

SHOOTERS

Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures

Abigail A. Kohn

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2004

Preface

AK: Do you consider yourself a handgun enthusiast?

Greg: Yes.

AK: And how do you define handgun enthusiast?

Greg: It's a term that I wouldn't normally use myself, but I would define it as somebody who enjoys and/or is interested in handguns. Either owning, possessing, collecting, firing, or fantasizing about it.

AK: What would be a more appropriate term, or what would be a term that has more resonance for you?

Greg: Shooter.

From the 1970s on, the American print media has carried on an all-out war against gun owners. They are labeled "gun nuts," "gun fanatics," "the lunatic fringe," "sickos," and "terrorists." Gun owners are laughable, contemptible, "a handful of middle-aged fat guys with popguns." Editorial after editorial calls for stronger gun control, ranging from licensing and registration of all guns to outright bans on handguns. The *New York Times* publishes "The Scourge of Guns" and "Addicted to Guns," straightforwardly indicting guns and gun owners for America's high rate of civil violence. Not to be outdone, the *Washington Post* publishes editorials entitled "Good Parents, Bad Kids: And Far Too Many Handguns" and "Illegal Guns and the District," arguing that "turning off the supply of handguns from around the nation" is the only effective way to reduce gun violence in the nation's capital and across the United States.¹

On the other side of the country, a columnist in a major West Coast newspaper pens a piece about the Second Amendment Sisters, a pro-gun women's organization formed largely in response to the Million Mom March, which favored gun control. Entitled "Pistol-Packin' Polyester," the columnist describes the Second Amendment Sisters as "bored, under-educated, bitter, ter-

rified, badly-dressed, pasty, hate-spewin' suburban white women from lost Midwestern towns with names like Frankenmuth all carrying firearms and somehow thinking they're aiding the species." Only moderately less inflammatory, another West Coast contributor argues that America's gun culture is responsible for the "tyranny of danger" and "omnipresent threat of death" in contemporary American society.²

The National Rifle Association (NRA) gets similar treatment. Social critics refer to it as a subversive "cult" with a dangerous creed. A high-profile newsman refers to the NRA as the "Negro Removal Association" because it opposes gun control laws that would supposedly prevent young black children from being murdered with guns. According to some of the top journalists in the country, gun enthusiasts and NRA members are racist, stupid, ignorant about history and politics, apathetic to violence, bellicose, and jingoistic. They are, quite simply, evil.³

It's difficult to imagine the media promoting these kinds of characterizations of particular ethnic or religious groups without a political firestorm. Yet these are routine characterizations of gun enthusiasts. Clearly, the American media has taken an active, vocal stance in the gun debate. The frequent editorials and op-eds size up the media's position fairly neatly: Guns kill people; therefore, gun owners are killers. Gun control is the best, if not the only, way to stop violence in the United States.⁴

Perhaps surprisingly, gun owners and the NRA don't fare much better in the world of academe. In the past fifteen years, health and medical journals have launched a rigorous campaign to promote gun control, lambasting gun owners and the NRA to give up their guns. The *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and the *American Journal of Public Health* have published scores of articles and editorials arguing that guns are a "pathogen" that should be eradicated from American society, that gun-related violence is an epidemic, and that anyone who owns a gun stands a strong risk of becoming either a victim of suicide or a murderer.⁵ The public health field clearly views gun ownership as a health risk and gun owners as inherently dangerous people who imperil both their own lives and the lives of people around them.

Other examples from the academy include a well-regarded sociologist who published an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* cautioning liberal scholars against researching guns and the Second Amendment. The scholarly endeavor should be informed by moral principles, he argues, and because supporting gun control is the right thing to do, good scholars shouldn't do research that could potentially undermine it. A Pulitzer

Prize-winning historian insists that the Second Amendment *does not* guarantee an individual right to bear arms, historically or contemporarily, and scholars who insist otherwise are guilty of rewriting history to suit their ideological inclinations. Law journals publish articles with intellectual rationales for why gun owners should be publicly excoriated. In the *Yale Law Review*, an eminent feminist legal scholar argues that all gun owners should be understood as potentially violent because gun ownership is *prima facie* evidence of apathy toward violence, particularly violence against women. Gun ownership and indeed the gun culture are straightforward examples of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. Another legal scholar writes in the *Boston University Law Review* that gun manufacturers and the NRA should all be labeled "necromerchants." In other words, the gun culture encourages murder.

These published examples are by no means unique. When I began my research into gun enthusiasm and gun ownership in the mid-1990s, I learned that a number of my academic colleagues held very similar views.⁶ One colleague said (trying to sound positive) that I was committing a real social service by researching "such disgusting people." Another informed me that because neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and the Ku Klux Klan all obviously love their guns, until I recognized that the phenomenon of gun enthusiasm was intrinsically racist, I was an apologist for racist violence. A third colleague told me frequently that she found gun owners utterly repellant, and she was surprised (and more than a little suspicious) that I didn't find them repellant as well. She insisted that until I recognized and acknowledged the ugliness and inherent pathology of gun enthusiasm, my research was disrespectful to victims of gun violence.

