, it is estimated that there are 393,300,000 weapons legally held by civilians in the United States, roughly 120.5 firearms per 100 residents. In comparison, the second largest civilian-held gun owning country is India (71 million), followed by China (49 million). Such similar differences can be seen in the firearms rate per 100 residents. After the United States, Yemen holds the highest rate (52.8), followed by Montenegro (39.1).⁵ As of 2017, 42% of American households own a gun, and three-in-ten adults personally own a gun according to two of the most recent polls of the Morning Consult⁶ and Pew Research Center.⁷ Similarly, 48% of U.S. adults say they grew up in a gun-owning household, which is consistent with the number of gun-owning households today. Of those gun owners, 66% own multiple firearms, explaining the firearms holding to exceed the population number. Of those who do not own a gun in the present, half says they see themselves owning a gun in the future.⁸ Moreover, the 2018 annual statistics report from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) concluded that the United States manufactured more than 11 million firearms in 2016 and that more than 5.5 million new weapons were registered in 2017 alone.⁹

Perception on gun ownership itself is a complicated and far from a one-sided topic. For example, Politico and the Morning Consult found that after the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018, support for restrictive gun laws reached its peak with 68% in

⁵ Karp, "Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers," 4-5.

⁶ Morning Consult and Politico, "National Tracking Poll #180217," *Morning Consult and Politico* (February 2018): 5.

⁷ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 4.

⁸ *Ibidem* 5, 16.

⁹ United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *Firearms Commerce in the United States Annual Statistical Update 2018*, (Washington D.C.: Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 2018): 1, 15.

favor.¹⁰ CBS and CNN polls found similar results (65%¹¹ and 70%¹² in favor). But when it comes to how that restriction looks like, American society is extremely divided. While 88% of Americans support background checks, only 47% think gun buyers are required to “demonstrate a genuine need” for a gun.¹³ Most importantly, only 59% believe that if more people carried guns, the U.S. would be less safe, according to a Quinnipiac Poll (see chapter 1).¹⁴

Although the aspect of violence could not solely explain gun culture, it does seem alter one’s personal relationship with a firearm. Therefore, it is important to look at how guns are perceived and what the reason is for gun owners to own a firearm. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, half of all gun owners believe owning a gun is important to their overall identity. At the same time, 74% of gun owners say the right to own a gun is essential to their sense of freedom while opponents claim the right to live as their pivotal argument for gun legislation.¹⁵ As a consequence, gun control for the one would constitute a clear infringement in their personal life and identity, but for the other the violence that stems from gun ownership affects their sense of safety.

Simultaneously, the way people perceive firearms says nothing about their reasons for or activities with guns - that a gun might be essential to someone does not tell us what that person does with it. As the same Pew Research survey reported, an estimated 34% of gun owners participate in hunting related shooting, 53% say they go sport shooting, only 13% collect firearms and 8% own one or more guns for their job.¹⁶ Although these percentages are not so surprising, they become important when we look at the primary reason for someone to own a gun. While many still *primarily* use weapons for hunting (36%), sports (30%) and collecting (18%), all of this is in stark contrast what scholars such as David Yamane call the *transition of gun culture*. That is that 71% of those who live in urban and suburban areas have a firearm primarily for protection purposes (this is 62% for

¹⁰ Steven Shephard, “Gun Control Support Surges in Polls,” *Politico*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/28/gun-control-polling-parkland-430099>.

¹¹ CBS News, “Poll: Support for Stricter Gun Laws Rises: Divisions on Arming Teachers,” *CBS News*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-support-for-stricter-gun-laws-rises-divisions-on-arming-teachers>.

¹² Jennifer Agiesta, “CNN Poll: Seven in 10 Favor Tighter Gun Laws in Wake of Parkland Shooting,” *CNN*, February 25, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/25/politics/cnn-poll-gun-control-support-climbs/index.html>.

¹³ Morning Consult and Politico, “National Tracking Poll #180217,” *Morning Consult and Politico* (February 2018): 7.

¹⁴ Quinnipiac University, “U.S. Support For Gun Control Tops 2-1, Highest Ever, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds: Let Dreamers Stay, 80 % of Voters Say,” *Quinnipiac University*, February 20, 2018, 1.

¹⁵ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 7.

¹⁶ *Ibidem* 8-10.

rural areas).¹⁷ A similar result was found by Joseph Wertz' research on long- and new standing gun owners, concluding that almost 70% of both groups answered that self-defense was their primary reason for owning a firearm.¹⁸ In the 21st century, protection seems to have become the primary reason above all else to own a gun in the United States.

The Problem

But what do all these numbers mean? While they give a good overall picture of American gun culture, they only show what the situation is today, not how it has evolved over time. This is where sociologist David Yamane comes in. According to Yamane in his article *Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture*, a big transition has occurred in the past 60 years in the way people use and own firearms. Yamane argues that in colonial and frontier times, guns were a necessity for survival. As the frontier closed, and more and more of American nature became “safe for democracy,” guns became a leisure product meant for hunting, sport and collecting.

This use of guns changed significantly in the second half of the 20th century. It is here Yamane argues that we see the change from leisure related gun use to self-defense appropriation, or what gun enthusiast Michael Bane calls a “gun culture 2.0” in his podcast “Down Range Radio.”¹⁹ While 28% of gun owners claimed self-defense as their primary reason in 1999, twenty years later that same percentage has almost tripled! As a result, it has changed the foundation of the American gun culture in one of *armed citizenry* that is not so much focused on the “protection for people” but more on the “protection against people,” so Yamane argues.²⁰

Therefore, he opens up a new academic debate in which this thesis participates - one that is focused on the exceptional position of American gun culture not as a static phenomenon but a changing one, potentially into a culture of armed citizenry or *gun culture 2.0*. Yamane believes that the academic debate misses a sociology of gun culture. As the public debate focusses on gun violence, the study of gun ownership has largely been a topic reserved for criminological studies and

¹⁷ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 21.

¹⁸ Joseph Wertz, “Differences Between New and Long-Standing US Gun Owners: Results from a National Survey,” *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 7 (July 2018): 874.

¹⁹ Michael Bane, “Down Range Radio #194,” *Down Range Radio*, podcast audio, January 4, 2011, <http://www.downrange.tv/blog/down-range-radio-194/7952>.

²⁰ David Yamane, “The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (June 2017): 5.

therefore misses a “broader cultural context.”²¹ Although such a sociology would broaden the debate, Yamane simultaneously runs the risk of ignoring other disciplines.

Gun culture is a complex topic that includes socio- and psychological, philosophical, cultural historical and criminological aspects, to name just a few. As with the public debate, the immense quantity of scholarly perspectives shows the complexity of American gun culture and can therefore not be explained inside the framework of a singular discipline. By excluding other disciplinary theories on gun culture, we deny its intricate nature. Instead the study of American gun culture must include concepts of masculinity, historical and popular depictions and usages of violence, social contract theory and the influence of gun lobbies and manufacturers to explain not only how people own guns, but also why they have them. Such a interdisciplinary approach is what is missing in the American gun culture debate.

Also, if there is truly a shift towards a gun culture 2.0, then Yamane fails to argue why this shift has precisely occurred. Although he points to the increasing liberalization of gun laws over the past four decades, Yamane is right to argue that these only facilitate and so much create a changing gun culture.²² In order to understand why gun culture has changed in the United States, this thesis will compare statistical data with theories on violence, masculinity and individuality. Therefore, the main question in this thesis will be: is there a change in gun culture towards a culture of armed citizenry and to what degree can ideas on the role of violence, individuality, and masculinity in American culture, as developed respectively by Richard Slotkin, Jennifer Carlson and Angela Stroud, and Elizabeth C. Hirschman be used to explain such a development.

One of the reasons that the change to an American gun culture 2.0 and “protection against people” phenomena could have occurred has to do with the increasing number of public shootings and the increasing visibility of violence. As a result, violence and its relation to firearms will be central to chapter one. This criminological aspect has, as Yamane argues, dominated the academic debate on gun culture and has overshadowed a social theory on such a culture.²³ By looking at data on gun violence in the past three decades and comparing it with cultural historical, psychosocial and

²¹ Yamane, “The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture,” 6.

²² Ibidem 5.

* According to a 2005 FBI classification report, the term “mass shooting” refers to an incident in which a single individual kills four or more people in one incident (excluding him- or herself), most commonly in a single location.

²³ Ibidem 7-8.

criminological theories on violence, the relation between violence and firearms becomes visible. Such a theory has been created by historian Richard Slotkin in his trilogy on the positioning of firearms in the past centuries. By analyzing the historical use of guns and comparing it to present day data, it becomes possible to either distinguish or falsify that the past three decades constitute a different gun culture through violence.

Such a similar influence will be investigated in chapter two through the concept of masculinity as explained by sociologists Jennifer Carlson and Angela Stroud. Masculinity has become an increasingly discussed topic when it comes to gun culture. This is especially the case after a mass shooting occurs. As of March 2019, Mother Jones counted 111 cases of mass shootings* since 1982. Of those, 107 were initiated by males, only three by females and one by a male and a female at the same time. Of the 111 cases of mass shootings, 61 were perpetrated by white males.²⁴ This number has caused scholars to question the connection between white masculinity and firearms and how it is that we see an increased number of concealed carry-requests (CPLs) in the United States. During their field research, sociologists Jennifer Carlson and Angela Stroud found that this connection becomes visible through a perceived socioeconomic decline of white males in society. Through the carry of firearms, they found that white males reassert some of their declined status.²⁵ But what exactly is the reason these men experience an age of decline and what other connections can be established when we talk about the link between gun culture, masculinity and race?²⁶

The last characteristic of gun culture discussed in chapter three is individuality (or the concept of freedom). This characteristic touches upon the importance of gun rights, identity and consumer behavior. More importantly, through the work of Elizabeth C. Hirschman, gun culture is researched through the narrative of Lockean social contract theory. Hirschman argues that guns are purchased for self-protection and property rights when the social contract collapses through “chaos” or “tyranny”. Since American society is grounded in social contract theory, any infringement on one’s right to own a firearm, or to protect and preserve should therefore, according

²⁴ Mark Follman, Gavin Aronsen, and Deanna Pan, “US Mass Shootings, 1982-2019: Data from Mother Jones’ Investigation,” *Mother Jones*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data>.

²⁵ Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

²⁶ Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

to pro-gun advocates, rightly be opposed.²⁷ As a result, gun lobbies and manufacturers play into this narrative through advertisement, causing an increase in firearm purchases and political influence. But is such a prospect of deviance truly an American characteristic and in what way has it changed the way Americans look towards firearms? And if a new gun culture has emerged, does this mean that “chaos” or “tyranny” is present in the 21st century?

The abovementioned characteristics of violence, masculinity and individuality are chosen because of their overarching properties and their connectiveness with the different theories presented in this thesis needed to create a multidisciplinary theory. For instance, the idea of violence in gun culture can simultaneously have racial (to whom is violence directed), masculine (who directs violence) and cultural properties (what depicts violence). Similarly, ideas on race, gender and socio-economic decline all play an important part in the characteristic of masculinity, but alone they do little to explain the existence of a gun culture. Finally, the idea of individuality, including its social contract theory, does not only have political (with whom is the contract signed) and institutional implications (who challenges the social contract), but also a consumer connection (who and why do people buy firearms). These three characteristics are therefore all-encompassing ideas on the development of an American gun culture and are similarly flexible to include ideas that have previously been left out in the debate.

During this thesis a strong connection between the theories, data and characteristics is expected. For example, Slotkin’s frontier myth theory and popular depictions of the Wild West (or gangster culture) already have overarching commonalities such as violence, individuality and masculinity. We could also add John Locke’s theory of a social contract to this dimension. Similarly, institutions such as the NRA play into the narrative of masculinity, whilst firearm deregulation of the 1970s have severely increased the individual possibility to purchase a weapon, evident in the increasing number of gun sales in the past decades. Although these characteristics of gun culture have been mentioned by theoreticians before, this research will expand on such commonalities and try to bring them together into a interdisciplinary theory on a potentially new American gun culture.

²⁷ Elizabeth C. Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” *Social Semiotics* 24, no. 5 (July 2014): 551.

Methodology

In order to understand why American gun culture is so unique and how it was created, it is important to understand what gun culture precisely entails. There seems to be no clear definition of what gun culture encompasses. In most English dictionaries it is defined as “the collection of attitudes, feelings, values, and behavior of a society or social group in which guns are used.”²⁸ By this definition, gun culture is constructed by a psychosocial (both personal and collective) relationship towards firearms. This definition offers a social and qualitative relation between groups and individuals and their firearms - the way people use them, think and feel about them.

However, this definition does not explain the role of historical or institutional factors in gun culture. For example, it does not explain how the frontier, Lockean tradition or racial perceptions through time have shaped the number of firearms present or the way they are being used. It similarly falls short to incorporate the presence of political and institutional actors such as the NRA and pro-gun politicians and their influence on the narrative and the absence of substantial federal legislation. Both these factors shape the qualitative relationship between society, social groups, individuals and their firearms.

However, research organizations such as the Small Arms Survey, that focus more on national levels of gun ownership, tend to look at “national” gun cultures. From this perspective gun culture is described as “each country’s distinctive combination of historic and current sources of supply, laws, and attitudes towards firearms ownership and use.”²⁹ Although this definition includes historical, institutional, and even lawful aspects of gun ownership, it runs the risk of generalizing gun owners in a specific country. By this definition, gun culture in the rural South for example, would comprise of the same distinctive combination of sources of supply, laws and attitudes towards firearms as in the liberal and urban East coast. It thus ignores the unique and qualitative social relations between groups, society and individuals and their firearms.

For this thesis, gun culture should therefore be described as a combination of the personal and societal relationship towards firearms and the historic and institutional influence on firearm

²⁸ *HarperCollins Online*, s.v. “Gun Culture,” accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gun-culture>.

²⁹ Karp, “Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers,” 4.

application and ownership. In this way, gun culture is not distinctly American, but American gun culture can be exceptionally different.

As a result of the differences in theories and their implications on time, there is no specific time period in which this debate plays out. However, since Yamane argues the culture has changed over the past four decades, it is here that this thesis is situated. By thematically approaching the topic (that is by characteristic) it is possible to create a better picture of the perceived gun culture change. During this thesis there will be no opinions on the practical consequences of gun laws and gun culture, nor any partiality in the contemporary debate on gun legislation. Also, because of the complexity of the topic and the immense amount of differences in firearms, there will be almost no distinction between guns and other forms of firearms such as hunting rifles or semi-automatic weapons (such as the AR-15). Therefore, the term guns and firearms will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

Although the term “gun culture 2.0”, dubbed by Michael Bane, is the concept on display, many other scholars have created similar terms that cover the same phenomena such as Yamane’s “culture of armed citizenship”³⁰ or Carlson’s “citizen-protectors”³¹. As gun culture 2.0 suggests an update (which simultaneously implies an improvement) the preferred terminology used in this paper will be that of Yamane. However, no distinction will be made between the different terminologies as they point towards the same change in gun culture.

While violence, masculinity and individuality are considered the most all-encompassing and including characteristics of gun culture in this thesis, one could argue that it misses the key element of race. The topic of race in gun culture is extremely important but believed to be imbedded into the three characteristics put forward in this thesis. As an example, violence between, against or from a different racial group is part of the relation between violence and gun ownership. This will be further explained in chapter one by looking at Slotkin’s work on violence and the frontier myth. Similarly, masculinity, and specifically white masculinity already display elements of race in the broader debate. Lastly, individuality *or* freedom touches upon consumer capitalism and more importantly polarization and politization of gun ownership, which has specific effects on different

³⁰ Yamane, “The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (June 2017): 2.

³¹ Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-protectors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 66.

racial groups. Therefore, race as a key characteristic of gun culture will not be discussed individually.

The relevance of this research lies in explaining gun culture through a mix of characteristics by using theories and data that are connected to them. Through this interdisciplinary approach, it is possible to not only understand the complexity of gun culture, but also its fluidity and development. In the past, research on firearms have mostly been carried out within the framework of specific disciplines. The lack of an overarching theory has withheld us from truly understanding the position of firearms in American society. So, if a new gun culture is emerging, then such a synthesizing theory is highly needed to explain it. It can then serve as a basis for further gun culture research and will hopefully even shine some light on the extremely polarized gun debate of today.

Chapter 1 – Violence

“Perhaps the mother thought the gun was curative in some way. We have the gun as a symbol of productive violence in our history. It has magical properties for a lot of people.”³²

- Richard Slotkin, *Richard Slotkin on Guns and Violence*, 2013

The mother whom the historian Richard Slotkin is referring to is that of Adam Lanza, the 20-year old boy who killed 28 people, among them 20 children between the ages of six and seven, during the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. In his interview with Bill Moyers, Slotkin argued that Lanza “was obsessed with performing some validating act of violence,” one that was modelled after violent figures he seemed to portray as heroic.³³ The case of Lanza is one of many and shows that there is much more to gun violence than meets the eye: a physical act. Instead, violence can be symbolic, validating, protective, and even productive.

This chapter sets out to answer the question what role violence plays in gun culture and in what way it could have potentially influenced a change to a culture of armed citizenry as described by David Yamane. In other words, does violence as a characteristic alter the way people own, use or behave with firearms? Simultaneously, this question can also be reversed: how has *violence* changed overtime? Has there been an increase in gun violence and/or has it become more visible? By using data trends on gun-related *acts of violence* over the last three decades, it becomes possible to find if there is an increase in such violence and a cultural turn towards self-defense needs. Only then can theories on the role of violence as described by Richard Slotkin be projected on the current gun culture to see if they are still applicable.

In order to understand if gun violence has changed over the decades, it is important to first determine what it actually means. Different versions of the terminology have entered the academic and public debate, but gun violence is usually considered, according to anthropologist Joe

³² Richard Slotkin, “Richard Slotkin on Guns and Violence,” interview by Bill Moyers, *Bill Moyers*, December 13, 2013, <https://billmoyers.com/segment/richard-slotkin-on-guns-and-violence>.

³³ Slotkin, interview.

Anderson, as a way to express all the problems that arise from the presence of firearms in American society. Anderson rightly argues that by putting violence in relation to an object, the false idea is created that the eradication of firearms in American society would solve the deeper but hidden problems.³⁴ Simple arguments become a safe out for deeper social and culturally hidden problems. In all, the debate around gun violence ignores the impact of social, historical and cultural meaning that results in acts of violence. In other words, it denies the importance of context. Gun violence is thus the physical harm that results from the usage of firearms, personal or public, stemming from social, historical and cultural factors.

This definition serves in a twofold way. Firstly, it allows us to take a closer look at the *acts of violence*: what are the numbers that make up gun violence? It effectively gives an answer how violence has changed over time. Is there anything about the number of firearm related crimes that could give an explanation to why more Americans admit to owning a gun for self-defense reasons today than in the 1990s? If so, this would suggest that Americans feel safer with a firearm than 30 years ago, which in fact, according to a recent Vox-poll, they do.³⁵ However, in that same Vox article, the reader is confronted with the harsh reality that, according to a 2013 report by the United Nations and the Small Arms Survey, the ‘homicide by firearm rate per 1 million people’ in 2012 was 4 times higher than the second industrialized country of Switzerland.³⁶

Therefore, if a majority of Americans feel safer with a firearm whilst simultaneously experiencing one of the highest gun homicide rates in the industrialized world, it begs the question what violence actually means in the United States? This brings us to our second part of the definition of gun violence. What are the underlining social, cultural and historical factors that create gun violence and what are its inclinations on the *perception of violence* in the United States and vice versa? In other words, what does the context in which violence plays out do to people? This context can tell us a great deal about how a unique version of gun culture has taken root, sustained itself, and changed over time.

³⁴ Joe Anderson, “We Need to Talk About ‘Gun Violence: Reflections on Terminology and Contexts of Violence,’” *Somatosphere* (June 26, 2018), <http://somatosphere.net/2018/06/we-need-to-talk-about-gun-violence-reflections-on-terminology-and-contexts-of-violence>.

