

Twenty years since the Columbine High School massacre

19 April 2019

Saturday will mark 20 years since the massacre at Columbine High School in a Denver, Colorado suburb. In that horrific incident, 12th-grade students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 12 of their fellow students and one teacher before committing suicide.

There had been school shootings in the US prior to April 20, 1999, but in its planned and systematic character, in its desperate and cold-blooded brutality, in its scope (Harris, in a diary entry, fantasized—well before the September 11, 2001 attacks—about hijacking an airplane and crashing it in the middle of New York City) and in its conscious “political” timing (on Adolf Hitler’s birthday and the near anniversary of the right-wing terrorist attack in Oklahoma City in 1995), the Columbine event represented something qualitatively new and disturbing.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, in the second year of its publication, recognized this.

“However terrible its consequences, the mad rampage of Harris and Klebold has deep social roots,” wrote David North in “The Columbine High School massacre: American Pastoral ... American Berserk” on April 27, 1999. What was it, North asked, citing a passage from novelist Philip Roth, that was leading vulnerable young people in America “into disaster”? “Look honestly at this society—its political leaders, its religious spokesmen, its corporate CEOs, its military machine, its celebrities, its ‘popular’ culture, and, above all, the entire economic system upon which the whole vast superstructure of violence, suffering and hypocrisy is based. It is there that the answer is to be found.”

The “disaster” of American society has only worsened in the intervening two decades. Inevitably, the specific derangement and mayhem of school shootings, associated with the names of institutions such as Virginia Tech (2007), Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut (2012) and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (2018), has continued.

Indeed, the Columbine anniversary events planned for this week were overshadowed by reports that an 18-year-old Florida woman, obsessed with the 1999 shooting, had made threats against Denver-area schools. The news that the teenager had flown across the country to Colorado where she purchased a pump-action shotgun and ammunition set off a massive police pursuit and led to the closure of schools attended by half a million students. Sol Pais was later found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound “in a heavily wooded area” west of Denver.

The latest deadly incident is never the last, it is simply the most recent. The *Washington Post* estimated earlier this month that since the Columbine massacre more than 220,000 children had been exposed to gun violence in their classrooms. This statistic alone testifies to a social order that cannot provide elementary protection for its most defenseless members.

This inability to guarantee the bodily and psychological safety of children goes hand in hand with official American society’s inability or stubborn unwillingness to comprehend or even seriously address the root causes of these unending tragedies.

This writer noted two decades ago (in “‘Eyes wide shut’: The reopening of Columbine High School,” August 19, 1999) that “Everything is being done except the critical thing: to make an analysis of the social situation in the US. Politicians and media pundits offer differing shallow conclusions, but they all agree on one thing: the killings have nothing to do with the basis of the social order. *That* they spring to defend. In any event, one is hardly expecting from official America a searching self-criticism, but the policy of sweeping major problems under the rug will inevitably have disastrous results.”

The blindness, made up of one part pig ignorance and another part deliberate obliviousness fed by prosperity and self-satisfaction, also continues unabated. If anything, the intellectual and moral atmosphere today is more

bankrupt and degenerate than it was in 1999.

One searches in vain for probing commentary on the 20th anniversary of the Columbine shootings in the American media, “left,” right or center—or much commentary of any kind.

The *New York Times*’ veteran columnist Clyde Haberman asks in a headline, “20 Years After Columbine, What Have We Learned?,” but he might just as well not have bothered. After pointing to many of the mass shootings and acts of violence that the Columbine events heralded or even inspired, and noting that such tragedies are now “so ingrained in the national character that they come with their own well-worn script,” Haberman abruptly leaves off, without drawing any general conclusions. His only solution apparently—more gun regulation, the sum total of the current wisdom of American liberalism. Meanwhile, grotesquely, Donald Trump and the fascistic National Rifle Association propose to arm teachers or put weapon-toting police in every school building.

School killings are largely seen in establishment circles as a police matter. Appropriately, the *Crime Report—Your Criminal Justice Network* recently observed that “perhaps surprisingly” the phenomenon of mass shootings “has not been subjected to a comprehensive academic study, until now.” The National Science Foundation this month sponsored a workshop, attended by “both academics and law enforcement officers,” on “An Evidence-Based Approach to Understanding and Countering Mass Violence in America.” The papers, we learn, “will be published in the American Society of Criminology’s journal *Criminology & Public Policy*.”

But from which quarter would one expect critical or deep-going analysis of any significant development in the US? The well-fed and well-heeled *Times* and *Washington Post* editors, columnists and their ilk at universities and think tanks, focused on Russia, race and gender and the 2020 elections, are hardly in a position to make sense of or even acknowledge the advanced state of dysfunction. As long as stock prices climb, the argument goes, everything is fine in America—even if young people happen to be shooting each other and dying in frightening numbers from suicide and drugs. Speaking for all the prosperous, the *Wall Street Journal* observed last year, “There aren’t many downsides to America’s humming economy.”

Not all ruling elites are created equal. The American version is especially stupid, short-sighted, philistine and, as Leon Trotsky observed in 1924, “ruthlessly rude,

predatory—in the full sense of the word—and criminal.”

And the upper middle class “left,” or what remains of it? The left-liberal halfwits at the *Nation* and *Jacobin* magazines are a thousand miles away from the vast popular suffering in the US, entirely preoccupied with promoting this or that Democratic Party “populist” charlatan and pretending that he or she will easily fix America’s problems.

The 20 years of mass school killings have to be seen in their full social and historical context. It has also been two decades, more or less, since the declaration of the “war on terror” and the invasions of Afghanistan and later Iraq, two decades since the hijacking of a national election and the repudiation of any concern by the American bourgeoisie for democratic norms, two decades of mounting social inequality and two decades of unrelenting attacks on workers’ conditions of life. All these processes exist “in the same historical plane,” in Trotsky’s phrase.

This same 20-year period has introduced Columbine, Sandy Hook and Parkland, Abu Ghraib and Fallujah, Guantánamo and Bagram, along with “school massacre,” “workplace shooting,” “targeted assassination,” “kill list,” “enhanced interrogation,” “black site” and “extraordinary rendition,” into the world’s lexicon.

American capitalist society is disintegrating. Mad, individual anti-social acts such as the one that occurred at Columbine will not be halted by the pious wishes, much less the indifference, of the powers that be.

However, the same intolerable social crisis is brewing something very different within the mass of the population. The same processes—war, poverty, and social misery—that give rise to mass shootings and the daily violence of American society, are also driving a much more progressive development: deepening hatred of capitalism and a growing audience for socialism.

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