If conventional wisdom suggests that gun owners are all criminals and troglodytes and supporting gun control is the right thing to do, then perhaps the negative reactions to the topic of guns in the United States are not surprising.⁷ If the main source of information people have about the gun culture is media images of stockpiled weapons and angry sound bites from the NRA, small wonder that so many Americans are disgusted by gun owners. And quite frankly, some gun owners don't help their own case. One of America's most famous gun enthusiasts, former NRA president Charlton Heston, has articulated ideas that *do* in fact sound racist, particularly when he links gun ownership to being white. For Heston, guns signify the "white way." In a speech he made to the highly conservative Free Congress Foundation, he stated: "Heaven help the God-fearing, law-abiding, Caucasian, middle-class, Protestant or—even worse—admitted heterosexual, gun-

owning or—even worse—NRA-card-carrying, average working stiff. . . . Why is ‘Hispanic pride’ or ‘black pride’ a good thing, while ‘white pride’ conjures shaved heads and white hoods?”⁸

Considering these words from Heston, arguably one of the best informed about how the NRA as an organization thinks and feels, I am sympathetic to those who distrust what they perceive as the true NRA ideology. As one *Washington Post* contributor put it, “The answer, of course [to Heston’s question], is that people who proclaim ‘white pride’ often have shaved heads or wear white hoods.”⁹ To many critics of widespread gun ownership, Heston’s speech sounds like the ravings of a racist, homophobic, and paranoid right-wing conservative, and thus the defining essence of the NRA.

The Heart of the Issue

Although ideologues tend to see these issues in black-and-white terms (and the gun debate has more than its fair share of ideologues), these issues are far more complex than they immediately appear. They are more complicated than Heston and the NRA seem to recognize, and unquestionably more complicated than critics will concede. In fact, in many respects, conventional wisdom regarding guns and gun owners is either overly simplified or simply wrong.¹⁰ For example, a number of historians have argued that there is a legitimate historical basis for citizen gun ownership and that the Second Amendment does confer an individual right to own guns.¹¹ Criminologists have been pointing out for years that most gun owners can and do own guns safely and without criminal intent. Some citizens do use guns effectively to thwart crime.¹² Noted scholars have even suggested the ultimate of heresies—that gun control may not be quite the panacea that liberals insist it is.¹³

Needless to say, pro-gun advocates have employed these academic arguments and findings to promote their position and to further legitimize the NRA’s stance against gun controls.¹⁴ At this point, perhaps not surprisingly, no amount of persuasive rhetoric from either side does anything but speak to the already converted. Both sides in the gun debate have provided their mountains of “conclusive evidence,” which generally consists of endless statistics that prove either the beneficial (or the detrimental) effects of widespread gun ownership.

But the question still remains: Why are so many Americans so attached to their guns? This is the heart of the issue, and *neither* side has addressed it effectively. Antigun advocates are mainly concerned with persuading gun

owners to stop owning guns, not with understanding why gun owners are so attached to them. Pro-gun advocates have not explored this issue adequately either. The evidence they proffer about the benefits of gun ownership notwithstanding, most pro-gunners tend to say simply that guns keep Americans free. Although this symbolic association is indeed held by many gun enthusiasts, its basis is not entirely self-evident. If the historical roots of guns making us free are long gone, why do some Americans still believe in this idea so strongly? Can we really afford to assume that linking guns to freedom is simply an artifact of American history (real and imagined) and leave it at that? More to the point, what does the concept of freedom really *mean* in relation to guns?

If we assume that there’s no mystery here, and guns equal freedom because Americans have always owned guns to keep themselves free (whatever that means), then there’s really nothing to debate anymore. Guns are a part of American history, and no amount of contemporary naysaying will change that fact.¹⁵ However, the sheer amount of rancor over these issues suggests that there is more going on than a difference of interpretation about our nation’s history and what kind of bearing that history should have on contemporary American society.