³⁵ German Lopez, “Poll: Most Americans Say Gun Ownership Increases Safety. Research: Nope,” *Vox*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/23/17155596/gun-ownership-polls-safety-violence>.

³⁶ Jean-Luc Lemahieu, Angela Me, *Global Study on Homicide 2013* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013).

As the German American philosopher Hannah Arendt mentioned in her work *On Violence*, “violence is by nature instrumental; like all means it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything.”³⁷ So while violence is not the essence, it is the result that springs from factors abovementioned, just like Anderson concludes. These can be social grievances, cultural depictions that glorify the use of gun violence, or historical usages of violence that justify the means it pursues. Violence originates from these factors and simultaneously alters them - in a way it is the classic chicken and the egg paradox. In the case of Adam Lanza for example, as argued by Slotkin, the boy’s excessive violence, perpetrated with the “magical properties” of a gun, was directed *at* and *with* the same factors it originated from - a clear expression of social grievances in combination with a glorification of violence. Thus “we create the lone killer,” Slotkin concludes.³⁸ Understanding these conditions is instrumental for answering the first question set out in this essay, about the role which violence plays in America’s changing gun culture. But first let us return to violence in numbers.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 51.

³⁸ Slotkin, interview.

1.1 – Violence in Numbers: The Most Effective Command

As argued, gun violence is a broad term and often only refers to the physical aspect done by a type of firearm on a personal or public basis. These include homicide, suicide, gun assault and robbery, and since the 1990s also mass shootings. In its most simple form, gun violence constitutes the practical consequences of gun ownership and culture, or as Arendt puts it “the most effective command that grows out of a gun.”³⁹

Violence in the United States, as in most countries, is a fundamental part of its creation, progression and present. As with the centuries before, the second half of the 20th century has seen periods of extreme violence - particularly the use of violence by sociopolitical groups. Hofstadter referred to these movements when he wrote about the “experiences of the 1960s.”⁴⁰ According to Hofstadter, these acts of extreme violence coming from movements such as the KKK created a popular revulsion against guns, but still did not achieve significant change in gun legislation. Now, a half century later, a similar situation is present.

These moments in history, exemplified by Hofstadter are generally seen as periods of extreme violence. This begs the question whether the numbers of violent acts suggest that the United States is experiencing such a period in the past 30 years? If so, do the surveys on gun violence show that Americans generally perceive such a period to be present? This in turn could partially explain a change towards a culture of armed citizenship which would coincide with Yamane’s period in which he sees a change in firearm appropriation. With the help of surveys, it is possible compare real data on violence against public emotions to find out whether people believe if violence is on the rise.

During this chapter, suicide by firearms will not be discussed as part of gun violence in the United States. Notwithstanding the high amount of firearm related suicides each year (e.g. 2016 saw 22,938 gun related suicides), and the impact this has on relatives and the wider community, it is believed that suicide is a public health issue which does not constitute gun violence from one person to the other (in contrary to mass shootings, which are often also perceived as a public health issue). Therefore, it falls outside the scope of this thesis to investigate the impact of such violence

³⁹ Arendt, *On Violence*, 53.

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, “America as a Gun Culture.”

on public opinion of gun violence and ownership – and with that the broader impact of violence on gun culture.

Homicide

In 2018, Amnesty International published a report called *In the Line of Fire: Human Rights and the US Gun Violence Crisis*. The report meant to call attention to the high number of firearm casualties in the United States, especially in 2016 when an average of 106 individuals died per day from firearm related deaths - on December 31, this total was a staggering 38.658 deaths. Out of these deaths, 22.938 committed suicide and 14.415 were homicides. In the process, Amnesty reported that 1.637 children lost their lives and that firearm related homicides disproportionately affected communities of color. Lastly, according to the human rights report, the rate of gun homicides had increased significantly in the most recent years. The United States, so the organization concluded, was dealing with a human rights crisis.⁴¹

The report was right, between 2013-2016 the homicide rate in the United States was on the rise. According to the 2017 data from the FBI (see fig. 1), more than 72% (10.982) of all homicides in the United States were committed with the use of a firearm.⁴² Nevertheless, the FBI stated that after 2016, a downward trend had set in when it came to violent crimes in general. Violence, so it seemed, was decreasing.

The FBI has been documenting crime in the U.S. since 1995 in the *Uniform Crime Report* (UCR). By using all of the UCR reports, it's possible to construct statistics on the number of violent acts and the percentage of firearms used in these acts. As seen in figure 1, the number of homicide victims drastically decreased between 1993-1999 and remained steady between the period of 1999-2014. Overall, there seemed to have been a decrease in homicide related violence between 1993-2014. Therefore, the absolute number of homicides alone do little to suggest that the U.S. was experiencing a period of extreme violence in the past 30 years.

⁴¹ Amnesty International, *In the Line of Fire: Human Rights and the US Gun Violence Crisis* (New York: Amnesty International, 2018), 8-17.

⁴² U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Report: Crime in the United States, 2017* (Fall 2018), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/topic-pages/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-8.xls>.

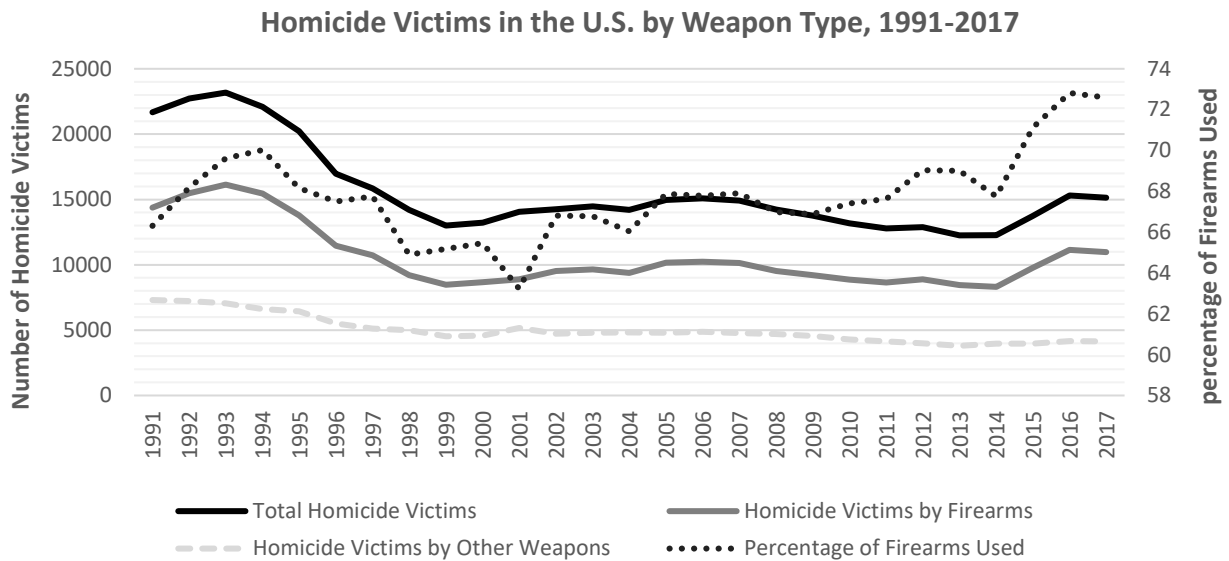


Fig. 1 – Homicide victims in the U.S. by weapons between 1991-2017. Source: FBI – UCR, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1992-2017.

The figure also shows that the number of homicide victims by firearms seems in line with all homicides combined. However, when we look more closely at the percentage of firearms used in homicides, there is almost a 10% increase since 2001. Non-firearm related homicides have been decreasing since 1991, while the weapon of choice, being a firearm, has not been lower than 63% in this entire period. So even if 2016 does not represent the biggest peak in gun related homicides, it does show the highest percentage of gun homicides over the past 30 years.

While a 10% increase might not seem as significant, it does counteract with the decreasing number of homicide victims over the past 30 years. Moreover, the FBI’s UCR report from 1995 argues that between 1985-1994, the total amount of murders, robberies and aggravated assaults by the use of firearms increased with a staggering 59.5% (46.3% for homicides). Similarly, information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of Justice’s National Crime Victimization Survey show that the gun homicide rate was rising in the 1960s, surging in the 1970s, and peaking in 1980 and the early 1990s. This ‘90s peak is visible in the graph, but even this peak is surpassed by the share of gun homicides in 2016.

But why are such trends important when looking at a potential new gun culture? The acts of violence would be meaningless in themselves. However, with the surveys on gun violence and control we can what less or more violence does with gun ownership. For example, the Vox-article mentioned before included the results of an NBC News poll of March 2018. The poll found that

58% of Americans in 2018 agreed with the statement that gun ownership increases safety, while in 1999, 52% disagreed and said that gun ownership reduced safety.⁴³ So even though homicide rate in 1999 was at one of its lowest points in the past 30 years, the number of people agreeing that guns created safety was also much lower than it is today. Could this suggest that when acts of violence increase, people generally feel safer with a gun than when violence is decreasing?

A Gallup poll found something similar but with a different kind of answer (see fig. 2). Gallup asked respondents between 1993-2014 if they thought that having a gun in the house made it a safer or a more dangerous place to be. Just as with the NBC poll, Gallup found that around 52% of the respondents, this time in

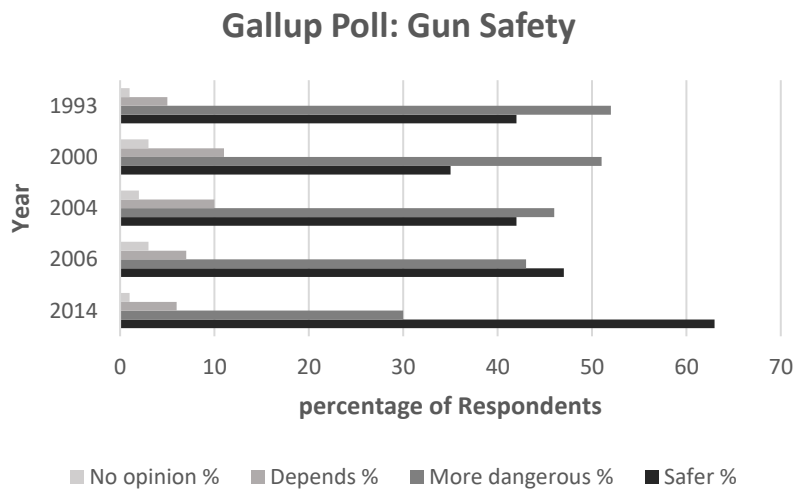


Fig. 2 – Results of a Gallup poll between 1993-2014 asking the question if the presence of guns made the household a safer or more dangerous place. Source: Gallup – *Guns*.

1993, believed that a gun made the household a more dangerous place. This while the homicide rate was at its highest point in 30 years. This idea that firearms diminishes safety in the household has decreased significantly over the years. In 2014, the year with the lowest number of homicides, only 30% believed that firearms made the home a more dangerous place and 63% even believed that it made the house a safer place.⁴⁴

It can therefore be established that real change in the gun homicides does not always translate into a changing attitude towards them. Instead, as the Gallup poll shows, the idea that guns make the household a safer place, has been on the rise since the past 20 years (see fig. 3) whether gun homicide numbers are increasing or not. Homicides alone are not a good indication of how violence changes the way Americans behave and think about gun ownership.

⁴³ Mark Murray, “Poll: 58 % Say Gun Ownership Increases Safety,” *NBC News*, 23 March, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/ncna859231?_twitter_impression=true.

⁴⁴ “Guns,” Gallup, accessed 25 July, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>.

Homicide Victims and Firearm Safety Perception

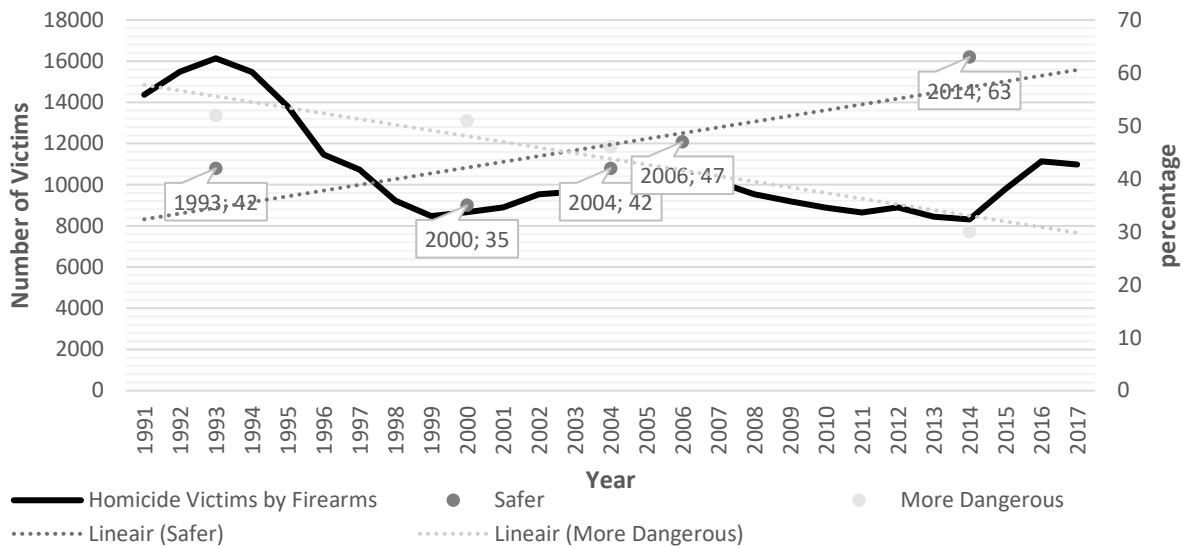


Fig. 3 – Results of a Gallup poll between 1993-2014 perceptions of firearms in the household and the number of homicide victims by firearms. Source: Gallup – *Guns*, and FBI – UCR, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1992-2017.

This could have two reasons. Firstly, it could be that something entirely different is changing the perception on gun ownership. For example, the increasing polarization of the gun debate, the influence of gun lobbies and manufacturers, terrorism and mass shootings, and fear of federal gun legislation could all be reasons why people increasingly feel safer with a firearm than they did in the past. In this case, it comes down to cultural and political identity (see chapter 3), not the number of violent acts. However, that this alone explains why a majority of Americans feel safer with a gun is highly unlikely, because one could ask the question “safer from what?”, and the answer would be violence. Therefore, gun violence does play a major role in how people feel about firearms - gun homicide in itself, less so.

Secondly, homicide is not as visible as other forms of violence for society as a whole. This means that only a small fraction of the American population experiences the consequences of gun homicides, especially those in communities of color. The FBI identified 7.851 Black or African American (54.2 %) victims in contrary to 6.579 victims that were described as White (43.1 %).⁴⁵ Not only is there a significant percentual gap, this is exacerbated by the fact that African Americans only allow for 12.7% of the total American population. Therefore, in 2017 you were 7 times more

⁴⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Report: Crime in the United States, 2017*, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/topic-pages/expanded-homicide>.

likely to be killed as an African American, than as a white person. Gun homicides, particularly in urban places, have come to be seen as a normative factor of urban life, as a part of the (poor) areas of the cities. It is therefore continuous, criminally motivated, and in all carries less the element of surprise than let us say mass shootings.

Consequently, less attention is paid to it, making it less important in people's choices to carry or own a firearm. The small fraction of people who experience gun homicide have more chance to experience it more than once, whilst others (especially white middle-class Americans) will never experience such violence in their lifetime. Thus, for a large portion of the population, the consequences of gun homicide have simply never occurred or mattered in their lifetime, making this kind of violence less significant or at least less visible to the overall perception of gun ownership and safety. Therefore, more research should be done on different communities and their relationship with firearms in order to understand how acts of violence shape their perception on gun culture.

Gun Assault and Robbery

Gun homicides only represent a fraction of the acts of violence that are perpetrated with the use of firearms. Most of the gun violence is committed in the form of gun assault and robbery. In fact, according to the Pew Research survey, 23% of Americans admit that someone has used a gun to threaten them or their family at least once in their lifetime.⁴⁶ As with homicides, information from the UCR reports have been used to construct graphs on the number of aggravated assault and robbery victims, and the percentage of firearms used in these offenses. And just as with homicides, it becomes possible to establish a trendline and see if this is coherent with that of other firearm related offenses.⁴⁷

Following the trend in homicides, the number of aggravated assaults has been in decline between 1995-2013 but has slightly increased ever since (see fig. 4). As an example, 2017 counted 86.676 more victims of serious violence than 2013. The share of firearm related assaults, however, has become much larger, much earlier. Since 1999 the percentage has increased with 130% and constitutes an average 21% of all aggravated assaults. Not only that, similar to the increase between 1985-1994 in firearm related homicides, aggravated assault by use of a firearm rose with 75.6%

⁴⁶ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 43.

⁴⁷ Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Assault*, <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=316>.

according to the 1995 UCR report. So, in both cases of violence, firearms are increasingly being used as the weapon of choice.

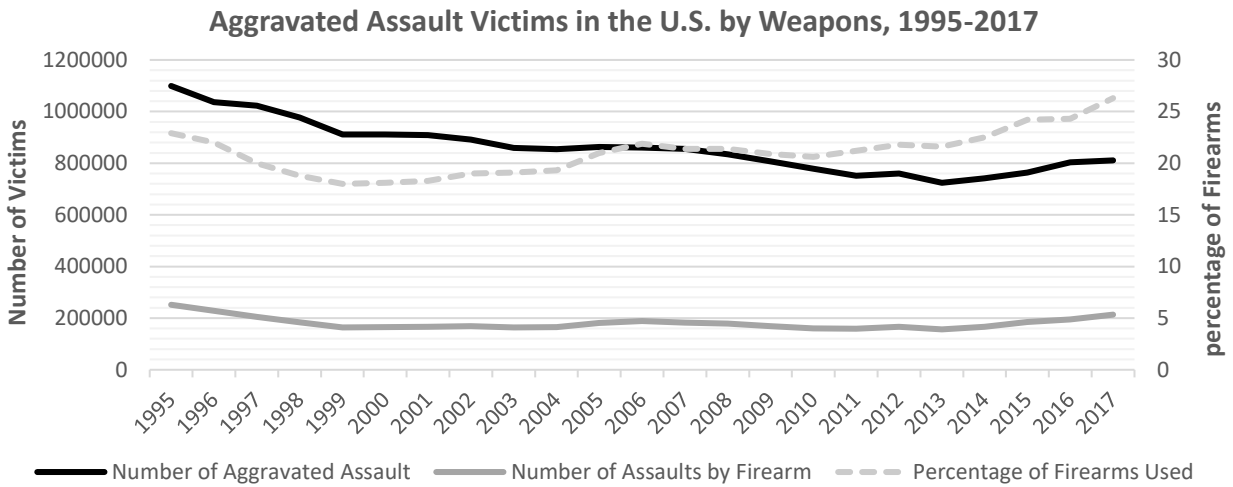


Fig. 4 – Aggravated assault in the U.S. by weapons, between 1991-2017. Source: FBI – UCR, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1995-2017.

This is not the case when looking at the number of firearms used in robberies over the past 25-years (see fig. 5). Robberies, in contrary to homicides and assaults, seem to be in decline since 1995 and there is no clear consistent percentage of firearms being used over the years in these crimes. Instead this percentage today is somewhere between the low point of 1998 and the high point of 2008, and on average consists of 41% of the way robberies have been committed. Once again, the report of 1995 showed a percentage change between 1985-1994 of plus 46,3%.⁴⁸

In short, gun homicide, assault and robbery, have been decreasing since the peak of 1993 and have been going up since 2013. Why violence has decreased so dramatically in the early 1980s, and after 1993, is still a topic of discussion among researchers. Some argue that the decline in the 1980s was due to the baby-boomers reaching adolescence, others blame the rise in the early 1990s on the rising market for crack cocaine and the later decline of violence on stricter laws and better economic opportunities.⁴⁹ But what these researchers have not been looking at is that (with the exception of gun related robbery) the share of gun related crime has dramatically increased. While the absolute number of gun crime has not been as high as 1993, the percentage of firearms used in overall crime has surpassed this crime-stricken year. At the same time when more Americans

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ D’Vera Cohn, et al., “Gun Homicide Rate Down 49% Since 1993 Peak; Public Unaware: Pace of Decline Slows in Past Decade,” *Pew Research Center*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/07/gun-homicide-rate-down-49-since-1993-peak-public-unaware/>.

choose a gun when committing a crime, they also feel safer with a gun in their home. Now why is that?

