

ANTH 1100- Ethnography Paper

(Chicago Format)

Introduction

Cultural anthropology explores broad issues related to what it means to be human in both recent and present communities and cultures. Cultural anthropologists do systematic research on a variety of subjects, including “technology and material culture”, “social organization”, “economics”, “political and legal systems”, “language”, “ideologies and religions”, “health and sickness, and societal change”.

In the short film by The Guardian, the narrator explored the rationale behind the fascination that the American population has towards owning a gun and what gun owners think about owning a deadly fire weapon. The film also focused on finding out if the same is contributing to the rising shootouts and crimes in the United States. This current essay will find out the details of the culture that was depicted in the film and explain the significance of gun culture in America.

Observations and Background

In the short film "Gun Nation: America's deadly love affair with firearms" by The Guardian, the current gun culture in the United States was shown vividly. The movie explored if the fascination with guns among the residents in America has changed in 18 years or not because during those 18 years, the number of deaths from shooting in the United States has rapidly increased and the narrator of the video wanted to find out if that has changed the perspective of

the gun owners about owning a firearm¹. Richard Hofstadter, a well known history expert has explained the “exceptionally high rates of gun owners” in America and the “violence” that comes along with it as a result of deep-rooted "gun culture". This can be referred to as a unique American Phenomenon and it can also be said that the results of this “culture” have impacts on the social and political distinctive outcomes as well. The same raises many questions concerning the culture, factors that constitute culture, the process of producing culture, and the pattern of demonstrating the effects of culture².

Finding out the symbolism of the gun culture in America is one of the best ways to approach these emerging questions as it focuses on guns that are used as a symbol of power and not just defined by their physical utility. Another study revealed that "symbolic forms are the means through which 'social processes of shared modes of behavior and outlook with a community' take place". Therefore, the moral and emotional definitions of firearms help in understanding in which way the “symbolic elements of cultural meaning” influence the action strategies and are constructed in a social way³.

It was found from the research as well as the movie by The Guardian, that the gun owners in America differ in their “sense of empowerment” that comes from the guns and most importantly the interviewees who went through economic distress or fear the same, tend to gain a sense of self-esteem and moral rectitude from owning the firearms and weapons⁴. These people tend to get a sense of meaning to their lives and according to them, they feel safe when they have deadly firearms accompanying them, which they cannot get from either economic status or

¹ The Guardian. “Gun Nation-America’s deadly love with firearms.” *YouTube* video, September 16, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUpCqBonOFw&t=50s>

² Mencken, F. Carson, and Paul Froese. "Gun culture in action." *Social problems* 66, no. 1 (2019): 1-27.

³ *Ibid*, Pg 1

⁴ The Guardian, 2016

religious devotions. In simple terms, it can be said that their attraction to their weapons comes from “popular narratives” including the "masculinity", "freedom", "heroism", "power", "independence" in America, and so on ⁵. Also from the movie it was noticed that every single one of the gun owners except the gun sellers was agreeing to one thing, that is guns are meant for protection only and “guns do not kill people, rather people kill people” and they use guns as a means for the same. But the most shocking thing was how guns are being sold privately without a background check which might be a core reason that the criminals have easy access to these deadly firearms.

In comparison to other Western post-industrialized nations, the United States stands out due to its high numbers of people who own guns, high rates of gun violence, and laxer gun laws. Aforementioned statistical data are cited as proof of an American-only "culture" surrounding firearms ⁶. When considering policy preferences in relation to gun laws, a paradox does, however, arise. Gun laws continue to be relatively lax despite a rise in public support for tighter regulation. Gun lobbies, particularly the National Rifle Association, have a significant impact on American politics, which is frequently cited as the cause of this contradiction. Furthermore, the promotion of “narratives and identities that exalt American gun owners” and, in the process, celebrate our "gun culture" is done by the industry that produces guns as well as special interest organizations. It is this "long-term emotional tie" to weapons that sets “American history” apart from other national histories and explains why the country has enacted benevolent gun laws. Gun

⁵ Boine, Claire, Michael Siegel, Craig Ross, Eric W. Flegler, and Ted Alcorn. "What is gun culture? Cultural variations and trends across the United States." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1-12. Pg 3

⁶ Yamane, David. "The sociology of US gun culture." *Sociology compass* 11, no. 7 (2017): e12497.

culture evolved during the 20th century, just like other serious hobbies ⁷(David, 2017, p-3). In the twentieth century, as workdays and hours reduced and wealth, as well as consumer credit, expanded, the previously mentioned change of hunting from a requirement of survival to a sports hobby was accentuated. There aren't many hunters in the United States, despite the fact that many still hunt for game meat. The "utilitarian" view of hunting has changed during the course of the 20th century. More and more hunters may be divided into two categories: "sport hunters", those who like being outside with others and showing off their talents, and "nature hunters", those who hunt for "inner-directed, practically mystical, reasons" ⁸.

Crimes rates are already very high in the United States and as it was shown in the film people believe there are bad people with guns and there are good people with guns. Owning guns does not create any problems and people in America take pride in owning firearms⁹. They are rather worried if the law changes and they for any reason have to hand over their guns, they will be in trouble. In the film, the interviewees were also asked if they think it is okay to allow private sellers to sell guns without any background check, and many of the interviewees said that all the sold guns should be registered as it might limit the access to firearms for the criminals. Another cultural factor that could be identified from the film is that the kids are brought up in a way that they prefer having guns from their childhood. They are not afraid of guns rather they are fascinated by firearms¹⁰. Many of them get training on how to shoot from early childhood and many of them get rifles, shotguns, or semi-automatic rifles as their birthday presents. It was also found that they like to use guns for fun activities and most of them use semi-automatic rifles for the same. After the attack on a school in Texas, parents would also prefer if the teachers are

⁷ David 2017, Pg 3

⁸ Ibid, Pg. 3

⁹ Claire et al. 2020, Pg 3

¹⁰ The Guardian 2016

allowed to carry guns in school ¹¹. Therefore it can be said that the video revealed the white population in America believes in having supreme power and guns and firearms are the ways to obtain the same.

