

Guns

by Michael Bettencourt

Several essays in 2015 about guns in *Harper's* and *The New York Review of Books* are notable for the way the authors have sacralized guns and gun owners/ownership, saying that gun users have rights that non-gun users are bound to respect and that the solution to “guns” in our society will come about when non-gun users begin respecting these rights and gun users act as stewards of the public peace by promoting what I can only call the “safe sex” version of gun usage.

This argument is absurd, of course, both as argument and as public policy. So, let's take it apart to see why.

First and foremost are these “rights” – what are they? The Supreme Court did say that gun ownership was a right, but it didn't say that unregulated gun ownership was a right. After all, the phrases “well-regulated” and “bear arms” appear in the same sentence, so the writers must have meant for them to have something to do with one another.

So the resistance by gun users in the name of Constitutional liberty to measures that mean to regulate them – or, more accurately, regulate things like buying/selling and information (through things like licenses, registration, etc.) – is hypocritical because they aren't really interested in protecting the Second Amendment but what I call Second Amendment Lite: all “bear arms,” no “well-regulated.”

This also means, as a logical consequence of their hypocrisy, that they must consider the 30,000 gun-related homicides a year a necessary blood sacrifice that the rest of must pay to protect their rights – why else would they do nothing to stop them?

Are these the kind of rights, and rights-holders, that any of us should be bound to respect, where gun-user self-interest (not to mention their fetishism about the gun-object itself) is tarted up as public interest and where someone else's pain is considered a proper homage to their beliefs? Not for me, and not for any state that would consider itself well-regulated and in service to the welfare of its citizens.

So, if these “rights” are not to be respected, what about the object to which they are attached? What, actually, is a gun?

Despite whatever else a gun is considered – beautiful machine, symbol of liberty – it is foremost a manufactured commodity that, like cigarettes, if used properly will only cause injury. Therefore, it makes no sense to treat something so dangerous with any kind of veneration when we should be treating it as we would treat any commodity that might cause harm, through the processes we have for product safety regulation. My toaster has to undergo such a vetting; why not something geometrically more dangerous than that?

In addition to product safety regulation, we should also treat guns as a public health problem, just as we did with cigarettes. The injuries and deaths caused by people using easily acquired guns have to be paid for, and there's no defensible argument against why that cost should not be borne, in part, by the companies that make the product that helps cause the injury, just as we did with cigarettes.

Therefore, the “rights” of gun users (and that includes the companies that make the guns) should not trump legitimate concerns about product safety and public health. That they do only proves the power of money and fear to stifle reason and action – and that’s all it proves. Sacrosanct rights, individual liberty, the tyranny of government (more on this in a moment) – all a smoke-screen to hide the fact that gun users simply don’t want to be told what to do with their manufactured commodities and that they believe their own self-interests in this regard are of a higher order than the interests of individual victims and the commonwealth at large.

Well, what about that tyranny of the government? What about the argument that the state wants to seize the guns of individuals and take away people’s freedoms and that the guns are necessary to resist such despotism, in the finest American revolutionary tradition?

Really?

If the state really wanted to take away people’s guns, it would take away people’s guns. As the owner of the biggest gun on the block, so to speak, the state can pretty much do what it wants to do when it comes to expending violence against the citizens. Sure, there would be hold-outs and pockets of resistance, but the state would win, at least for a time, in part because, even though there 200 or 300 million guns in the people’s hands, these gun users in no way resemble a “well-regulated militia.” The thought that there would be coordinated push-back by citizens enraged by this assault on their rights is a fever dream.

But the state is not interested in taking away people’s guns as a means of controlling them because it doesn’t need to do that to control them. There are far easier and more effective ways to cow a citizenry than outright attack, and the state uses all of them right now, from oppressive surveillance to a friendly tax audit.

So, if gun-user rights are really expressions of self-interest underscored by an adolescent whininess about being told what to do; if guns, as products, are dangerous when used as instructed; if the idea that people have to have guns in order to resist tyranny is just a fever dream, what defense is left to justify not changing the situation concerning guns and gun violence in our society?

None.

Gun users, though, are right about one thing: it’s probable that gun regulation will not stem the tide of gun violence, at least not in any meaningful way. Gun regulation is about gun regulation, but guns are not the source of the violence – that lies elsewhere in our society. The only way to turn that tide of violence is by basing our society on peace and justice instead of its customary foundations in hyper-individualism, capitalist greed, and willful ignorance (about history, about economics, about morality).

Now, if gun users wanted to work towards that end, I might be more open to respecting the rights they say I should respect about their using guns. But until they come around, then I have no recourse but to work towards making sure they and their manufactured commodities get at least the level of regulation that car owners, barbers, and dry cleaners have to undergo to do their business. Anything less than that (and I’d like a lot more) is just an insult to the people sacrificed to ensure that they get to play with their toys without interruption.

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