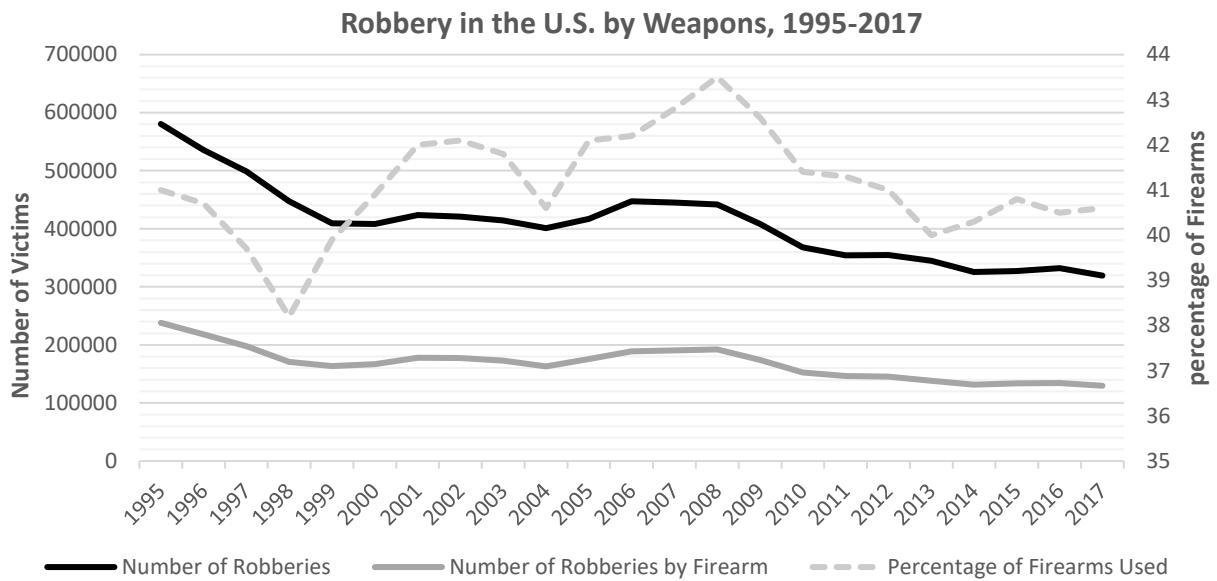


Fig. 5 – Robbery in the U.S. by weapons, between 1991-2017. Source: FBI – UCR, *Crime in the U.S.*, 1995-2017.

Mass Shootings

One thing that has been overlooked is the question whether gun violence is actually perceived as a problem in American society by the broader public. So far this thesis has established that there is no evidence to suggest that we are in a period of extreme violence, but that nevertheless the share of gun related violence is increasing. The question remains, how do Americans experience this increasing share?

Therefore, the Pew Research center also investigated whether Americans felt gun violence to be an issue. They found that in overall, half of Americans find gun violence a “very big problem.”⁵⁰ In their 2013 survey, researchers concluded that 56% of participants thought gun crime had gone up compared with 20 years ago, while in fact it had been decreasing rapidly since the 1990s.⁵¹ Morning Consult and Politico’s survey from 2018, which included a section on the future prospects

⁵⁰ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 13.

⁵¹ Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Gun Homicides Steady after Decline in ‘90s; Suicide Rate Edges Up,” *Pew Research Center*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/21/gun-homicides-steady-after-decline-in-90s-suicide-rate-edges-up/>.

of gun violence, also found that 44% of people thought gun violence would increase over the coming years.⁵²

So how is it that Americans experience more violence and predict more of it in the future, while the numbers suggest the opposite? One of the reasons this might be the case is because of the increased number of mass shootings over the past three decades. The perception of such mass shootings brings us back to the definition of gun violence, that gun violence is not necessarily personal, but also public or community based. While mass shootings only constitute a tiny fraction of gun related deaths, mass shootings symbolize the most extreme visual example of public violence.

While homicides, assault and robbery are experienced by a smaller circle of people when it occurs, mass shootings are experienced nationwide. The United Nation's report, mentioned before, even included a section on it by saying that "as technology now enables instant access to global news, awareness of mass murder events has increased."⁵³ Events like the Newtown Sandy Hook shooting are examples in which violence is not only experienced just by victims, but also by the country as a whole. By means of technology this awareness is created by visual experience, as one can literally see the shooting unfold from a safe distance via social media or tv news channels.

In addition, the aftermath of mass shootings is subjected to a much more polarized debate, keeping the consequences of gun violence much more lived. This could lead to the idea that violence is all around us and constantly present. This is also evident through media. The Associated Press's year-end poll of 2012 concluded that mass shootings were the leading news stories - it even overshadowed the 2012 presidential elections.⁵⁴

To make matters worse, according to a Mother Jones investigation, the era of mass shootings has since 2011 entered a phase of acceleration in which mass shootings occur more frequently than before. According to the news agency, between 1984-2011 the average number of days between a shooting was 200, after 2011 this average decreased dramatically to 64 days. However, not

⁵² Morning Consult and Politico, "National Tracking Poll #180217," 11.

⁵³ Lemahieu, Me, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 58.

⁵⁴ James Alan Fox and Monica J. DeLateur, "Mass Shootings in America: Moving Beyond Newtown," *Homicide Studies* 18, no. 1 (2014): 125.

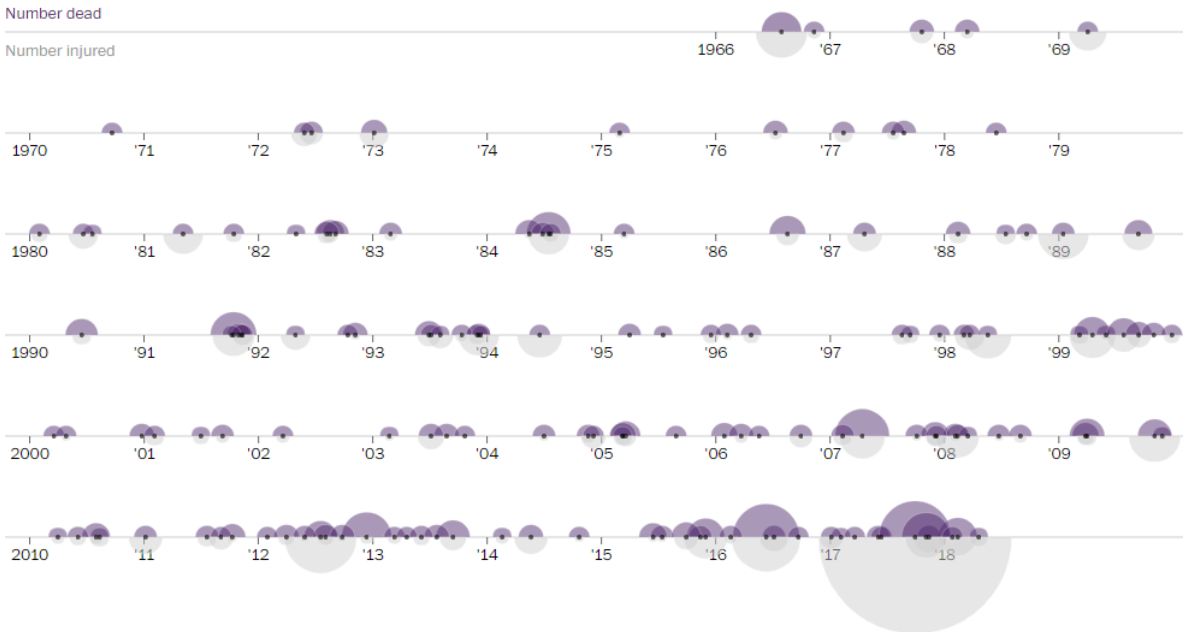


Fig. 6 – Number of dead and injured due to mass shootings, 1966-2019. Source: Washington Post, *The Terrible Numbers that Grow with Each Mass Shooting*.

everyone agrees with Mother Jones’s assessment. Criminologist John Alan Fox argues that Mother Jones’s did not include all mass shootings but only focused on the “senseless” and “public” ones. According to Fox, all mass shootings that include four or more victims (which is part of the FBI’s definition of a mass shooting) should be weight in. Therefore, mass shootings involving family relations, gang activity or criminal enterprises should not be left out. In this case the numbers between 1976-2011 show a consistent 20 mass shootings a year. With these numbers included, the image of a mass shooting epidemic, Fox concludes, is false.

But although Mother Jones’ did in fact not include these variables, the fact of the matter is that such senseless (meaning a shooter being unrelated to the victims) and public shootings are on the rise (see fig. 6). Moreover, such shootings more often create a public outcry and are much more heavily experienced since they can happen at any time, at any place, without any reason.

Especially the latter is important to the influence of mass shooting on the larger perception of violence. Fox’s incorporation of criminal enterprises and gang related mass shootings is not necessarily wrong, but it deflects in this case from the question of how gun violence is perceived by the overall public. This doesn’t mean that the public does not take in criminal, family and gang related gun violence, but that these are simply not linked to the term ‘mass shooting’. If we want

to measure the impact of mass shootings on public perception, Fox's use of victim related shootings should be excluded.

Moreover, research has shown that not only do mass shootings occur more often, they are also more deadly as can be seen in the table made by the Washington Post (see fig. 6).⁵⁵ Even if Fox's suggestion is correct that the amount of mass shootings (or mass murders) are roughly the same as the past three decades, mass shootings still have become more deadly. The FBI has been investigating active shooter incidents since 2013 and published three reports (2000-2013, 2014-2015, and 2016-2017). The first report focused on shooter incidents between 2000-2013 (14 years) in which the bureau identified 160 incidents with a total of 1,043 casualties.⁵⁶ It's latest report of 2016-2017, thus only spanning two years, identified 50 incidents with a staggering 943 casualties.

Therefore, in its latest report the FBI concluded: "The enhanced threat posed by active shooters and the swiftness with which active shooter incidents unfold support the importance of preparation by law enforcement officers and citizens alike."⁵⁷ Not only does the FBI speak of an enhanced threat, they also argue for the importance of citizen preparation, suggesting citizens play a vital role in stopping active shooting incidents when they occur - a role most countries would not apply to their citizens (see chapter 1.2). Although the frequency of mass shootings might be taken into question, the severity of mass shootings undeniably cannot.

In conclusion, this subchapter set out to investigate whether violence as a physical act has changed over the past three decades. Has the number of violent acts increased in this period? Does the United States find itself in the midst of a period of extreme violence, and could this explain a rise of an American gun culture 2.0 – one that is focused on the protection against people, instead of for people? The answer is, not surprisingly, a complicated one.

⁵⁵ Bonnie Berkowitz, Denise Lu, Chris Alcantara, "The Terrible Numbers that Grow with Each Mass Shooting," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/mass-shootings-in-america/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cbc9a8c7c347.

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation and Texas State University, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*, by Peter J. Blair and Katherine W. Schweit (Washington D.C., 2013), 5-6.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERTT) Center at Texas University, *Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2016 and 2017* (Washington D.C., 2018), 1-2.

On the one hand, neither the numbers on gun homicide, assault and robbery give any reason to think that the U.S. is finding itself in the hay days of the 1990s drug wars or the mafia days of the 1960s. There is no denying that both the homicide and gun assault rate have been rising since 2013, but this also follows a period of extreme cooldown after the violent 1990s and similarly shows signs of decreasing since 2016. Therefore, it becomes hard to conclude that the United States is experiencing a period of extreme violence. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that a new gun culture is the result of an increasing number of acts of violence.

Simultaneously, when it comes to the question whether gun violence changes the broader concept of American gun culture in anyway, it seems not to be the case. For example, between 2000-2014 the percentage of people who feel safer with a gun has increased significantly (from 35% to 63%), while the number of violent acts in this period has remained pretty much the same. This means that statistics on gun violence do little to affect the way people, feel about and behave with guns. Similarly, if there was ever a time for people to need a weapon for self-defense it was in 1990s, but strangely, as Yamane found, surveys suggest only 28% owned a gun in the '90s for self-defense in contrary to 70% in 2018.⁵⁸ The argument that a firearm protects you and your family has become increasingly important, while the numbers on the past 30 years show a decreasing necessity to actually do so.

On the other hand, such arguments do not conclude that there is no ground for an emerging culture of armed citizenry. For all the statistics on violent acts that would advocate that such a culture holds no merit, there are several important findings that show the contrary. Firstly, the statistics show that the share of gun related violence has increased significantly since the turn of the century. Additionally, the increasing share is inconsistent with the absolute numbers on violence, implicating that it does not matter whether violence is increasing or decreasing, the share of gun related violence is still consistently growing.

On top of this increasing share, there is a larger believe that gun violence constitutes a major problem. Surveys show that approximately 50% of Americans experience that gun violence has increased over the past 20 years, composes a major problem today and is likely to rise in the future. This while more and more Americans feel safer with a firearm. As this thesis has shown, it is most

⁵⁸ Yamane, "The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture," 5.

likely that the growing experience of gun violence is created due to the increase of “senseless” mass shootings and the escalating number of victims involved. The high visibility of mass shootings creates the image that gun violence is always around the corner and that preparedness is therefore critically important (the latter even being promoted by the FBI).

Something that has not been discussed and which falls outside of the scope of this thesis, is the influence of terrorism on gun ownership and culture. It could be said that the growing experience of violence and safety by owning a gun, has increased since the turn of the century because of 9/11 with its growing fear of repeat. This would support the perception that firearms could guarantee safety in such instances. The Gallup-poll, showing the growing feeling of safety by owning a firearm since the turn of the century, could therefore also be allocated to fear of terrorism.

In conclusion to the question whether violence has changed over time, it is undeniable to conclude that the percentage of firearm related violence has been rising during the past three decades. And whilst this chapter has found no strong correlation between the number of gun victims and the perception of firearms in the household, it has shown a strong connection between three other important aspects: the increasing number of people having firearms primarily for self-defense (established by Yamane), an increasing number of people feeling safer with a firearm in their home over the past 20 years, and lastly, a rising percentage share of gun violence in the overall numbers on violence. Therefore, we can conclude that gun violence in general has changed and in turn has affected gun culture - it has become increasingly firearm related, possesses growing impressions of “senselessness,” is perceived to be on the rise and has created the impression that firearms guarantee safety.

1.2 - Violence in Context: Myth, Monopoly and the Militia

As beforementioned, gun violence as a terminology is split into two aspects: *acts of violence* and the *perception of violence*. The first, as discussed in the previous subchapter, focuses on the number of violent acts and what this tells us about how gun violence has changed in the last three decades. They represent the consequences of such violence and how people perceive it. There is, however, a distinction to be made in how people perceive acts of violence and the perception of violence as a concept.

For example, if a fight breaks out, and violence thus becomes visual, people tend to have a perception (although maybe different in kind) about the particular act. One can experience it to be horrific, senseless, exhilarating, traumatizing, painful or even justified. One can respond to such an act by intervening or stepping aside, or in the case of televised mass shootings, one can look at it, take action or decide to turn off the television. No matter the outcome and the decision made, people create a perception of the act of violence that was just experienced.

This altogether differs from the *perception of violence* which constitutes our second aspect of the terminology of gun violence. The perception of violence focusses on the concept of it, not the individual or public perception of the act or its consequences. To illustrate, one cannot deny the presence of violence in the realm of man, or nature for that matter. While we can condemn an act of violence, we can simultaneously feel a sense of acceptability for the concept of it. For example, most countries possess an army for multiple purposes. Having an army presupposes the notion that violence is inevitable as an army is imbedded with the use of it. It is so ingrained in nature that it can often be the first response to our emotions - that of anger or jealousy. When we move on such emotions it becomes an act of violence (effect), while the perception of violence (cause) is focused on the question: what place does violence have in a society?

Hence, if we want to get the answer to this chapter's main question (what violence as a characteristic says about gun culture in the United States) we must first understand what violence means in the U.S? How and when is the use of it seen as legitimized? And if violence as a concept is more justified, do acts of violence then increase in such a society? Also, what position do citizens have in what is called the monopoly of violence - how is violence seen as a means to an end? In other words, in what context does violence play out? By looking at the country's social, cultural and historical background of violence, we might find the answer to such questions.

While we used criminological data and sociological surveys in investigating acts of violence, this chapter will be more theoretical in nature. In order to understand the context of violence, it is detrimental for one to look at how it is allocated to civilians. In what kind of manner are they allowed to participate in what Max Weber calls the "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical

force”?⁵⁹ Is this use, including gun violence, severely limited to the state or not? And if not, where does this originate from and what are its consequences, both positive and negative?

Secondly, how has this concept on violence evolved over the centuries? If violence has changed as discussed in chapter 1.1, what is the theoretical basis for such a change? In this, Richard Slotkin’s *myth of the frontier* becomes important. The way this myth is constructed and reemerged in the 20th and 21st century, says something about the root causes of a potentially different conceptualization of violence. The myth of the frontier is especially important in the legitimization of violence, because when one knows when violence becomes legitimate, its practical place in society becomes visible.

Lastly, knowing the monopoly and legitimization of violence, one should look at how violence is depicted in popular culture. How do movies, games and literature position violence overall? Do these depictions support the notion of the monopoly and the legitimate use of physical force, and in what way does this influence gun culture and the notion of an armed citizenry in the 21st century? For example, wild west movies, showing heroic cowboys fighting “savages” and the wilderness of the Western frontier both display the legitimate use of force (myth of the frontier) by individuals within a state’s territory (monopoly of violence). Such movies are a direct display and also amplify the consequences of the myth and the acquisition of legitimate use of force by individual civilians.

It is important to mention that this subchapter discusses violence in general, not just gun violence – even though the two are inextricably intertwined. While it has been important to distinct one another while looking at acts of violence, it becomes less important when we look at violence as a concept. As Hannah Arendt explains “violence – as distinct from power, force, or strength – always needs *implements*.”⁶⁰ Therefore, implements are already implied in violence and the perception of it.

Monopoly of Violence

In January 1919, the famous German sociologist Max Weber held a speech to the Free Students Union of Munich. At the time, Germany was undergoing a major transformation after four years

⁵⁹ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *On Violence*, 2.

of World War I had proven disastrous. Weber's speech *Politics as a Vocation* came in the midst of the revolutions that saw the consequential Weimar Republic installed in Germany. In his speech, Weber argued that the "state cannot be defined in terms of its ends." Instead, "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."⁶¹ In a time of political crisis, Weber seemed to have given the necessary legitimization requirements, or the means for a potentially new German state to emerge.

Weber's terminology of a state is still widely used today. Dating back to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), the German sociologist had been the first to conceptualize the idea of a *monopoly of violence*. According to Weber, before the creation of the modern state the powerholders of the feudal era had no way of claiming such a monopoly as they had no control within their territory on their vassals. The modern state, so he concludes:

has been successful in seeking to monopolize the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination within a territory. To this end the state has combined the material means of organization in the hands of its leaders, and it has expropriated all autonomous functionaries of estates who formerly controlled these means in their own right.⁶²

As an example, Weber uses the case of Great Britain in which the parliamentary power gained supremacy over the monarch in the 17th century, with the head of Parliament as its leader. This became the norm for the European continent, but would also come to represent the opposite of the American system which "placed the directly and popularly elected leader of the victorious party at the head of the apparatus," and "bound him to the consent of 'parliament' only in budgetary and legislative matters."⁶³ Consequently, as the composition of the state changes, so does the monopoly of violence.