Anthropological Context

The culture of armed citizenship, often known as gun culture, is prevalent in the United States and is focused on armed self-defense. The idea of "armed citizenship" acknowledges the enormous and expanding population of Americans who are "exercising their constitutional right to carry a gun in public for self-defense"¹². In recent times, people who own gun, specifically who have bought a firearm recently—cite "self-defense" as the main justification for possessing a gun, despite the complexity of the reasons for gun ownership, as it has been seen. In a 1999 "ABC News/Washington Post poll", 26% of respondents said they owned a gun for protection. However, by 2013, that percentage had increased to forty eight percent. The combined declines in "hunting", "target/sport shooting", and "gun collecting" were about equal. In the 2015 National Firearms Survey, which was conducted more recently, it was shown that 63% of respondents cited "protection against people" as their main justification for possessing a firearm¹³.

An important finding from the Washington Post/ABC News survey conducted in 2013 was that 51 percent of Americans believe that owning a gun at home makes it a safer place to be than a more hazardous one. Outside the house is also part of this panorama. According to a 2015 Gallup Poll, fifty-six percent of people in the United States, including fifty percent of women

¹¹ ibid

¹² David 2017, Pg 4

¹³ David 2017, Pg 4

and forty eight percent of people who did not own a gun, believe that when people in the country carry “concealed guns”, the country becomes more safe. These figures represent evolvement of legal framework governing the “possession and use of guns for self-defense”. The United States' extraordinary relaxation of gun restrictions over the years, both show and encourage the growth of a gun culture there¹⁴.

Supporters of gun ownership often highlight one or more of the following points that include "Second Amendment rights", "responsible gun ownership" the "importance of self-defense" and the prevalence of politicians and celebrities who own guns. More specifically, they contend that the United States Constitution already guarantees unrestricted gun ownership rights, “gun ownership is ingrained in the fundamental right to self-defense”, and “authorities and celebrities at all levels of contemporary society support the freedom to own guns and make that freedom a part of their public lives”¹⁵.

Culture can be defined as a factor that consists of symbolic indicators which include belief, ritual practices, ceremonies, and art forms along with a set of informal cultural practices such as language, stories, and gossip from daily life. It is hard to completely assess culture as its whole, as this term is used. To acquire insight into the impact of particular segments of a person's cultural universe, it can nevertheless concentrate on especially overt components of culture, such as well-known and well-defined symbols and storylines. It is particularly intriguing to learn how and when people gain meaning and a sense of self from cultural symbols. The idea of an "American gun culture," which has both good and bad implications, is well known and the

¹⁴ Kocsis, Michael. "Gun ownership and gun culture in the United States of America." *Essays in Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2015): 154-179. Pg 156

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Pg 156

symbol of the gun is already deliberately associated with it¹⁶ (Condé. 2022). The NRA's president, Wayne LaPierre, speaks openly about the cultural significance of gun ownership. Millions of Americans, particularly those who own weapons, are questioned by him about the country's gun culture. Self-reliance, self-defense, and self-determination are considered to be three fundamental American ideals¹⁷.

There are various elements that are illuminating in how Americans who possess guns are portrayed in popular culture, specifically, the stereotype of the masculine, white gun owner that pervades society. In popular fiction, video games, television shows, and movies, these features are frequently portrayed and appeal to those who possess those characteristics. As a result of weapons being "symbolic of the masculine position as a family defender," men constantly feel the need to demonstrate their manhood¹⁸. They represent the authority of the Strict Father and serve as a moral compass. Given how deeply ingrained gun ownership is in American culture, the relevance of weapons and gun ownership is partially social. However, the U.S. Constitution specifically guarantees gun ownership as a distinctive and uniquely American right. On the other hand, proponents of gun ownership often overlook a key aspect of their opponents' platforms: a society free of firearms, or, more specifically, a society free from the harm that excessive gun ownership does to people. Supporters of gun ownership fail to understand how a society without gun violence is an equally vital basic right and how it is for everyone's benefit.

During "periods of societal transition" or "unsettled lifestyles," symbolic components of culture can become more potent and persuasive. This makes sense considering that "positive

¹⁶ Nast, Condé. 2022. "The Atrocity Of American Gun Culture". The New Yorker.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/06/the-atrocity-of-american-gun-culture>

¹⁷ Michael 2015, Pg. 158

¹⁸ Steidley, Trent. "The effect of concealed carry weapons laws on firearm sales." Social science research 78 (2019): 1-11. Pg 5

notions of self, such as self-esteem and mastery, have been found to deteriorate under economic stress and disruptive life events." Therefore, it can be said that guns are a convenient symbolic "tool" in the United States that may be used to deal with pain on a moral and emotional level¹⁹. Gun owners figuratively cling onto their moral identity and intended "moral order" as a tangible manifestation of their power and independence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that as people in America and the United States are fascinated about owning guns and always want to be "prepared" for any danger that might befall, it contributes to the rising of the gun culture in the United States. It was found that people might own a gun for many reasons but most of them prefer to own it for self-defense. Also, guns were identified as a cultural symbol.

As a key takeaway from this, it can be said that the American gun culture's principles seem to be fading with the times. Fewer people hunt or live in remote places where they may hunt, more people want stronger gun regulation, and the population's share of white men is declining. Despite this, gun restrictions have not been toughened and gun narratives are still pervasive.

¹⁹ Trent 2019, Pg 6

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