In most countries the monopoly of violence is secured within the state. The state alone is allowed to use violence as a means to protect national interests and safety - the army protects national interests and security at home and abroad, while the police safeguards order and stability domestically. Both are directly linked to the federal government, whether it is legislation creating laws for police to uphold or declaring war in which a nation's army fights. Some states, however,

⁶¹ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 77-78.

⁶² Ibidem 82-83.

⁶³ Ibidem 90.

allow civilians to participate (or at least in part) in such a monopoly. In such societies it is believed that violence is not necessarily limited to the state and so the perception of violence is seen differently. For example, a state can contract paramilitary organizations which gain the right to use violence “to the extent to which the state permits it,”⁶⁴ but who have no legitimate claim to challenge the state’s monopoly. It can thus grant actors the right to use violence without fear of losing its monopoly.

The United States is one of such countries that allow citizens to take a more active role in the monopoly. This does not mean that violence can always be implemented and without repercussions, nor that the U.S. is a violent country, but that there is more room for citizens to engage in violent matters of state. Thus, if we use Weber’s definition of the monopoly in relation to the United States, we can speak of what we shall henceforth call a *participatory monopoly*. There are some important arguments in favor of such a deviating form of the monopoly of violence.

First of all, the United States is not one state, but a federation of states. The original intent of some of the Founding Fathers, such as Adams and Jefferson, was to limit federal powers. Therefore, the federation was specifically created to withstand consolidation of centralized power in which a typical “Old World” monopoly would exist. Instead, central to the American Republic would be the sovereignty and freedom of “we the people.” The Bill of Rights guaranteed such rights to its people and state and limited the power of its federal government. Especially in the founding era, the monopoly of violence belonged less to one federal state than was the case in most European countries at the time.

Out of the Bill of Rights, the Second Amendment has become the most controversial in the past few decades. Through the Supreme Court, it has become the primary argument for pro-gun advocates ever since the 2008 case of the *District of Columbia v. Heller* held that the Second Amendment protected the individual right to possess a firearm and to use it for traditional lawful purposes.⁶⁵ The Second Amendment reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”⁶⁶ Although the Second Amendment was only truly empowered in the 21st century, it’s existence

⁶⁴ Ibidem 78.

⁶⁵ “Supreme Court of the United States: *District of Columbia v. Heller*,” Legal Information Institute, Cornell University Law School, accessed June 13, 2019, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/07-290.ZS.html>.

⁶⁶ U.S. Const. amend. II.

alone suggests that at least some of the Founding Fathers had different ideas about the role of civilians when it came to their place in the monopoly – the fact that it was the second of ten Amendments furthermore emboldens the popular believe that militias and firearms were important parts in everyday life and the survival of the American Republic. The Amendment was never scrapped nor altered.

Secondly, what makes the Second Amendment unique within the theory of monopoly is that it not only ascribes the use of physical force to those other than the state, but it also aims it towards itself. The right of the people to keep and bear arms was never meant for self-defense against other individuals, or against the forces of the wild nor “savages” - such a right was given to protect its people against a domestic tyrannical government (see chapter 3.1).

This participatory monopoly has had a multitude of consequences to the perception of violence in American society. First of all, it normalizes the idea that individuals have the right to use deadly force to defend themselves against other people. In some cases, government agencies even encourage participatory violence. In a report by the FBI report on *Active Shooter Incidents 2000-2013* the agency argues:

Even when law enforcement was present or able to respond within minutes, civilians often had to make life and death decisions, and, therefore, should be engaged in training and discussions on decisions they may face.⁶⁷

As such acts of violence are increasing (as we have seen in subchapter 1.1) we might see a rising demand by law enforcement for civilian participation. Furthermore, this notion strengthens the idea that firearms are needed for self-defense and that a culture of armed citizenry is not only desirable, but paramount to what David Yamane calls “the protection against people” phenomena.⁶⁸

On a more local level, we see such participation demands in the “Stand-Your-Ground” laws which allow any person to use (lethal) force against a threat or even a perceived threat. 25 states adopted such laws since 2005, and 10 others have enacted limited or different versions of the law. While the use of force in self-protection is allowed in most countries, the “Stand-Your-Ground” law

⁶⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*, 5-6.

⁶⁸ Yamane, “The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture,” 5.

makes no distinction in whether someone could have retreated from the (perceived) threat. Although the Stand-Your-Ground laws do not actively ask for civilians' participation in violence, it allows levels of force which one personally believes to be necessary. Not only is the monopoly (the legitimate use of physical force) more ascribed to civilians, the interpretation of its practical utility is also left open for discussion.

This could have severe consequences as we have seen with mass shootings. As Arendt mentions "Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to the public attention."⁶⁹ Whenever the monopoly of violence is not clearly defined, nor limited, it opens up ways for individuals or groups to use such gaps for legitimizing personal causes. While many are quick to point to public health issues in the aftermaths of mass shootings, the problem also resides in the fact that the monopoly of violence lacks definition and restriction in the United States. Notwithstanding the victims of mass shootings, such an undefined position makes it possible for mass killers to argue they are in their right as American citizens.

In conclusion, the monopoly of violence in the United States is not something that belongs, and never has belonged exclusively to the federal government. In fact, the participatory monopoly is also aimed at the government, as becomes evident in the Bill of Rights and specifically the Second Amendment. Therefore, the government has given its population the right to use violence to the extent it allows but has simultaneously pointed it towards itself. In doing so, the American individual has become both a participant, a protector and in some cases the attacker of such a monopoly.

Therefore, the participatory monopoly can have serious consequences to individual safety. A culture of armed citizenry in times of increased violence is one such consequence, and when one perceives one's own freedom to be in peril by the hands of the federal government, it creates a legitimate claim to use violence against it (see Chapter 3). Therefore, we must also turn towards the notion that some perceive the federal government to be an increasing threat if we want to find out whether a "gun culture 2.0" has come into existence. In other words, is democracy perceived to be in danger?

⁶⁹ Arendt, *On Violence*, 79.

Myth of the Frontier and Popular Culture

One of the most influential scholars on the concept of American gun violence is Richard Slotkin. A cultural historian and critic, who between 1965-1992 wrote a trilogy on the position of violence in literary, cultural and historical sense. Central to this trilogy, which discusses colonial till 20th century America, is the historical development of the “myth-ideological trope of American culture: *the Myth of the Frontier*.”⁷⁰ Within it, Slotkin argues that the American culture is grounded in the idea that the frontier, and its violence tendencies, legitimizes in romantic fashion the westward expansion and creation of the American nation. As a consequence, violence became a necessity to create and protect a safe environment for American pioneers, manifest destiny and the progression of the American civilization. By doing so violence became justified as a means to an end - the means being gun violence, the end a “safe democracy.”⁷¹

In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin tells the story of the writer John Filson, a schoolmaster from Delaware. Filson traveled the frontier of Kentucky for two years and returned to his home state in 1784. Here he wrote a promotional brochure on Kentucky’s frontier life and its wilderness. At the end of his brochure Filson added a story to strengthen the appeal of the frontier called “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon.”

In “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon” Filson created a character who was to become the archetypal hero of the American frontier, copied by imitators and plagiarists and appearing innumerable times under other names and in other guises – in literature, the popular arts, and folklore – as the man who made the wilderness safe for democracy. The Boone narrative, in fact, constituted the first nationally viable statement of a myth of the frontier.⁷²

Through the story of Filson, Daniel Boon became the ultimate frontiersman, American legend and folk hero. Based on a true character, Boon was heroic, adventurous and calm, mystical and pure. Filson’s narrative incorporated the idea of the contemporary man, as the hunter-husbandman, one who’s adventures were part of a bigger morally, philosophically enlightened quest. The narrative drew on levels of mythology that supported the westward expansion and based it on the

⁷⁰ Richard Slotkin, *Fatal Environment: the Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994): xiii.

⁷¹ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1800-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 269.

⁷² *Ibidem* 269.

assumptions that its American culture had a place, a destiny and value in the world that would not only outlast but transcend past empires of the land. It seemed like Boon had always belonged to the frontier, and in fact that was precisely Filson's point. As Slotkin argues, a "myth grows out of the timeless desire of men to know and be reconciled to their true relationship to the gods or elemental powers," but for the American colonies "whose people were not native to the soil, this desire took the form of a yearning to prove that they truly belonged to their place."⁷³ Out of this desire grew the myth of the frontier.

The myth combines manifest destiny, social Darwinism and Puritan spirit. The land of America once occupied by other empires "had been the scene of great failure,"⁷⁴ and now it was up to the American colonists to bring civilization to its wilderness. This wilderness included the Native Americans (and later African Americans) which lacked civic responsibility and restraint to create the ideal republican democracy envisioned by the Founding Fathers and the American people. Rather, these peoples were part of the wilderness that withstood the creation of such a modern world - an American world - one "safe for democracy".

What both the myth and the archetypal hero have in common is that they are part of the founding myth of the United States in which violence plays a primary role - a foundation that still lives on today. "And what we have in this country is we have a history in which certain kinds of violence are associated for us with the growth of the republic, with the definition of what it is to be an American."⁷⁵ In other words, the hero and the myth of the frontier formed a blueprint, an example for individuals to be able to use legitimate forms of violence, namely when democracy is perceived to be in danger. Because when violence is needed to make the wilderness safe for democracy, then violence is justifiable when that democracy is threatened:

And because we are also devoted to the notion of democratic individualism, we take that glorification of social violence, historical violence, political violence, and we grant the individual a kind of parallel right to exercise it, not only to protect life and property, but to protect one's honor and protect one's social or racial status.⁷⁶

⁷³ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 269.

⁷⁴ Ibidem 275.

⁷⁵ Slotkin, *interview*.

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

Consequently, the frontier has changed the directory of American gun culture in concert with its monopoly. Firstly, it has created a unique and exceptional gun culture in which society has been granted the private use of deadly force if in service of American progression and defense of democracy. Secondly, the myth and the hero defined what is a positive response to a crisis, to complex problems in American society. The same has been the case with the monopoly of violence. When the monopoly is in danger, either by a tyrannical government or a lone aggressor, violence becomes legitimized in its protection (see chapter 3). This is exactly the kind of productive violence and the symbolism that is attached to a gun of which Slotkin speaks of at the start of this chapter. Through the inheritance of the myth and the participatory monopoly, American gun culture has sustained itself.

But there are those like Hofstadter who do not agree with the idea that the American frontier, participatory monopoly, nor the myth with its justifiable gun violence should explain the persistence of American gun culture. In his lifetime the frontier had long ceased to exist and most of the justifiable reasons for guns in the 20th century - to protect against the wilderness in remote areas – were no longer valid arguments for a nationwide gun culture, so Hofstadter argued. Then why, as the American author Jervis Anderson points out, did the gun become a “permanent ingredient of the nation’s style and culture”⁷⁷ never to disappear again?

The most important argument is that it was not just the place nor the time, but the idea of the frontier that never ceased to exist. While the frontier closed and folk legends like Col. Daniel Boone were no longer necessary, American culture, through movies, literature, shows and video games, never stopped revitalizing the picture of the frontier, the gun, and the archetypical hero. Hofstadter failed to incorporate the spirit of the frontier that had not perished over time. Consequently, American society has never let go of the notion that came out of the myth: the use of legitimate and productive violence as a solution to complex problems.

As we will see in chapter 2, masculinity is one of such complex problems. Over the past couple of decades, the perception has started to emerge that especially white males find their position “as the iconic guardian of American values,”⁷⁸ to be in decline, both economically and in social status.

⁷⁷ Jervis Anderson, “Chapter 3: Gun Crazy,” in *Reload: Rethinking Violence in American Life*, ed. Christopher B. Strain (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 70.

⁷⁸ Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” 556.

In this case, the gun has become the solution to an emasculated status. It has become the tool for regaining masculinity based on the power that the myth and the folk legends gave to it centuries earlier - the fight of good guys vs. the bad (see chapter 2.2).

And this seems to be a returning phenomenon. During the Vietnam war, veterans were often diagnosed with what was called the “hero complex,” or in the popular vocabulary called the “John Wayne syndrome.”⁷⁹ The actor John Wayne became a cult hero of the 20th century based upon the folklores of the 18th and 19th. During his career, Wayne played almost exclusively the role of the Western cowboy that fought Indians, bandits and bears alike. In doing so, Wayne depicted the image of borderless freedom and the constant struggle of right vs. wrong that symbolized the frontier. At the frontier of Vietnam, many soldiers believed they would become the new John Wayne of the Vietnamese jungles – most of them returned home disillusioned, short of achieving their goals.

Although Wayne’s movies are watched less today, the Wild West genre, in which the frontier lives on, is far from extinct. Shows like *Westworld*, *Yellowstone*, *Frontier* and *Damnation* are only a handful of must watch of the past years, and movies such as *The Magnificent Seven* (2016), *The Hateful Eight* (2015), *Bone Tomahawk* (2015) and *The Revenant* (2015) are all examples of major blockbuster of this day and age. The genre has for decades even ventured outside of earth with movies such as *Avatar* (2009), in which the main character protects the local inhabitants from the violence of the galactic frontiersmen by use of violence. Space is often also entitled the *final frontier*, not only in movies such as *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989), but also in politics such as with JFK’s famous inauguration speech of 1960 in which he named space one of the “new frontiers” of the 1960s.⁸⁰

The frontier also lives on in different ways and through different genres. Videogames are an example in which the user is given unlimited access and power to conduct acts of violence without serious repercussions. The user experiences a sense that is similar to the frontier, borderless freedom in which violence is permitted for progression. The violence is productive as it gets you somewhere – new perks, bonuses or the next level. Major American gun manufacturers such as

⁷⁹ Slotkin, *interview*.

⁸⁰ “Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/acceptance-of-democratic-nomination-for-president>.

Colt, Browning and Remington even tried to use videogames as a way of selling firearms to a younger audience. They found that the safe recreational approach of their games did not sell, paradoxically they were not violent enough, furthermore adding to the argument that violence sells in America.⁸¹

Whether it is productive violence in videogames or justified violence in movies and shows, through the arts and the continuation of the Western genre, the spirit of the frontier has never vanished. As a result, much of the problems depicted through movies, shows and video games, are seen to be resolved through violence. In this, the myth of the frontier, it's legitimized violence in defense of democracy and the legend-making of those defending it is still present today.

1.3 – Conclusion: Violence in Gun Culture

Theoretically, American gun culture has sustained and evolved itself in part through violence. Practically, as we have seen with the acts of violence over the past 30 years, the increasing share of firearms being used suggests that violence also changes gun culture over the short run. The increase of senseless mass shootings gives an indication that gun violence is increasingly being used to enforce change, show grievances, and (as we will see in chapter 2) promote or preserve white masculinity. Senseless violence similarly suggests that gun violence can also be “non-senseless” but legitimate for a larger part of the public even today.

By deconstructing the monopoly of violence and the myth of the frontier, this chapter has shown what position violence has in American society. In doing so, it answers the main question of this chapter: what role does violence as a characteristic play in American gun culture? In short, the perception of violence has shown that (both socially and culturally) violence has a much more prominent and accepted position in American society. It has found that violence is a considerably more justifiable solution to complex problems and that there is a deep-rooted legitimization of such violence in American society.

That this is the case is not surprising. First of all, the decentralized federal power of post-independent United States created a monopoly which extruded a participative role for civilians.

⁸¹ Garen J. Wintemute, “Where the Guns Come from: The Gun Industry and Gun Commerce,” *The Future of Children* 12, no. 2 (Summer – Autumn 2002): 59.

Both through the construction of legislation such as the Bill of Rights and through federal institutions, have civilians been asked and given the right to protect itself and the community, to resist domestic tyranny and chaos (see chapter 3.1). This isn't to say that such rights are always being used, and that Americans constantly fire their pistols whenever they disagree with the federal government or feel personally threatened by others. It means, only, that they gained the rare right of private use of deadly force.⁸² The American has become the participant, protector and attacker of the participatory monopoly in which it has a stake of its own. And although this monopoly is not the cause of a new gun culture of armed citizenry, it does compose the ground upon which such a culture could emerge.

Secondly, whereas the monopoly created a legal justification for the use of violence, the myth of the frontier produced the social-cultural foundation upon which this justification thrived. The myth created a story for "the true American" to prove they belonged to a landscape that previously was not theirs. This foundational myth showed what it meant to be an American, and more importantly gave existence to folk legends to whom one looked up to. These legends personified American ideals of democratic individualism and, in their ways, exhibited gun violence as a tool for progression - with it the goal of the creation of a land safe for democracy. The myth itself became the American norm that set the boundaries of who is in and who is out. Those who were out, such as Native Americans and other minorities within its borders, were subject to legitimate uses of violence as a means to preserve the safety of the democratic republic. Boosted by the participatory monopoly, the myth created a culture which was to be protected by its people and thus set the cultural basis for guns to become the main implement of violence.

Lastly, this myth has been reshaped and revitalized by popular culture throughout the decades. The folk legends of the 18th century such as Col. Daniel Boone might not be characters to which whom looks up to today, but rather indirectly through movies and videogames of the 21st century. Both the myth and the archetypical hero of the frontier are modelled in this popular culture. Violence is illustrated as a productive solution to save the world, win the girl, progress oneself, defeat the villain, win over the people and become the hero. Violence validates the goal, and in any such instances is legitimized by the end it pursues.

⁸² Slotkin, *interview*.

In summary, the role of violence in American gun culture seems to have changed significantly over the past three decades. An increase in mass shootings and share of firearm related homicides, the popularization of violence as a justifiable solution (through popular culture), the reiteration of the legal basis through the participatory monopoly, and the myth of the frontier as the example of iconic American values, combined have created a gun culture that is increasingly focused towards protecting what is valuable internally, such as democracy, family and freedom. The gun has become the implement of protective violence, not against nature but “against people.” As a consequence, the firearm has kept a strong presence in the American public domain, and its current gun culture in general seems to have transitioned into a culture of armed citizenry in the 21st century.

Chapter 2 – Masculinity

*“By using firearms to commit acts of violence, these boys attempted to move from margin to center, from being the wimp who was picked on to the aggressor who dominated and controlled others.”*⁸³

- Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns*, 2012.

As explained in this thesis’ introduction, characteristics of violence, masculinity and individuality are far from mutually exclusive influences on gun culture. Instead, for the most part, these characteristics complement each other. This becomes particularly clear when we look at the concept of masculinity. Violence has been portrayed in this thesis as a consequence of gun culture through acts of violence, and simultaneously is shown to be the foundation which influences Americans’ behavior with firearms through the perception of it. Violence is perpetrated upon the legal basis given by the monopoly as a way to solve complex problems of society, reiterated by the myth in a “good vs. bad guy”-narrative and enhanced by its depiction in popular culture. However, as the use of “Americans” implies, violence as an independent characteristic portrays a generalized view of firearm users in society and is not specified to a group, race or gender. Violence has shown how and from what basis people can behave with firearms in American gun culture, not who owns and uses them.

Through mass shootings, masculinity in relation to gun culture and violence has increasingly become a topic of debate. And this is not surprising. Of all the 160 active shootings between 2000-2013, 6 were committed by females,⁸⁴ in 2014-2015 this was 3 out of 42,⁸⁵ and of the 50 incidents between 2016-2017 none of the shooters were female.⁸⁶ This contrast has created the public terminology of *toxic masculinity* - a term which describes the negative consequences of societal

⁸³ Angela Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns: Hegemonic Masculinity and Concealed Handguns,” *Gender & Society* 26, no. 2 (April 2012): 220.

⁸⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Active Shooter Incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013*, 6-7.

⁸⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, *Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2014 and 2015* (Washington D.C., 2016), 2.

⁸⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation and ALERTT, *Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2016 and 2017*, 2.

expectancies of men - which is connected to the more academic theory of *hegemonic masculinity*. But what exactly is the relation between masculine violence, gun culture and this concept of hegemonic masculinity? What can masculinity tell us about the evidence that suggest a new gun culture is present in the United States?

As exemplified in the previous chapter with Adam Lanza, Slotkin argues that this relation “has to do with a sense of lost privilege, that men and white men in the society feel their position to be imperiled and their status [is] called into question.”⁸⁷ Gun violence thus becomes a way of dealing with this perceived attack on the white men’s position. However, this would suggest that the relation between masculinity and gun culture needs a violent or physical ingredient. Instead, through masculinity, violence merely becomes a product. As Stange and Oyster explain: “In [men’s hands], the gun has served a symbolic function that exceeds any practical utility. It has become the symbol par excellence of masculinity: of power, force aggressiveness, decisiveness, deadly accuracy, cold rationality.”⁸⁸ Reiterated by both Slotkin and sociologists Carlson and Stroud, this relation is thus both physical and symbolic.

In order to research this relation, it’s necessary to first explain the concept of hegemonic masculinity. This concept was first used during a study into Australian high schools in 1982 and further worked out by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in 1995.⁸⁹ Before, hegemonic masculinity was understood in the 1980s as a set of practices which were normative. “It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, [and] required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.”⁹⁰ Therefore only a small fraction of men lived up to that notion. However, Connell’s terminology argued that hegemonic masculinity was the result of “discursive practices which embodied dispositions that legitimize male domination.”⁹¹ These are not fixed in the individual, but are

⁸⁷ Slotkin, *interview*.

⁸⁸ Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster, *Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America* (New York: NYU Press, 2000): 22.

⁸⁹ R.W. Connell, and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 830.

⁹⁰ Connell, and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 832.

⁹¹ Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns,” 217.

“configurations of practices that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting.”⁹²

While gun violence, according to Yamane, is mostly researched through criminological and epidemiological studies,⁹³ masculinity and its relationship to guns are often investigated in a sociological “law-abiding” setting. In such a setting, the idea of hegemonic masculinity is idealized in the male protector and would, according to Connell’s definition, work in opposition to “non-law-abiding” males and feminine versions of masculinity.

Both sociologists Angela Stroud and Jennifer Carlson researched how “law-abiding” citizens use concealed carry of guns to identify their relation towards hegemonic masculinity and their position in society. Both concluded, as Slotkin did, that the position of mostly white males in American society is perceived to be in decline. By owning and carrying a gun, men fill the gap of this experienced decline of iconic American values. Therefore, the second part of this chapter will investigate what arguments “law-abiding” citizens use to justify notions of decline. It will explain why these men choose to carry a concealed gun and as a consequence sustain and change American gun culture.

In line with the first chapter, the context of this masculine characteristic of gun culture is nothing without data supporting it. The abovementioned numbers on male mass shooters alone do little to cement a relation between masculinity and gun culture. In fact, the numbers on violence combined with masculinity represent a small fraction of the overall relation between men and their firearms. Other data on age, race, long- and new-standing gun owners, the number of firearms owned, and concealed carry all suggest a strong relation between masculinity and gun culture. This in turn supports the context in which this characteristic interacts with a unique gun culture. Therefore, corresponding data to masculinity will be discussed in the first part of this chapter.

⁹² Connell, and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 836.

⁹³ Yamane, “The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture,” 1.

2.1 - Masculinity in Numbers: Unequal Shares

This chapter started off with simple numbers on male mass shooters. In the public debate this often seems to sum up the relation between violence and masculinity. However, from the police officer, to the Wild West cowboy, the gangster from the 60s and the gangsta culture of today, men always seem to have had a more violently fascination with firearms, both physically and symbolically.⁹⁴ However, when we look at the immense amount of data about masculinity and gun culture, there is a lengthier and more complicated answer than just physical violence. To understand this, one first has to focus on the basic principle of gun culture: gun ownership.

As has already been mentioned in the 2018 Small Arms Survey, 393,300,000 weapons were legally held by civilians in the United States as of 2017, roughly 120.5 firearms per 100 residents. The latter would suggest that almost all Americans own at least one firearm. What the survey did not investigate, however, was the gender, demographic and racial difference in gun ownership. While four-in-ten adults (42%) say there is a gun in their household, it is a third of all adults who admit they personally own one or more firearms.⁹⁵

Primarily, and this supports the importance of masculinity and race within gun culture, guns are owned by white men (48%). Only a quarter of white woman and nonwhite men (24% each), and only 16% of nonwhite women own a gun.⁹⁶ This in turn explains scholarly interest in white male gun ownership. The staggering number of firearms is not only concentrated within a third of the American population, but predominantly centered around white males within that third.*

Besides the concentration of firearms among white men, those men who are gun owners interact with guns at a surprisingly early age, especially for those who grew up in a gun owning household. The latter respondents told Pew that they were on average 12 years old when they first fired a gun - for women that age was 17.⁹⁷ On average, these same men were 17 when they first acquired a

⁹⁴ Jennifer Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry: Guns, Masculinity, and Socioeconomic Decline," *Gender & Society* 29, no. 3 (May 2015): 388.

⁹⁵ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 18.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem* 6.

* It is important to mention that data on gun ownership is far from accurate. Partly because of legislation, such as the 1996 Dickey Amendment which prevented CDC funds being used for firearm research, has there been a lack in proper scientific results. Therefore, scholars have to rely on independent surveys made by agencies such as the Pew Research Center.

⁹⁷ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 5.

gun (excluding air guns such as a BB gun) in comparison to 26 for women.⁹⁸ For all American adults the numbers are not much lower: 19 years for men, 27 years for women.⁹⁹ Before many male gun owners could buy alcohol, they already owned a gun.

As the concentration of firearms suggests, 75% of respondents admitted to owning two or more guns in their household. However, among women this percentage is also fairly high (53%).¹⁰⁰ Consequently, the number of firearms one keeps is thus not exclusively linked to masculinity. Nevertheless, men interact more with their guns but also with other gun owners. More than half of the male respondents say they go shooting and hunting. Men watch significantly more gun-oriented TV shows and videos, go to gun conventions more often, and over half say all or most of their friends own a firearm as well.¹⁰¹ All numbers considered, whether it is gun ownership, social interaction, age or affiliation, white males top the charts.

This is also the case with new gun owners. In Wertz' research on new- and long-standing gun owners, the results show a similar predominance of white male gun owners in American society. New-standing gun owners (less than 5 years) are dominantly male (64,3%) and for 75,6% white (in contrary to 8,7% of African Americans). Both Stroud and Carlson found similar results in concealed pistol licenses (CPL) requests. Of the roughly one million licenses issued in Texas between 1995-2010, 81% were men, and 88% were white.¹⁰² For the state of Michigan, men have four times the amount of concealed carry licenses than woman,¹⁰³ and white men comprise of 75% of the 425,790 CPL residents as of 2013.

In the case of Michigan however, 21% of African Americans owned a CPL while they made up only 14,3% of Michigan's population in 2012.¹⁰⁴ This has to do with the fact that permit data shows a significantly higher percentage increase in permit requests among other racial groups such as African Americans, Asians and Native Americans between 2002-2017.¹⁰⁵ Although it looks like these racial groups are closing the gap with white male CPL holders, the fact of the matter is that

⁹⁸ Ibidem 26.

⁹⁹ Ibidem 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem 22.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem 8.

¹⁰² Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns," 222.

¹⁰³ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 387.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem 394.

¹⁰⁵ John R. Lott, "Concealed Carry Permit Holders Across the United States: 2018," *Crime Prevention Research Center* (August 2018): 25-30.

the number of concealed carry permits has been increasing dramatically across the board over the past 11 years with 273%. Today, over 17.25 million Americans own a permit.¹⁰⁶

Such numbers show a strong correlation between race, gender and a gun culture of protection. As we return to the concept of violence, this correlation is only strengthened as can be seen in the 2017 results of the UCR-program (see chapter 1). Of the 15,129 victims, 78.4% were male, and of the offenders 88.1% were male. The program also found similar shocking results on the basis of race. The FBI identified 7,851 Black or African American (54.2%) victims in contrary to 6,579 victims that were described as White (43.1%).¹⁰⁷ Not only is there a significant percentual gap, this is exacerbated by the fact that African Americans only comprise 12.7% of the total American population. Therefore, in 2017 you were 7 times more likely to be killed as an African American, than as a white person.

These numbers are important when focusing on a rising culture of armed citizenry. As Yamane looks for a sociology of gun culture, he also hopes to incorporate a new focus on the role of masculinity within a rising appropriation of firearms as a protective means. And while Yamane did incorporate gender differences as a way of explaining a new gun culture, he fell short in expressing the apparent contrast in race within that gender.

During the second part of this chapter, race within the characteristic of masculinity becomes a crucial element in explaining a culture of armed citizenry and can therefore not be excluded in the debate towards a new sociology of gun culture. For example, the fact that white males consist of 48% of all gun owners indicates there is already some racial basis to this. Why do white men own consistently more guns than other groups, not just women, but also minorities? And if a culture of armed citizenry - that protects against people - has become the new norm of American gun culture, what are the masculine reasons this has occurred? In short, what are white men protecting, and against whom are they protecting it?

¹⁰⁶ Lott, "Concealed Carry Permit Holders Across the United States," 3.

¹⁰⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Report: Crime in the United States, 2017*.

2.2 - Masculinity in Context: The Good, the Bad and the Old

The data clearly demonstrates the importance of masculinity within gun culture, but it falls short in explaining why this connection is there in the first place. Over the years, multiple scholars have investigated this relationship, and as mentioned before, most of them focused on permit holders. This has multiple reasons.

Firstly, CPLs are public information in most American states, meaning that researchers can easily access them, and most of all can construct patterns from these requests by looking at race, gender and age of the permit holders. Due to the lack of research funding into gun research in the United States, there is an immense shortage in reliable sources on this topic, making CPL information a valuable source to have.

Secondly, CPLs are believed to be held by “law-abiding” citizens. This is not to say that no crime will be committed by permit holders, however, it is fair to say that applicants mostly do not have a criminological motivation to request a license, but are fore more likely to be motivated by their urge to protect. Therefore, the CPL holder became the ideal person of interest to be interviewed by sociologists such as Jennifer Carlson and Angela Stroud. This chapter will focus on the results of these two sociologists and compare it with the data discussed above.

The American sociologist Jennifer Carlson published her book *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* in 2015. The title already gives away the focus of Carlson’s research, namely socioeconomic decline creating a culture of armed citizenry. Her work is based upon in-depth interviews with CPL holders in Michigan. Carlson found Michigan particularly interesting because it experienced a major transformation in the past half century. Its capital city of Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013 after its auto industry had collapsed. However, while the city’s funds were decreasing, the amount of CPL requests was increasing. Carlson argues in her work that this increase is the result of the socioeconomic decline in the state, which in turn greatly impacted the position of men in the household.¹⁰⁸

Carlson is not alone in her research. In a like manner, the American sociologist Angela Stroud also investigated why men feel the need to carry a concealed gun. Her research focused on Texas which, in comparison to Michigan, was not feeling the same brunt of socioeconomic decline. In her 2016

¹⁰⁸ Carlson, “Mourning Mayberry,” 386.

work *Good Guys with Guns*, Stroud similarly interviewed CPL holders in order to find out their arguments for carrying a concealed firearm. Although her work did not find a similar sense of socioeconomic decline among her interviewees, her results are far from mutually exclusive with those of Carlson. Instead, Stroud found that men's explanation in carrying had a threefold conclusion: the need to protect their family, their declining physical strength due to age, and their personal sense of safety in places in which they feel vulnerable.¹⁰⁹ What both Stroud and Carlson have in common is that their conclusion draws on notions of decline, whether it is due to violence, socioeconomic downfall or because of age. For this reason, it is detrimental to look at this feeling of decline and its relationship with concealed carry if we wish to understand why masculinity is an important characteristic in a gun culture of armed citizenry.

However, the reason why men have a much stronger connection with firearms does not exclusively rely upon decline. Gun ownership has always been possible in the United States. This would suggest that there has always been an impression of decline in American society in order to sustain itself. Alternately, guns are a way of creating an upward sensation of masculinity whenever that is deemed necessary. The same upward socioeconomic positioning can also occur within the transition to male adulthood. Especially in the South, firearms can function as symbolic tool for a transition called *the rite of passage*.¹¹⁰ A firearm in this case does not help to fill a gap left by a perceived impressions of decline, but rather as a way to pass from boyhood into manhood. Therefore, this chapter will also include traditional uses of firearms when it comes to masculinity.

The New War Ethos

This thesis has discussed the position of violence in American society during the previous chapter. It concluded that the role of violence has changed significantly in the past decades. Violence has become a reason for gun owners to protect against people and make them feel increasingly safer with a firearm. In a like manner, it showed that the polarized debate on gun violence has strengthened the assumption of justified violence as long as this is directed against those who are not part of the ideal American democracy. As more Americans feel that crime is on the rise, so too has the intersection between masculinity, race and violence become more visible.

¹⁰⁹ Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns," 224.

¹¹⁰ Amy Louise Wood, "Violence," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 19*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and Amy Louise Wood (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 72-73.

Similar to violence, Carlson's work shows that what it means to be a man is changing. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity, being, according to Connell, the "ideal privileged form of masculinity in a social context," is shifting to a particular white form of protectionist masculinity within gun culture.¹¹¹ Not surprisingly, this hegemonic masculinity moves along the line of a renewed appreciation for the myth in which guns are powerful symbols that enhance self-reliance, individualism and independence and reinforce men's position in society.¹¹² The gun, for the law-abiding citizen, is a tool needed to enforce a *New War ethos* (race) and become the *home protector* (gender) in the construction of a neo-patriarchal relationship.¹¹³

The continuation of the myth becomes particularly prevalent in this New War ethos. The myth, as argued before, is no longer about protecting the frontier from savages and the wilderness, but about domestic protection of what is important, such as democracy, freedom and family. The heroes of the frontier of the 19th century, have become the home protectors of the 21st century fighting a new war against "evil men" in society:

They promote a "New War ethos" where power, force, and might are celebrated as socially necessary when used to protect "good people" from evil. In this worldview, firearms endow "good guys" with the strength, power, and moral right needed to defend the world from "bad guys."¹¹⁴

Such a narrative, as argued by Stroud, is particularly pointed towards violence and more specifically against crime. "The men I talked to consider themselves law-abiding, virtuous, and brave defenders of their families—matching the image of the ideal gun owner perpetrated by the NRA," Stroud argues.¹¹⁵ Gun owners, in line with Yamane's point, increasingly claim protection as their primary reason for owning and carrying a gun because they believe their world has become less safe.

Stroud's work in Texas made her come to the conclusion that part of the reason these men carry a gun, is that it allows them to become part of the hegemonic masculinity norm through "fantasies of violence and self-defense," even though some might never fire a gun.¹¹⁶ The New War ethos is

¹¹¹ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 389.

¹¹² Scott Melzer, *The NRA's Culture War* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

¹¹³ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 391.

¹¹⁴ Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns," 218.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem* 226.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem* 216.

thus a constructed and idealized principle made by many of these men, and promoted by organizations such as the NRA, to legitimize the use of force in order to defend “their” world from evil and return it to a nostalgic period of better days.

Moreover, what this implies is that some do not participate in this idealized image of the American democratic republic, and this becomes most apparent through notions of race and right of existence. Through her interviews, Stroud found that while most white men saw their own carrying as just and even as a noble pursuit, they attached “violence and aggression to others, particularly Black and Latino men.”¹¹⁷ This makes the New War ethos a particularly racial construction.

This perception also has a historical background. Psychological studies in the 1960s and 1970s, as Mertz points out, argued that “many of the men labeled as violent and mentally ill were also, it turned out, Black,” and found that if Black crime was committed “US psychiatric and popular culture frequently blamed Black culture or Black activist politics—not individual, disordered brains—for the threats such men were imagined to pose.”¹¹⁸ Hofstadter similarly argued that through the history of the South, gun carrying was “a white prerogative,”¹¹⁹ and Slotkin even goes so far as to say that the national myth constructed a view in which Native Americans and African Americans were not considered quite human, and in so doing created a white man’s republic in which “if you’re white, you’re all right.”¹²⁰

This differentiation between “good vs. bad” among racial lines, is articulated by the masculine “image of the ideal gun user constructed by the NRA”¹²¹ of which 19% of gun owners claim to be part of.¹²² This white constructed image clashes with that of Black masculinity, which, according to sociologist Patricia Collins, is seen as a “threat to white society.”¹²³ This violent basis of the relation between masculinity, race and concealed carry, seems to suggest that the protection of the

¹¹⁷ Ibidem 217.

¹¹⁸ Jonathan M. Metz, and Kenneth T. MacLeish, “Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and the Politics of American Firearms,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 2 (February 2015): 244.

¹¹⁹ Hofstadter, “America as a Gun Culture”.

¹²⁰ Slotkin, *interview*.

¹²¹ Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns,” 221.

¹²² Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 14.

¹²³ Patricia Collins, “A Telling Difference: Dominance Strength and Black Masculinities,” in *Progressive Black Masculinities?*, ed. A. Mutua (New York: Routledge, 2006), 75.

ideal American democracy is solely a white men's enterprise, and the New War ethos pointed at those racially different.

The Home Protector

However, there is more to the fantasies of violence and self-defense than race, explaining why some of these men want to carry a weapon. Gender roles play a particularly important part in this motivation. Both Stroud and Carlson found that the men they interviewed saw themselves as home protectors in what Iris Marion Young calls "masculinist protection."¹²⁴ This idea, according to Young, is in contrast to feminist theories of masculinity explaining it as "self-consciously dominative" – the idea that domination of men over women stems from their own gratification and pleasures of domination. Instead, this *masculinist protection* is constructed upon models of chivalry, in which the "good" man is the one who protects the "subordinate members" of their family, such as his children or wife.¹²⁵

Many of the respondents of both Stroud and Carlson believed they embodied this notion of the "good husband," the brave defender of the family and the 21st century frontiersman. This role is emphasized by institutions like the NRA with comments such as "the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun."¹²⁶ For these men, masculinity is connected to physicality and dangerousness, while femininity is considered vulnerable.¹²⁷ In this way, women and children become dependent on the male home protector.¹²⁸

These gender roles are nothing new. Even in Filson's myth of Col. Boone, Boone's wife is portrayed as a physically weak person. Even though other folk myths have her to be in all accounts a strong, wild and freedom fighting women, Filson's story portrays nothing off the kind. On the contrary, Filson depicts her as someone in need of a hero's protection, "a victim suffering dutifully under physical discomfort and the pangs of womanly sentiment,"¹²⁹ and without an identity other than her social role as a wife and mother. Many of Stroud's respondents emphasized these

¹²⁴ Iris M. Young, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 1 (2003): 4.

¹²⁵ Young, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection," 4.

¹²⁶ Wayne LaPierre, "NRA Press Conference: December 12, 2012," *National Rifle Association* (December 2012), https://icma.org/sites/default/files/304636_NRA%20Press%20Conference%2012%2021%202012.pdf.

¹²⁷ Jocelyn Hollander, "Vulnerability and Dangerousness: The Construction of Gender through Conversations about Violence," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 1 (February 2001): 84.

¹²⁸ Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns," 225.

¹²⁹ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 301

separated roles. Many of the married men argued that even though some of their wives decided not to carry a concealed handgun, they were not in definition bad mothers. It was after all their role and duty as a father to protect their family.¹³⁰ Then what has changed between the time of Col. Boone and now?

As Carlson states, men's "duty" to protect their family stems from finding a social relevance in times of economic insecurity. In this case, gun carriers use guns as tools in a narrative of crime, which helps them understand their feelings of socioeconomic decline.¹³¹ Returning to the characteristic of violence, this economic insecurity in turn sparks crime or more importantly creates the perception of increased violence and criminality. Pew found that 65% of respondents believe a lack of economic opportunity causes gun violence.¹³² And as argued before, the visibility of mass shootings and the feeling that violence overall is increasing, has not helped this perception. The duty to protect and the use of violence in doing so "allows men to distinguish themselves from hyperaggressive, violent men (who threaten them with chaotic, rather than controlled, violence) and from dependent women and children incapable of self-protection."¹³³

However, as Stroud's use of the word "fantasies" suggests, most of the men that carry a concealed gun will never be able to protect their wives and children in reality and might thus not be able to fulfill these fantasies.¹³⁴ Thus, as mentioned before, the gun also carries symbolic meaning, entitling it with the future prospect that they one day might be able to accomplish the duty of heroic protectionism.¹³⁵ In all, masculine protection gives men the ability to claim a "privileged relation vis-à-vis women and children (by protecting them) and vis-à-vis other men (by protecting against them)."¹³⁶ This argument only further strengthens Yamane's perception that a new gun culture is aimed at protection against others. In doing so, these men legitimate a neo-patriarchal relationship as a form of hegemonic masculinity.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns," 226.

¹³¹ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 388, 396.

¹³² Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 55.

¹³³ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 389.

¹³⁴ Wendy Brown, "Finding the Man in the State," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 24-25.

¹³⁵ Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns," 226-227.

¹³⁶ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 391.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem* 391.

Age and the Rite of Passage

Until this point, we have looked at how violence and the concept of white hegemonic masculinity have helped construct and evolve a unique American gun culture. These concepts have a cultural historic and sociological background and have been put in relation to gun culture. What has not yet been discussed is the role of age in relation to masculinity and how this influences someone's desire to carry a firearm. Similarly, there are also concepts - within the larger characteristic of masculinity - that are more passive and traditional. One key concept is the rite of passage. This is explained as an experience that provides boys the passage from boyhood into manhood by owning their first firearm. This rite of passage is particularly present in the South and therefore demographics also play into gun culture. This ritual is often forgotten in the wider range of gun research but can be just as important.

In her conclusion on the motivational reasons for concealed carry, Stroud found that the fantasies of violence and self-defense had much to do with the age of her respondents. Only a couple of the respondents younger than 40 argued that they needed a weapon primarily for self-defense, while half of the respondents over 40 said age played a major role into why they wanted a CPL.¹³⁸ This does not mean that these reasons are mutually exclusive with the home protector or New War ethos argument. Instead, many of these men claimed they were motivated by the desire to protect, both themselves and their family, but needed to compensate in lost strength.¹³⁹ The gun helps to become equal again with those who are physically stronger.

Not surprisingly, this idea of the gun as the equalizer is a popular argument and even became the name of one of the most sold guns in the United States: The Colt *Equalizer* (see Chapter 3). Michael Kimmel wrote in his 1996 *Manhood in America* that “manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us.”¹⁴⁰ According to this argument, by getting older, men run the risk of getting dominated by others and thus lose their equal footings with others. This creates vulnerability combined with an already perceived notion of socioeconomic decline, increased criminality and lost patriarchal position of men in the nuclear family.

¹³⁸ Stroud, “Good Guys with Guns,” 227.

¹³⁹ Ibidem 216.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996): 6.

This image of the nuclear family is celebrated among CPL holders, says Carlson. The nuclear family prescribes separated spheres in which women are housewives and men breadwinners. These notions are “reproduced by socializing children into their respective gender role.”¹⁴¹ Within this role is encapsulated the male ownership of guns at a very early age, which the numbers on masculinity support. As discussed before, male gun owners who grew up with a gun in the household are on average 12 years when they first fired a gun and 17 years old when they first owned a piece of firearm.

Especially in rural areas, guns are particularly present in the household. 72% of those respondents argued in the Pew survey that they grew up with firearms (for both small town, suburbs and cities, this percentage is close to 40%). However, gun owners in rural areas are more likely to appropriate gun usage to hunting or sport shooting (instead of self-protection) both in the past and in the present. Eight-out-of-ten adults in these areas argued hunting was the primary reason why a gun was present in the house during their childhood. And today, about a third of gun owners go hunting often or sometimes, and about half go to shooting ranges with some frequency.¹⁴² Therefore, in rural areas, the gun still plays an important part in leisure activities.

Hofstadter argued in his article *America as a Gun Culture* that the gun is kept in American society because it is claimed to be a “basic symbol of masculinity.”¹⁴³ Nevertheless, this claim does not explain cultural variations and why such symbols have not manifested in other cultures, so Hofstadter argues. Especially in rural areas, owning a firearm is less a responsive action to the changing situation of society and more part of a cultural tradition that is uniquely American.

Although Hofstadter is right in arguing that the gun is a symbol, a tool of masculinity, he misses the fact that the cultural variation lies partially in the *rite of passage*-argument. Many of the states that have emerged out of the frontier, and are Republican in character, have immortalized the gun not just as a tool of masculinity, but also of both progression and tradition. In Amy Louis Wood’s encyclopedia on violence in the South, she argues:

Aside from its protective function, gun ownership in the South also seems to have a symbolic, ritual meaning. The presentation of a series of guns to young southerners often serves as a rite of passage,

¹⁴¹ Carlson, “Mourning Mayberry,” 390.

¹⁴² Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 23-29

¹⁴³ Hofstadter, “America as a Gun Culture”.

and the intricate progression in firearm socialization, many times in communal hunting settings, teaches basic safety and gun- use skills and perpetuates the existence of the southern gun culture.¹⁴⁴

This argument is not without merits. Seven-in-ten gun owners claim to have taken a gun safety course such as weapons- and hunter safety trainings.¹⁴⁵ Also, during their youth almost 50% of male respondents claimed to have engaged in hunting (contrary to 21% of women),¹⁴⁶ while only a quarter of men and women in urban and suburban areas claimed to have done the same.¹⁴⁷

Children in rural areas are thus more likely to come into contact with firearms at an earlier age and learn - mostly in a responsible and safe manner - to interact with them. For these kids, gun ownership is not just tied to masculine protectionism or the New War ethos, but what Wood calls “firearm socialization.”¹⁴⁸ By using firearms to measure progression status (from air guns to real firearms), children perceive their place not just within hegemonic masculinity, but in the wider community as a whole. When children gain their first real firearm they are therewith acknowledged as an equal by their parent(s) and fellow community members, and in doing so have completed the *rite of passage* from boys into men.

Hunting and sport shooting might be considered symbols of masculinity, they are likewise part of traditions and the normal day-to-day life, particularly in rural areas. So, while age can be a factor, especially for older men, to acquire or reinvent the purpose of firearms into masculine protectionism, *masculine traditionalism* within gun culture in some areas has always been present. Such passive form of masculine gun ownership might not have changed much in the past three decades, but it is still an important factor in arguing why America has preserved a unique gun culture in the first place.

Masculinity and Socioeconomic Decline

As the previous part of this chapter suggests, there are both adjusting and traditional reasons in how masculinity influences gun culture. Violence (increased criminality perception), hegemonic masculinity (home protector), race (new war ethos), and age (vulnerability and rite of passage), are all good indicators of the workings of masculinity as a characteristic within this culture. What

¹⁴⁴ Wood, “Violence,” 72-73.

¹⁴⁵ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 48.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem 34-35.

¹⁴⁸ Wood, “Violence,” 72-73.

most of these indicators have in common though (with the exception of the *rite of passage*) is that they depict a perception of societal decline. One part of this perception has to do with something that goes far beyond the individual, namely the idea of socioeconomic decline in American society as a whole.

In Carlson's *Mourning Mayberry*, the title hints to the loss of a place that was considered important. However, *Mayberry* itself never existed. It was a fictional town situated in North Carolina that became the scene of the '60s television sitcoms *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Mayberry R.F.D.* Mayberry showed how tranquil and perfect life could be in the simplicity of rural-suburban America and thus became the symbol of the idyllic American small-town. An elegy to one of the actresses Frances Bavier, maybe describes the town the best:

In Mayberry, it was always spring or fall, Andy never slept with Helen, Barney never used his one bullet tucked away in shirt pocket; even the Darlings were darling, cradling mandolins and shotguns, whistling into jugs, picking guitars.¹⁴⁹

But something had changed since the '60s. Through the interviews Carlson had with permit holders, she found that "Mayberry [was] either a "lost" America or an America that never existed."¹⁵⁰ Two of her respondents named Frankie and Nate argued that "the Mayberry America" was gone, and with that good jobs, safe communities and everything else needed to uphold a "breadwinner masculinity." Therefore, Carlson concluded that these men used guns not just to protect against violence (due to a perceived increase of criminality and vulnerability), but because of a felt socioeconomic decline which impacted the celebrated *breadwinner model*.¹⁵¹

Through this post-WOII model American men functioned through the ideal of the provider within the bigger picture of the nuclear family. But now, the singular and male responsibility of providing was believed to be eroding, as men nowadays have a harder time holding on to their jobs, or do not earn enough to be the sole breadwinner. And there is some truth to her statement. In 1960, 70% of families had a single household breadwinner. Nowadays that percentage is close to 31.¹⁵² This

¹⁴⁹ Jenny Brantley, "Mayberry and Vietnam: An Elegy for Frances Bavier," *The North American Review* 288, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 2003): 44.

¹⁵⁰ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 390

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem* 401.

¹⁵² Wendy Wang, Kim Parker and Paul Taylor, "Breadwinner Moms: Mothers are the Sole or Primary Provider in Four-in-Ten Households with Children; Public Conflicted about the Growing Trend, *Pew Research Center* (May 2013), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/>.

means that more households have a dual income and women are increasingly entering the workforce or are getting paid more equally.

This was especially the case in the Detroit metropolitan area around 2013. The results show how the erosion of the breadwinner model and the increasing number of women in the workforce (changing their social status), created a demasculinizing effect on her respondents. As a result, these men reinvented their claim as the head of the household by embracing the home protector-status as discussed before. And although the result might be the same, Carlson, in contrary to Stroud, argues that crime itself was not the reason for them to take on the masculine protectionist model. Instead, crime serves as a narrative and helps legitimate the role of protector. Therefore, crime is not central here, but socioeconomic decline is.

Carlson's argument brings us back to the perception of violence. The men she interviewed believed that crime was increasing because in their minds socioeconomic decline and the breakdown of the nuclear family created it. However, these ideas of increasing crime and economic imageries, are both a false perception.¹⁵³ In fact, as has been shown in the chapter on violence, crime in general had been decreasing since the 1990s even though the share of firearm related violence went up. Thus, the threats these men perceived were "symbolic, and not actualized, threats - especially for middle-class, white men who live in suburban areas and who experience economic decline mostly as perceived rather than actual economic decline."¹⁵⁴

So while Stroud argues that these men's fantasies of violence and self-defense motivates them to take on the role of home protectors, Carlson concludes that her respondents feel legitimized to use the home protector role as a way of coping with the perceived image of socioeconomic decline. In reality, however, these men take on *masculine protectionism* to protect themselves from "falling down the masculine hierarchy."¹⁵⁵ As hegemonic masculinity prescribes the way men "position themselves through discursive practices,"¹⁵⁶ the loss of these men's breadwinner status means a loss of positioning themselves as the head of the household. And as the concept of hegemonic masculinity imposes a practice in which men retain a collective dominance over women, the

¹⁵³ Carlson, "Mourning Mayberry," 392-393.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem 401.

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem 401.

¹⁵⁶ Connell, and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 841.

erosion of the breadwinner model similarly caused a power vacuum needing to be filled.¹⁵⁷ The home protector, using the gun instead of money as its tool, in a sense replaced the breadwinner model, or at least reformed the position of the man as head of the household.

2.3 – Conclusion: Masculinity in Gun Culture

It has become clear throughout this chapter that masculinity is an important characteristic in a seemingly changing gun culture. While gun violence has shown the legal, cultural and practical consequences of this culture, masculinity gives insight into how “law-abiding” men position themselves in society and use firearms as both a tool and a symbol. Particularly white males use firearms as a crucial element in defining one’s relation with the other, especially now as they perceive their position to be in decline. In the matter of “who” instead of “what” is changing American gun culture, the role of white men becomes clear as they top the charts in nearly every statistic related to gun ownership.

Within the characteristic of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity provides a framework in which the consequences of this perceived decline can be measured. It shows how men reinvent their position in the household and in the wider community by using firearms. This chapter has defined two forms of masculine relations towards guns: masculine traditionalism and masculine protectionism.

The first offers a consistent view of gun usage among long-standing gun owners in mostly rural areas. Here firearms have always been part of day-to-day life, for leisure activities like hunting and sport shooting, or by using it as a tool for the rite of passage. For these gun owners, the role of firearms has changed significantly less. Masculine traditionalism has therefore been a consistent factor in the preservation of American gun culture.

Masculine protectionism on the other hand shows a changing relation between men and firearms. This form is more responsive towards the developing situations of society. As both Stroud and Carlson conclude, a sense of increased criminality, a breakdown of the nuclear family and increased vulnerability due to age, have reinvented the role of men and the way they look at their gun. The home protector has fortified, but in many cases replaced the eroding breadwinner model.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem 840.

The white male gun owner has become the person that dutifully safeguards his family from evil and uses the firearm primarily for self-protection against others. This model, along with the data on primary reasons of gun ownership, demonstrates that there is a strong case in Yamane's designation of a culture of armed citizenry over the past couple of decades – a change both Carlson and Stroud seem to agree on.

However, there are differences in opinion within the academic debate on the relation between masculinity and gun culture. These differences are not about what causes such a culture to emerge, but on the individual reasons why men want to become a home protector. According to Stroud, this has to do with fantasies of violence and self-defense and the desire to be equal again when age creates vulnerability. By making the family dependent on the father's protection, such fantasies can become real, even though many will never fulfill them. In all, the model of the gun owning "law-abiding" citizen prescribes the use of the gun as "just" or part of what it means to be an ideal man. For them "the bad guy" does not fit in the chivalric "law-abiding" image and this picture of the ideal privileged male tends to exclude people of other races.

In this case, hegemonic masculinity has shifted to a particular white form of protectionism and in doing so promoting a new war ethos. This ethos is aimed at the other and argues that fighting the *bad guys* in crime (by giving a gun to the *good guy*) is the only, and proper American way to solve problems. This ethos reinvokes the principle of the myth of the frontier, by arguing that violence is accepted in making America safe for democracy and by encouraging a 21st century form of the frontiersman. According to Stroud, by carrying a gun, these men create a privileged neo-patriarchal relation towards women and children, while protecting against other men in a world filled with crime.

Carlson, on the other hand, does not deny crime to be an important factor in men's decision to carry a weapon, however, she argues that this is not the central reason for the individual desire to be a home protector. Through her work, Carlson argues that it is the perception of socioeconomic decline that pushes the change for a culture of armed citizenry. Without excluding Stroud's argument on fantasies and age, this conclusion by Carlson seems to hold more merit. Through socioeconomic decline, especially white men feel their position to be in peril. As a consequence, they see crime around them increase and their financial "breadwinning" status decrease. These imageries then use the narrative of crime to justify gun carry, with fantasies of violence and self-

defense as a result and aging as a simple argument in an already perceived sensation of decline. In short, Stroud's arguments become a part of the legitimization to carry guns to fight their declining socioeconomic status.

The concepts of the new war ethos and the home protector in this chapter depict a grim picture of the relation between masculinity and gun ownership. However, it is important to state that these conclusions derive from research done by sociologists on concealed carry, especially among white "law-abiding" males, and are not representative for all male gun owners and non-gun owners. The choice, however, to focus on this particular group stems from the concentration of firearms within it, its publicly vocal narrative of righteous gun carry (e.g. by the NRA) and the mass shootings carried out by predominantly white males, which have sparked the debate on masculinity within the public domain.

Moreover, while these concepts do not always result in a violent outcome, they do carry notions of gun violence within them through fantasies, domination and the safeguarding of men's position in the constructed image of the perfect American democratic society. Therewith, these concepts merely show how men have legitimized and used their choice to carry a concealed gun by combining two characteristics (violence and masculinity) central to this thesis. Most importantly, it has shown in which forms masculinity can manifest and in so doing help to sustain and change American gun culture. However, more research should be done on how other forms of hegemonic masculinity, and men and women from different racial backgrounds have influenced this uniquely American culture into what it is today.

Chapter 3 – Individuality

“A gun is status - that’s why they call it an equalizer,” said a young Chicago black a few years ago. “What’s happening today is that everybody’s getting more and more equal because everybody’s got one.”

- Richard Hofstadter, *America as a Gun Culture*

What is still missing in order to create a multidisciplinary theory on gun culture is a political and economic characteristic. These last characteristics can best be described within the umbrella term of *individuality* (or freedom). The word individuality in this chapter does not suggest that America’s (new) gun culture is the result of a growing notion of the individual behaving more and more separate from the wider community. Instead, the word in this case means the collective term for everything that discusses the political and economic relation between guns and the individual, such as its individual rights, consumption behavior, and political beliefs and views towards the government. Moreover, it discusses what are considered to be key American concepts and ideals of freedom engrained within the American characteristic of individualism. Among these ideals are the social contract (as put forward by John Locke), economic liberties (among which is the right to buy a firearm), freedom of speech and political agency (such as pro-gun advocates like the NRA).

Therefore, this last chapter is divided into two strains of individuality: *political individuality* and *economic individuality*. The first strain discusses the importance of social contract theory by John Locke. This theory has found major support in American society since its creation and in many ways symbolizes the relation between the government and the individual up to this day. As professor of marketing Elizabeth C. Hirschman argues in her work *Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America*, whenever the social contract seems to be collapsing, Americans tend to buy guns in order to protect themselves and their property rights.¹⁵⁸ In other words, Americans tend to buy guns whenever they feel their individual freedoms are in peril. This theory is supported by data on gun owners which show that many believe their personal sense of freedom

¹⁵⁸ Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” 541.

and identity to be directly linked to their right to own a gun.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, the prospect of federal gun legislation directly threatens one's identity and freedom. Through this, federal legislation and party affiliation also play major roles in the relation between the individual and gun culture. Moreover, if Hirschman's theory is true, it furthermore strengthens the conclusion that a new gun culture of armed citizenry is on the rise.

The second part of this chapter discusses economic individuality. Within it the idea of guns as a product becomes front and center. The fact that guns can be bought in supermarkets, combined with the belief that economic liberties extend to guns, suggest that firearms are both highly accessible and considered normal products. Therefore, guns are part of property right and are subject to all kinds of consumer marketing strategies. What has changed over the past three decades when it comes to economic individuality that could explain why a gun culture is still present or is changing? How has mass consumption altered or solidified the relation between Americans and their firearms and how are individual property rights measured against collective safety?

The line between political- and economic individuality can sometimes be very thin. Identity for example can both be influenced by party affiliation and advertisements and vice versa, and many of the other traits of individuality have similar connections. The two strains of individuality are therefore not meant to be mutually exclusive or separate from one another. They merely provide a framework that makes it easier to see the influence of both politics and economics on gun culture. Alternating from the first two chapters, this last chapter on individuality will not obtain a separate chapter on the data of this characteristic due to its complexity. However, data will still be used to support or contradict theories on individuality. These include, among others, data on identity and gun ownership, party affiliation and gun legislation, and the last remaining piece of information: numbers on gun sales throughout the years.

¹⁵⁹ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 6.

3.1 – Political Individuality: Social Contract Theory and the American Identity

In 1689, the English philosopher John Locke published his *Two Treatises of Government*. It was his second treatise on the topic “Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government,”¹⁶⁰ that came to be known as one of Locke’s and the Enlightenment’s most famous works. In it, Locke explained his view on the so-called *social contract*. A view that ultimately became part of the writings of the American Declaration of Independence and its Constitution, and centuries later would play a surprising role in the gun control debate. But why is the latter the case?

During the 17th and 18th century, the debate surrounding the origin and extent of political power was becoming a household discussion topic, no less so in the British Thirteen Colonies. The practices of absolutist monarchs were increasingly being questioned by enlightened philosophers such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, Hobbes and Locke. These discussions included questions on the rights of man, equality, property, and also if “there [was] a legitimate right to resist an illegitimate monarch to the point of removing him by force? Locke famously concluded that there [was] indeed such a right,”¹⁶¹ so says political scientist Ian Shapiro.

Just like Hobbes, Locke believed that prior to societies, humans lived in a *state of nature*. At the start of his second treatise Locke argued that:

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature; without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.¹⁶²

Thus, Locke concluded that the state of nature possessed complete equality, and that the state of perfect freedom was based upon the fact that no person had to obey another. This obligation only existed when the “Lord and Master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to

¹⁶⁰ John Locke, “The Second Treatise: Concerning True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government,” in *Rethinking the Western Tradition*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 100.

¹⁶¹ Ian Shapiro, “John Locke’s Democratic Theory,” in *Rethinking the Western Tradition*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 310.

¹⁶² John Locke, “The Second Treatise,” 101.

dominion and sovereignty”¹⁶³ – such a right and evidence, Locke concluded, had never been given to any monarch.

Locke expanded upon Thomas Hobbes’ social contract theory. In contrary to Hobbes, Locke perceived the state of nature to have been a fairly peaceful place. While people eventually “signed” a social contract with the government, they had not done so out of fear, but out of the desire that their *natural rights* would be protected. Therefore, people had joined societies, so Locke concluded “for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name property.”¹⁶⁴ As long as the subjects were protected in these fundamental rights, and the government was set up by its peoples consent, the government was a legitimate one.¹⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, Locke’s natural rights would become important components in the Declaration of Independence, and this is evident in its most famous sentence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.¹⁶⁶

However, such unalienable rights can also be retraced in the Second Amendment as it ensures an individual’s right to bear arms and the collective right to oppose a government violently whenever it breaks the social contract. As the first chapter of this thesis concluded, the Second Amendment made sure that the use of violence was not just limited to the federal government but that it was also partially given to the individual in order to protect the “free state,”¹⁶⁷ thus aiming it potentially at the government itself. “To Locke, any government or person attempting to infringe upon an individual’s right to preserve and protect his/her personal property and freedom may justly be opposed.”¹⁶⁸ Therefore, the Second Amendment in a way functions as the guarantor for upholding the social contract, making gun ownership intricately linked with the contract.

¹⁶³ John Locke, “The Second Treatise,” 101.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem 155.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth W. Grant, “Locke on Women and the Family,” in *Rethinking the Western Tradition*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 295.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” *Historic American Documents*, Lit2Go Edition, (1776), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/133/historic-american-documents/4957/the-declaration-of-independence/>.

¹⁶⁷ U.S. Const. amend. II.

¹⁶⁸ Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” 542.

This in turn makes social contract theory important in understanding if a new gun culture of armed citizenry is present in the United States. Making the connection between these two helps answer the question whether more people own guns for self-defense reasons because they increasingly believe the government is breaching the social contract, and to what degree guns are part of the American identity as a result of the incorporation of social contract theory in American society. Basically, the relationship answers the question that if a new gun culture is emerging what role does social contract theory play in it?

Therefore, there are two significant factors in this relationship. Firstly, firearms are symbolically part of the social contract itself, meaning that in Locke's definition they are considered property. Just as with land, a house, a car or any other possessions, guns are widely seen as being part of what people own and for which the social contract is signed. Any infringement by the government on the right to bear or own arms could therefore not only be seen as a constitutional breach, but also as a violation of the social contract (see chapter 3.2). Secondly, firearms are (as meant in the Second Amendment) a tool to resist any such governmental breaches of the contract. In this case firearms could be used as a tool to protect people's property of which, again, firearms are itself part of. Thus, banning or infringing upon firearm possession, so it is believed by pro-gun advocates, would affectively take away the means to resist a "tyrannical" government in the first place. Just as is the case with masculinity, firearms can be considered both a tool and a symbol.

Chaos & Tyranny

Maybe one of the most interesting researches on firearms in relation to the social contract comes from Elizabeth C. Hirschman. Surprisingly Hirschman is not a specialist in gun culture. In fact, as a professor in marketing her main focus is pointed towards consumer behavior, cultural narratives, individualism and semiotics. However, in her article on social contract theory and firearms, Hirschman makes an interesting connection between these two subjects. She finds that firearms are being purchased at points when individuals feel the social contract is in danger through "chaos" or "tyranny."¹⁶⁹ Just as is the case with violence and masculinity, guns are purchased and used in times of perceived decline.

¹⁶⁹ Hirschman, "Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America," 541.

In her article, Hirschman makes the distinction between the two threats against the contract on the basis of political and cultural narratives. She argues that *chaos* represents the inability of the government to protect individuals and their families from attacks in- and outside the sphere of influence (attacks can both be carried out by domestic and foreign criminals), or because of incompetence or corruption within the government and its law enforcement. *Tyranny* on the other hand represents the threat against the social contract in the form of the government's misuse of the military or law enforcement against its own citizens. This could manifest in the illegal seizing of land or property without due process or compensation. Such actions are safeguarded against by the Fourth & Fifth Amendments – both heavily steeped in social contract theory. It is clear however that both threats against the contract are perceived as some form of failure by the government and not from the community itself.¹⁷⁰

Both arguments seem logical. Whenever the government is not able or is the reason for the free state to be in peril, citizens, under the participatory monopoly, its Constitution and Bill of Rights would be able to protect their liberty by use of the gun, so is the argumentation of pro-gun advocates. This has always been the case says Hirschman, “the ultimate social contract touchstone, of course, [being] the revolutionary war.”¹⁷¹ From that point on, different interpretations have been given of what constitutes chaos and tyranny. During the Civil War the confederates believed blacks to be “savages” and the government the “tyrant”. Similarly, the frontier-dwellers of the 19th century thought the natives to represent chaos whilst arguing that the only way to combat them was with a local or regional, not a national social contract. “Thus, the ideology of asocial contracts being best constituted on the local or regional level became further ingrained in this portion of the citizenry.”¹⁷² In many ways, these alternatives to the social contract, linked with a distrust in the national government, still continue today.

But for all the examples of chaos and tyranny, Hirschman fails to put her own theory to the test. Do the numbers on gun sales and ownership truly increase when the social contract is perceived to be under attack? Also, if a rise in gun ownership has been happening in the past decades, in what ways do Americans believe the social contract to be in danger? In other words, is part of the reason for a new gun culture the result of government infringement in the use of guns as tools to

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem 550.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem 555.

¹⁷² Ibidem 545.

resist the government and protect American liberty, or because of an inability by the government to protect the contract in the first place?

Gun Sales and Party Affiliation

In order to find out if social contract infringement is important in understanding a gun culture 2.0, it is detrimental to look at the number of gun sales, whether they rise because of the fear for gun legislation, and how Americans identify with their Second Amendment rights. Gun sales have not yet been discussed in this thesis. However, it can tell a lot about why and when Americans buy guns. These numbers say little about those who already own one or more firearms, but instead give us insight into the motivation for new gun owners to buy a firearm – which, according to Yamane, is an ever-growing group of (young) owners particularly interested in self-defense.

After the crime wave of 1993, the number of gun sales, together with the number of violent acts decreased significantly (see chapter 1 on violence).¹⁷³ As has been discussed before, this is most probably due to new legislation surrounding drug policy and gun control under the Clinton administration. Nevertheless, according to a New York Times investigation, between 2001 and 2016 the estimated monthly sales of guns have been increasing again and almost doubled over this period of time. Somewhere in the fifteen years that followed, something changed that altered the trajectory of these sales.

According to the article, gun sales saw besides a steady rise since 2001, a couple of significant spikes over the years. These spike are pretty consistent with what the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) found (although no one-on-one relation can be made with gun sales and background checks).¹⁷⁴ Both the rise since the 21st century and the below mentioned spikes can be connected to a chaos and tyranny argument.

The first spike, maybe not surprisingly, came after the September 11 attacks in 2001. A period followed in which gun sales experienced a first boom. In the month of September alone 754,000 guns were sold, while the years before and after the attack saw a pretty stable 500,000-600,000 each month. The next peak followed just before November 2008, the month of Obama's first

¹⁷³ Wintemute, "Where the Guns Come From," 56.

¹⁷⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *NICS Firearm Checks: Month/Year; Statistic Representing the Number of Firearms Background Checks Initiated Through the NICS from November 1988 to November 30, 2019*, (Fall 2019), https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/nics_firearm_checks_-_month_year.pdf/view.

election, and shows a much larger spike. Throughout his two-terms as President, Obama became known for supporting gun control policies (although little change in gun legislation was actually accomplished). The 1.1 million guns sold in November 2008 were in sharp contrast with the already rising sales of firearms in the months before (it being close to 750,000). The record was then set in January 2013, with a staggering 2 million guns sold after Obama's re-election and the Sandy Hook school shooting. The shooting shocked the country and set Obama's administration further on a rampant course with pro-gun advocates and institutions such as the NRA. The fear that guns would no longer be easily accessible after this horrific event became so widespread that for a couple of months guns were stockpiled between 1 and 2 million each month. Another spike was than seen in December 2015, closely after the San Bernardino attack and the proposed gun legislation by the Obama administration.¹⁷⁵ The last peak came shortly before the 2016 presidential elections. Fearing Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton was going to win and would pursue stricter gun control policies like her predecessor, gun sales once again reached a new height. After Trump's election in 2016, gun sales have decreased significantly.

Obviously, the rise of gun sales in general is not simply the result of whose is in the Oval Office. Throughout this thesis it has become clear that there are countless reasons for Americans to purchase a firearm at given points. Moreover, gun sales see a steady seasonal height in December (coinciding with much of the spikes) and a low in June. This means that a rise in gun sales can be as simple as a reduction in prices during the holiday season. However, what these events show is that the tops in gun sales are not so much coincidental and that seemingly they prove Hirschman's point that guns are bought at points where the social contract seems to collapse - chaos being a terrorist attack, tyranny the notion of increased gun legislation. What is interesting though is that this sense of "collapse" is not so much triggered by the government truly being tyrannical, but because of the threat it poses to the accessibility of firearms itself, creating a sense of decline in the contract and the relation between the government and the individual's right of self-preservation. So, for the 21st century, guns are bought at points when Americans experience that firearms themselves might be harder to get in the future.

¹⁷⁵ Gregor Aisch, Josh Keller, "What Happens After Calls for New Gun Restrictions? Sales Go Up," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/10/us/gun-sales-terrorism-obama-restrictions.html>.

American Identity

The question remains however which group(s) of Americans feel inclined to buy firearms at such points. In this, it is important to look in which way American identity connects with firearms in general. Identity, like gun ownership in turn is steered by political identification. Such a connection can be seen in the fact that gun owners are divided whether owning a firearm is important to their identity. Of all gun owners, 25% believe owning a gun is very important to their overall identity while another 25% believe this somewhat to be the case. Another 73% say they can never see themselves not owning a gun. When it comes to identity, an equal share of woman and men believe firearms in their lives are important to their overall identity – therefore the relation between American identity and gun ownership is not so much oriented around masculinity.¹⁷⁶

But what is unmistakably clear is that there is a huge bipartisan difference in this relationship. While gun owners overall believe (with 74%) that the right to own a gun is essential to their sense of freedom, Republicans overall are twice as likely to believe this than their Democratic counterpart (91% for Republicans, 43% for Democrats).¹⁷⁷ Since the 1970s, Republicans own a larger proportion of firearms than Democrats. Today more than four-in-ten (44%) of Republicans or Republican-leaning independents own a firearm in contrast to 20% of Democrats.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, new gun owners are increasingly liberal (27,9% liberal; 36,2% moderate; 35,9% conservative) and represent 10% of all current gun owners,¹⁷⁹ while long-standing gun owners are more moderate/conservative (liberal 12,8%; 41,6% moderate; 45,6% conservative).¹⁸⁰

But what party affiliation says about gun ownership can also be turned on its head, namely how gun ownership influences voting behavior? Since the 1970s, gun ownership has created two contested cultures that have been reflecting on an ever-partisan vision of gun legislation. On the one side, supporters for gun control increasingly identified with the Democratic party (and the party with them vice versa), were urban, liberal, African American, increasingly female and believed firearms to neglect a fellow citizen's safety. On the other side, gun rights supporters became attracted to the Republican vision in which guns are seen as part of the core American

¹⁷⁶ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 32-37.

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem 31.

¹⁷⁸ Mark Joslyn et al., "Emerging Political Identities? Gun Ownership and Voting in Presidential Elections," *Social Science Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (June 2017): 382-396.

¹⁷⁹ Wertz, "Differences Between New and Long-Standing US Gun Owners," 871.

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem 873.

values of freedom, self-sufficiency and what it means to be a good citizen. These supporters are mostly rural, male and conservative.¹⁸¹

Although most of these arguments might be nothing new, what has changed since the 1970s is that the 21st has seen a rise in mass shootings (see chapter 1), increasing the heat of the debate on gun legislation, consequently widening the partisan divide on the topic of such legislation. This in turn expands the impact of gun ownership in voting preferences with each election cycle. A simple example of this can be found in the gun sales during Obama's presidency and the decline of it since Trump's nomination. Financial insecurity, starting with the economic depression of 2008 also plays a key role in this partisanship as chapter 2 on masculinity has shown. The rise in concealed carry permits as a way of coping with a loss in patriarchal status and as a tool for protecting family and loved ones, show that there is a soaring distrust in the federal government to protect its citizens (especially among Republicans) and that this has sparked a build-up in gun sales over the past two decades.

Therefore, it is fair to say that the 21st century is marked by a perception of social contract endangerment, thus needing a return to times of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Therewith, the participatory monopoly gains further traction in American society furthermore cementing the importance of guns in American life. Political individuality has shown to play a major role in the construction of what indeed seems to be a gun culture of armed citizenry emerging in the United States. What is clear though is that this culture is perceived differently by Republicans and Democrats. Although Yamane seems to be right on the fact that self-protection has become the majority reason for Americans on both sides of the isles to own or carry firearms, he does not incorporate the difference in how self-protection is perceived within these different political spectrums.

For Republicans, this thesis has proved that owning a firearm is essential to their way of life as many see the gun as an essential symbol of their freedom as an American – a natural right being an undeniable part of the social contract. While gun ownership is partly for self-protection reasons, the part of protecting is not just aimed at criminals or outside threats (the chaos aspect of Hirschman's theory). Instead, for Republicans, gun ownership in the new gun culture is also about

¹⁸¹ Mark Joslyn et al., "Emerging Political Identities?," 384.

protecting the right to carry a gun. It is about holding on to the symbolic meaning of the right to carry in order to protect from tyranny. Losing, or infringing upon such rights is an immediate attack on the fundamental principles of American existence - the social contract, freedom and self-reliance.

For Democratic gunowners, firearms, in the 21st century gun culture are merely seen as tools. Many have only just purchased a gun in recent years, and usually only one as it serves the need to protect. The right to own a piece of firearm is less essential than the practical utility it provides to protect from chaos. Therefore, Democrats are more open to gun legislation than their Republican counterparts - having more or less rights as a gun owner is less important as it hardly hits home on a symbolic level. This does not mean that all Democrats agree on strict gun legislation. However, they are more prone to consider public safety above national and individualistic symbolism. So, while an overall majority of Republican gun owners in the new gun culture believe in the symbolic right of the gun in order to protect from tyranny, Democrats believe guns to be a tool to protect from chaos.

Notwithstanding that the abovementioned conclusion can be seen as black and white (there are a lot of different standpoints within the two political parties) this chapter hopes to show that political individuality in combination with violence and masculinity has shaped a new gun culture in the United States since the start of the 21st century. What seems to be the overarching theme in this new culture is the role decline has played since the post-9/11 era. Whether it is violence in the form of mass shootings, or declining job opportunities spurring new forms of patriarchal structures such as the home protector, a feeling of decline is what seems to connect the three characteristics of gun culture. Within political individuality, both sides experience such a decline through chaos and/or tyranny, which increases the importance of what Locke believed to be paramount in society: the right of self-protection and self-reliance. However, throughout the past decades political individuality has shaped two contested cultures that have been reflecting on a growing partisan vision on guns, grounded within the conflict between the individual and the collective, the tool and the symbol, chaos and tyranny, and what it truly means to be American.

3.2 – Economic Individuality: The Product and the Equalizer

There is an old saying in the American West, one that has been repeated in cowboy cult movies time and time again, and that is that “God created men and Samuel Colt made them equal.”¹⁸² Colt became one of the most famous gun manufacturers in the United States because of the Colt Single Action Army (SAA) type revolver created for the army in 1872. The gun soon got the nicknames: The Frontier, The Equalizer, The Model P, and most of all The Peacemaker.¹⁸³ However, the Colt SAA would not be the only famous weapon of the West. Other types of firearms would get similar renown for their reliability, power, accuracy and reloading speed. Weapons such as the Winchester Model 1873, better known as “the gun that won the West,”¹⁸⁴ or the 1860 designed Henry Rifle that was proclaimed “the gun you could load on Sunday and shoot all week long.”¹⁸⁵ What these guns all had in common, besides the fact that they were created in the 19th century and used throughout the American westward expansion, was that they were considered a necessary and essential product to the American way of life and were advertised in such fashion.

As so, these ‘products’ were being sold in local newspapers and through mouth-to-mouth advertisement creating a longstanding culture in which it became normal for firearms to be presented and bought as consumer products. Such a normalization of firearms in American culture has persisted through stories depicted within e.g. the myth of the frontier and through movies, shows and other forms of popular culture (see chapter 1). Till today, the firearm has a prominent role in action movies and tv-shows, wielded by both the good and the evil. And although there have been differing levels of restrictions, advertisement of handguns and larger firearms are still very much used by weapon manufacturers today. Simultaneously, pro-gun organization such as the NRA solidify the normality of weapons in- and outside the household, stating that the liberties of possessing is part of what it means to be an American.

This small chapter examines what is considered for this thesis to be the last missing link in understanding the evolution and continuation of American gun culture and the seemingly changing

¹⁸² “God Created Man They Say, Samuel Colt Made them Equal, More or Less”, *Quigley Down Under*, directed by Simon Wincer (1990; Pathé Entertainment), DVD.

¹⁸³ Jeremy Agnew, *Crime, Justice and Retribution in the American West, 1850-1900* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2017), 84.

¹⁸⁴ Stephen van Dulken, *Inventing the 19th Century: 100 Inventions that Shaped the Victorian Age, From Aspirin to Zeppelin* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 208.

¹⁸⁵ Dulken, *Inventing the 19th Century*, 208.

composition of gun owners and their arguments for owning a firearm. That is the believe that firearms are an inextricable part of American individual socioeconomic liberties: the right of possession. Therefore, this chapter discusses the meaning of firearms as an economic product. Most importantly, keeping in line with the supposed development in American gun culture, this chapter begs the question what has changed in the last decades when it comes to seeing guns as a consumer product, and what has caused such a change to begin with.

My Gun, My Right, My Property

What makes the United States distinctively different from other parts of the world when it comes to gun ownership, is not only the believe that Americans have the right to protect themselves (see chapters 1, 2 and 3.1), but also that they ought to have the right to own a firearm simply for the argument of possession. This brings us back to Locke's social contract theory and to his point that the contract was particularly signed to protect one's goods. In this case the utility of firearms no longer takes center stage as has been the case in the previous chapters. In this instance, it is about the believe that firearms are mere products like cars, houses, food and other supplies.

For a long time, the discussion whether guns should be considered normal consumer products like cars, has been part of the larger debate concerning gun control and ownership. Anti-gun advocates argue that if they would be treated as a car, a gun owner would have to first obtain a gun license before being able to own a firearm, as is the case with an automobile. However, as gun rights advocate and attorney David B. Kopel rightly argues in his article *Treating Guns like Consumer Products*: "Yet were we to treat guns like automobiles or alcohol, we would have to remove most gun restrictions because guns are already regulated much more strictly than automobiles or alcohol."¹⁸⁶ Although Kopel is right when it comes to state regulations, this does not seem to be the case on a federal level.

Notwithstanding the difference of opinion, it is clear that there has not yet been a time in which the social contract seized to include firearms as part of one's property. On the contrary, taking away the right to own a firearm by legislatively banning them has proved to be a very unpopular measure, and as of 2020 no bill on the complete prohibition of firearms has been passed. Only

¹⁸⁶ David B. Kopel, "Treating Guns like Consumer Products," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 148, no. 4 (April 2000): 1213.

assault weapons were banned between 1994-2004 by order of President Clinton's Public Safety and Recreation Firearms Use Protection Act.

And this hardship in federal gun legislation is not surprising. When something is part of a longstanding culture, in this case through liberties of private property, it becomes extremely difficult by any federal government to undo itself from such products of society. An example of this is off course the Prohibition era between 1920-1933, which saw the trade in alcoholic beverages become forbidden, only to be repealed after years of protest. Many believe, so Kopel argues, "that when the government singles out a constitutional consumer product for punitive taxation or regulation, the government oversteps its authority."¹⁸⁷

Whether banning firearms actually means the overreaching of federal power is open for discussion. However, that discussion is not part of this thesis. Nevertheless, these arguments by Kopel provide us with an insight in how deep these consumer goods are woven into the American fabric, even to a point that banning them would be considered unconstitutional, touching upon the "Fourth Amendment protections from illegal searches and Fifth Amendment protections against the taking of property without due process."¹⁸⁸ For those like Kopel, the government has no right to interfere with people's right to possess.

And Kopel is not alone in this believe. For decades the National Rifle Association (NRA) has lobbied for deregulation aimed at gun owners and dealers not just on the foundation of self-protection, but most of all on the rationale of property rights. And this has not been without success as Joshua Horwitz claims in his book *Guns, Democracy and the Insurrectionist Idea*. Born in 1977, the organization quickly established itself as a champion for gun rights, nearly abolishing the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and winning the passage of the Firearm Owner's Protection Act (1986) that rolled back important parts of the Gun Control Act of 1968. The Firearm Owners Protection Act specifically focused on protecting firearm dealers from federal interference in selling their consumer products.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem 1246.

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem 1243.

¹⁸⁹ Joshua Horwitz, Casey Anderson, *Guns, Democracy and the Insurrectionist Idea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009): 36.

Through organizations such as the NRA, the firearm did not only become a protected product for consumers, it even succeeded in extending such a protection to weapon dealers and manufacturers by using the Bill of Rights and the sometimes fragile social contract. As Hirschman best explains, the NRA uses “public paranoia concerning the instability of the American social contract [knowing it] can be played upon.”¹⁹⁰ Opposition groups have had a hard time fighting such arguments that represent people’s individual rights, especially in the United States where such rights have incredible weight. Only since the last two decades have anti-gun advocates found effective selling points through the horrific results of mass shootings and other excessive uses of firearms.

Even though membership numbers of the NRA have changed overtime, 19% of Americans claimed to be a member in 2018. Another 40% believe that the NRA has the right amount of power and another 15% think the NRA should have more power when it comes to firearm matters.¹⁹¹ It is therefore imperative not to underestimate the influence of organizations and other pro-gun actors in reaffirming the importance of the very rudimentary argument that guns should be a rightful part of one’s property. The positioning of firearms through philosophical principles is therefore much more static than if we look at the influence of violence or masculinity. It resides within the individual property rights Americans gave themselves, and which in turn is easily reevoked by groups such as the NRA by bringing the social contract into the debate. Much more than in other countries does individual rights and property transcend common good. Especially when it comes to firearms, keeping alive the tradition of gun ownership and the culture in which it resides, no matter the good or bad consequences that stem from it.

Selling the Product in Times of Change

These arguments based on the social contract and economic liberties are, as said before, much more static than what has been discussed during the previous chapters. This means that individual property rights and the existence of the social contract have been part of the American existence since its founding. Although “political philosophy can be used to prove normative arguments for the possession of guns by civilians in the USA, [...] the pattern of historical events provides an additional rationale,”¹⁹² so Hirschman argues. Many of such events have already been considered throughout this essay. However, there are also elements within economic individuality that are

¹⁹⁰ Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” 551.

¹⁹¹ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 14.

¹⁹² Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” 543.

more variable through time, such as the marketing and sales of firearms. These elements furthermore explain the continuation of the American gun culture and could help us understand why Yamane argues for a new gun culture to be present today. In other words when we talk about weapons as a consumer product what has changed in the past few decades?

Firstly, one of the biggest changes when it comes to the rights of individuals to possess a firearm, is unquestionably the Supreme Court ruling following the case of *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008). It held that the Second Amendment protected the right to bear arms for the purpose of self-defense, changing the 1939 *United States v. Miller* ruling which had not taken the right to bear arms independent from the right to form a militia. The following case of *McDonald v. City of Chicago* (2010) ruled that this right applied both on state, local and federal level. The Court's ruling in effect opened pandoras box and to this day there is still much debate about what this right exactly entails. One of the most important questions that came from the *Heller* ruling is if there is a Second Amendment right when it comes to the sale of firearms?¹⁹³

As of 2020 there is still no clear answer to that question. In the past few decades gun manufacturers and retailers have had a changing degree of flexibility when it comes to selling their weapons. President George W. Bush Jr. signed in 2005 one of the last major laws concerning gun manufacturers of the previous decades, actually protecting manufacturers from being named in civil suits by victims of gun violence that had used their products.¹⁹⁴ Although the case *District of Columbia v. Heller* did not directly speak to gun manufacturers, they definitely benefited from its result. Loosened restrictions on owning and carrying firearms meant more people were able to buy guns all across the country, no matter if you lived in an anti-gun state.

Similarly, with the expiration of the *Public Safety and Recreation Firearms Use Protection Act* in 2004, this also meant manufacturers and consumers were no longer prohibited from respectively manufacturing, selling or buying semiautomatic assault weapons such as the AR-15, opening up a whole new market for military styled weapons. Unfortunately, these weapons have proven to be the preferred choice for mass shooters, and manufacturers such as Colt even stopped producing a

¹⁹³ Joseph E. Sitzmann, "High-Value, Low-Value, and No-Value Guns," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 86, no. 7 (November 2019): 1985.

¹⁹⁴ Sarah Gray, "Here's a Timeline of the Major Gun Control Laws in America," *Time*, April 30, 2019, <https://time.com/5169210/us-gun-control-laws-history-timeline/>.

consumer variant of the AR-15 in 2019, claiming that the market was already saturated.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the 21st century has seen a significant rise in manufacturing of military styled assault weapons, peaking in 2016, according to the ATF.¹⁹⁶

Secondly, another factor which has been left out in the debate is the use of social media by manufacturers, retailers and gun enthusiasts. The 21st century has seen the emergence of such platforms and these have proven to be very effective in the promotion and selling of firearms. The growing number of YouTube-channels and podcasts have made information on firearms more ready-made and entertaining. Yamane's designation of "Gun Culture 2.0" actually derives from Michael Bane's podcast "Down Range Radio," an informative podcast on newly launched firearms.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, gun shows have proven to be extremely attractive. Among gun owners, one-in-four admit that they have or often attend guns shows.¹⁹⁸ Although more research should be done on how these 21st century platforms influence American gun culture, the role of online marketing should most definitely not be underestimated.

Lastly, the change in legislation and the accessibility of firearms has caused another effect in American gun culture that supports Yamane's hypothesis, and that is the effect the notion of *equality* has on gun culture. In Hofstadter's article, a young Chicago African-American is quoted in arguing that the gun could be seen as a status symbol of equality, and since everyone had one, everyone was equal.¹⁹⁹ In this the young Chicagoan of the late 60s refers to his ability to defend himself from the white American who had made it impossible for him to be legally equal to them. Then again, the equality theory had already been part of the American westward expansion since the 19th century. Whereas users of the Colt Single Action Army (SAA) would make them able to match the same number of Native Americans as bullets the revolver held – hence the nickname "the Equalizer."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ David Yaffe-Bellany, "Colt to Suspend Production of AR-15 Rifles for Consumers," *New York Times*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/business/colt-ar-15.html>.

¹⁹⁶ United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *Firearms Commerce in the United States Annual Statistical Update 2019*, (Washington D.C.: Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 2018): 1-2.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Bane, "Down Range Radio #194."

¹⁹⁸ Parker et al., "America's Complex Relationship with Guns," 30.

¹⁹⁹ Hofstadter, *America as a Gun Culture*.

²⁰⁰ Slotkin, interview.

It is arguable that the 21st century has seen the return of what can be called the *equality effect*. This is the idea that, not only do Americans tend to buy and own guns at points when the social contract seems to be collapsing, but also when they are in danger of becoming inequal to others. Traces of this can be seen within the home protector theory and with males who own firearms to compensate for lost strength due to age. Most of all, the result of such an effect can be seen in the rapidly increasing market that targets female non-gun owners using advertisement that highlights their need for a gun to be physically equal to dangerous men. And not without success. Out of all new gun owners, women represent the biggest growing group.²⁰¹

The 2008 Supreme Court ruling, among others, has opened up the door for non-gunowners to buy firearms on the basis of self-defense. This has created a domino effect of equality seeking, or as Hirschman puts it “the firearm became the equalizer in rights and duties.”²⁰² For example, when a neighbor buys a firearm, it is more likely that those around that neighbor will buy a weapon themselves. Whether they do this to protect from their neighbor or to be able to protect against others just like the neighbor can. In fact, half of all gun owners admit that one or all of their friends own a firearm.²⁰³ What makes the equality effect in the 21st century different from those episodes in the past, is the fact that weapons are not bought to make the west safe for democracy, nor for civil rights. The equality effect in the 21st century is solely based upon self-protection.

Not surprisingly, weapons manufacturers have put more emphasis on the sale and production of handguns over the last decades. Firearms are obviously consumer products with different uses. While rifles and semiautomatic weapons are typically used for hunting, sport shooting and collecting, pistols (and in some ways revolvers) are more popular for self-protection as they are easier accessible in case of emergency. These types of weapons have become more popular over the last four decades, evident in the rise in pistol manufacturing between 1980-2019, (not to mention the legal and illegal sales of existing pistols on the secondary market). While only 21% of all manufactured weapons consisted of pistols in 1986, this percentage rose to 41% in 2016 - the year the most firearms were manufactured in total.²⁰⁴ Of the 1 million Americans that become

²⁰¹ Hirschman, “Social Contract Theory and the Semiotics of Guns in America,” 553.

²⁰² Ibidem 544.

²⁰³ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 29.

²⁰⁴ Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *Firearms Commerce in the United States Annual Statistical Update 2019*, 1.

new gun owners each year,²⁰⁵ 65% percent have only one reason to do so and own only one gun to do it with, and that is to protect and become equal with others.²⁰⁶ Gun manufactures therefore play into the demand for handguns and the seemingly American need to protect. In all, there is little to deny Yamane’s claim of a new gun culture of armed citizenry in the 21st century.

3.3 – Conclusion: Individuality in Gun Culture

This chapter set out to explore how ideas on political and economic individuality can help us explain the preservation of American gun culture. More importantly, it supplements the answer to the question whether a culture of armed citizenry is present in the 21st century. In order to do this, this chapter included social contract theory, American identity, Hirschman’s chaos and tyranny model, the impact of the Bill of Rights and that of prohibition legislation, the influence of pro-gun organizations and firearm manufacturers, and lastly the equality effect.

When it comes to the characteristic of individuality and the question why American gun culture has endured the past couple of centuries, the significance of social contract theory is undeniable. The relationship between these two is complementary. The social contract protects the gun as a symbolic part of the contract itself, and the gun protects the social contract in being a tool for safeguarding against chaos and tyranny that threaten the contract. As this chapter has shown, firearms are, as Hirschman points out, indeed being bought at points when the social contract is in danger.

However, the 21st century has seen a change in this relationship. Firstly, through party affiliation, the relationship between firearms and the social contract has created two different points of view. As was the case in the chapter on violence, partisanship has since the 1970s created two contested cultures. For Republicans, who see a firearm as being part of their overall identity, this relationship is much more essential to their sense of freedom. For Republicans individual freedom through the symbolic position of the gun transcends the Democratic argument for public safety. As a result, Republicans tend to see gun ownership more as a symbolic right given by the social contract in order to protect from tyranny. And whenever the federal government threatens in their view, the

²⁰⁵ Wertz, “Differences Between New and Long-Standing US Gun Owners,” 871.

²⁰⁶ Parker et al., “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns,” 22.

accessibility of firearms, gun sales tend to go up. Democrats on the contrary believe less in the relationship between firearms and identity. For most of them, this relationship between the contract and owning a firearm is more practical as they are more interested in using firearms as a tool to protect from chaos instead of tyranny. Therefore, new gun owners tend to be younger and more liberal, owning only one piece of firearm as it serves their need of protecting.

Another way of researching the endurance of gun culture through the ages is by looking at individual property rights and America's longstanding culture in which firearms have become regular products. Again, the social contract plays a big part in this as it has almost always included firearms as a part of one's property. And as social contract theory dictates, the government is a legitimate one if it protects the fundamental rights of property. Through advertisement, pro-gun organizations, shows, movies, books and other popular culture, firearms have become normalized consumer products in American society. This normalization has made it extremely hard for any federal government to regulate gun ownership causing the political stalemate we find ourselves in today.

A significant change in the last three decades, which adds to the chaos and tyranny model, is that firearms are also bought at points when they themselves are believed to be harder to get in the future. This argument is all about perceived accessibility. Whenever the accessibility of firearms is being "threatened" (due to proposed legislation which Republicans tend to see as tyranny), gun sales seemingly go up as can be seen in the last two decades until 2016. At the same, time real accessibility to firearms has dramatically increased after the Supreme Court ruling of 2008 and 2010. Nevertheless, no clear laws have been put in place to regulate and monitor such changes. Especially with the help of 21st century platforms such as internet and social media, manufacturers, retailers and gun enthusiasts have found themselves in a more easily accessible and less restrictive era of gun sales.

Lastly, this thesis has shown a second addition to Hirschman's theory, and that is that firearms are similarly bought at points when one feels unequal to another. This equalizing effect is of all times and returns when Locke's state of perfect freedom could become imbalanced – that is when one runs the risk of having to obey another. During times of the frontier, the equalizer was advertised and used as a way to individually become as strong as a number of "savages," or to become equal to the forces of the wilderness to make them safe for democracy. In other times this effect finds a

return in the pursuit of legal equality. In the 21st century however, this effect has found a restoration in the quest for physical equality.

In short, the characteristic of individuality helps us to understand that the factors of chaos and tyranny, accessibility and equality have helped to maintain and change a gun culture in the United States. Much more than in other countries has political philosophy, legal and constitutional (property) rights and the notion of equality play into its way of life. It has therefore retained the tradition of the American gun culture over the centuries. Nevertheless, (as has been the case with violence and masculinity) it seems that notions of decline within the core principles of this characteristic have sparked a new type of gun culture - one that relies heavily on the sole principles of self-reliance, self-preservation and self-protection: a culture of armed citizenry.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate whether gun culture in America has changed over the past three decades into what Yamane calls a gun culture of armed citizenry. In order to do so, it contains the question what role characteristics of violence, masculinity and individuality play in this changing culture.

To start off, this thesis has proven that without an interdisciplinary study, the abovementioned characteristics are mere puzzle pieces. Unconnected, they only show a small image but not the complete picture. For example, it would be too elementary to assume that an increase in violence alone causes a protectionist gun culture, nor does a sense of toxic masculinity or increased polarization. Instead, these characteristics seem to complement each other as the pieces come together, and although more should be added, it is believed that these characteristics form the center pieces of this puzzle.

Most importantly, in this spirit of understanding American gun culture, these characteristics all seem to point to a certain direction when it comes to Yamane's argument of a culture of armed citizenry. Not only do they show that there is indeed such a culture present in the 21st century, they also point to a shared cause for this change, and that is decline. This theory of decline is what seems to motivate Americans to own firearms for reasons of self-protection and self-reliance - the pinnacle elements for a gun culture of armed citizenry.

They in turn are the result of some major and generally felt impressions of decline throughout American society over the past couple of decades. Firstly, an increasing sense of violence, partly due to mass shootings, has underscored the idea that self-protection is necessary, making many believe that carrying a gun makes life safer. Secondly, the felt believe of socioeconomic decline by (especially white) males, has furthermore emphasized that the United States is not what it used to be. Compensating for a demasculinized position, the gun returns a sense of self-reliance and what it means to be a true American. Thirdly, the concept of chaos and tyranny has shown that the 21st century has ushered in a time of government distrust and polarized views. As gun sales have drastically increased since the turn of the century, it indicates that many believe the government to be unable to either protect them from inside and outside threats, or to preserve and protect

American values such as rightfully owning a firearm. Lastly, decline can also be felt through a sense of inequality. As firearm deregulation makes it easier for anyone to purchase a firearm and lost physical strength due to age makes it harder to protect, the believe to be unequal to others is easily constructed. Combined with the increasing sense of violence, a loss in masculine- and patriarchal status, and growing impressions of chaos and/or tyranny, decline seems to be the main reason for a change towards a gun culture of armed citizenry.

However, this idea of decline can set in anywhere and does not necessarily result in a culture of self-reliance and -protection in other countries, let alone by using firearms. Then why is it that we see this particular phenomenon in the United States? The reason for this is that these concepts of self-reliance and -protection do not come out of nowhere. Instead they are backed by precedent as has been shown throughout this thesis. Although decline shows the need for a changing culture, precedent emboldens such a change by notions of rights and believes.

When it comes to believes, the myth of the frontier depicts a nostalgic world in which violence is legitimized to protect American ideals and all that is good from evil. It furthermore reiterates the role of men as guardians, consistently being echoed through popular culture such as movies, TV-shows and social media. Through fantasies of violence and the rite of passage, men want to live up to those ideals, resulting in a new war ethos and the transition towards a status of home protector.

Similar to such believes, many Americans feel emboldened by their rights as Americans to carry a gun for self-protection. These rights stem from concepts such as the monopoly of violence. A unique American right originating from its Second Amendment, which calls upon civilian participation in protecting American society against a tyrannical government, and in the 21st century against evil elements of society. Similarly, social contract theory has always included firearms as part of the bargain. Whether they are used as tools to uphold the contract itself or are seen as part of the property rights which Americans have enjoyed since the American Revolution. Therefore, these rights are considered crucial to American identity and thus political parties, gun lobbies and manufacturers have played upon these precedents in order to support the seemingly growing need for self-protection and self-reliance.

Nevertheless, although most of these rights have always been there, one could argue that the causes or perceptions of decline are not so much a 21st century phenomenon. Instead, throughout

American history all three characteristics might have included some measure of decline. Times of increasing violence is nothing new as we have seen with the 1990s. Nor is a renewed search for what it means to be a man. In this instance, the struggle for American veterans after the Vietnam War or the redefinition of American family values into the nuclear family after WWII come to mind. Nor has this thesis shown that polarization is a unique 21st century phenomenon or that the myth of the frontier has never been adhered to before.

While these arguments all hold merit, there are two important factors that should be considered. First of all, it has never been argued throughout this thesis that such a gun culture has never existed in the past. It has simply tried to answer the question put forward by Yamane, why such a gun culture exists today. Secondly, and most importantly, it is the combination of these characteristic changes, combined with precedential right, that has caused this change in gun culture. Only because of a combination of decline through mass shootings, socioeconomic decline, redefinition of (white) male hood, individualism, polarization and the belief in American rights could a change in a longstanding culture be created, furthermore solidifying the fact that a multidisciplinary study is crucial in understanding it. Combined, the puzzle pieces seem to fit, showing us a picture of a new gun culture - a culture 2.0, of the citizen-protector, a gun culture of armed citizenry.

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