Guns obviously have tremendous social meaning in American society. The different and complicated meanings that Americans do attach to guns is almost completely unexplored territory. Even conceptualizing the gun debate as a clash of political ideals, the difference between what conservatives value versus what liberals value, does not really address the core issues. At this point, both liberals and conservatives tend to treat the gun issue simply as more evidence of how ridiculous and “out of touch with reality” their political opponents are. As an explanation for why Americans find guns meaningful, this really doesn’t cut it. None of these explanations or arguments really gets at the heart of the issue: *What does owning guns really mean for American gun enthusiasts?*



Introduction: Guns in America

In the fall of 1997, as a graduate student at the University of California, I set out to conduct an anthropological study of gun enthusiasm. To collect data, I used the traditional anthropological method of participant observation, which basically entails joining the designated group in question, making friends with its members, observing and participating in community events, and engaging in group activities with the community. For fourteen months, I spent time at shooting ranges, gun shops, and shooting competitions, all of which are open to the general public. I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-seven male and female gun enthusiasts and spent hours hanging out and shooting with dozens more.¹ I asked the gun enthusiasts I interviewed how they were first introduced to guns, how long they had owned their guns, and what gun ownership meant to them. I asked them what guns symbolized for them. Their answers to these questions, as well as their beliefs and concerns, constitute the data discussed in this book.

I conducted this research largely in the San Francisco Bay Area. Because the Bay Area usually evokes images of the free-spirited bohemianism of Haight-Ashbury, the student-packed chaos of Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue, and the sprawling, misty beauty of the Northern California coastline, it is not a geographic locale that is usually associated with America's gun culture. And yet there is one. Northern California has an active, self-delineated community centered around guns and gun enthusiasm. When I conducted this research, there were between six and ten gun shops in the metropolitan area (depending on how the boundaries are drawn), six shooting ranges within a forty-five-minute radius of the inner city, traveling gun shows that stopped

in the Bay Area several times a month (with local vendors in attendance), local chapters of national organizations like SASS (Single Action Shooting Society), IPSC (International Practical Shooting Confederation), and the NRA, and shooting competitions and events that occurred almost every weekend of the year.

These are but a few local examples of what constitutes a local manifestation of America's gun culture. The term "gun culture" is often used but rarely defined. I define a gun culture as one that places enormous social, historical, and political *emphasis* on guns (both positive and negative and every shade of gray in between). A gun culture has structural manifestations pertaining to gun ownership in a variety of geographic locales. Even a place not strictly associated with guns can have a version of the gun culture if people in the area gather to talk about guns, buy and sell them, or recreate with them. A gun culture is one that uses a common language about guns and shares a set of signs and symbols pertaining to guns in everyday life.

In fact, academics have employed their own (more strict) definition of gun culture, suggesting that it denotes a geographic locale where gun ownership is prevalent and where people are socialized into gun ownership and "pro-gun values."² As such, scholars have noted that gun prevalence is particularly high in the South and then in descending order from the Rocky Mountains, the Midwest, the Pacific, and finally the Northeast.³ Gun ownership and socialization into gun use are strongly associated with rural areas as opposed to urban ones, and with conservative political values rather than liberal ones. Therefore, a site more likely to demonstrate "typical" gun ownership would be a rural area in the American South, where activities like hunting and target shooting are common and politics are generally conservative.⁴

But attending a number of Bay Area ranges and shooting events on a frequent basis enabled me to see that there were plenty of regular participants, a loose-knit fellowship drawn together not by physical space but by shared interests, specifically an interest in guns. Members of the local gun culture love to talk about, shoot, and collect guns. The fact that this thriving example of gun culture coexists alongside everything that the gun culture supposedly is *not* (i.e., liberal, wealthy, multicultural, contemporary) made Northern California a fascinating place for this research. Clearly, some version of the gun culture can thrive in urban environs, even where guns are not supposed to be of much historical or material importance.

This research was also undertaken as an ethnography, or in-depth study of a particular community or small-scale society.⁵ In the tradition of ethnography, the point was *not* to gather quantifiable data from a representative

sample of gun owners. Rather, I sought to discover the "natives' point of view," or, in more contemporary terms, to learn which issues and concepts are most important to gun enthusiasts.⁶ Ethnographic research is unique in its ability to provide an understanding of behavior and belief that is usually understood only in quantitative terms.⁷ Academics actually do know a fair amount about American gun ownership in more statistical terms.⁸ However, these quantitative methods yield data that are not particularly subtle or nuanced. Numbers don't present a window into how gun enthusiasts actually think or feel about their guns. Establishing a cohesive and inherently meaningful pattern of action, or worldview, is extraordinarily difficult when analyzing short answers from respondents, such as "Yes, I own two guns" and "I own my guns for self-defense." These short answers present only snapshots, images and pieces of a complex social world.

Ethnography, on the other hand, can combine and interpret these pieces into a richer and multifaceted whole.⁹ Ethnography fills in the gaps and provides a window for the social world of any given group. These are the "warrants for ethnography" that provide the main reasons why ethnographic accounts have wider relevance than their small samples might suggest.¹⁰ So while the thirty-seven shooters interviewed here are not "representative" in the sense that they can and should represent all gun owners or enthusiasts on a national scale, the concepts and issues they raise are broader than their own personal or phenomenological interests.¹¹ These shooters provide a window into the cultural concerns and issues that gun enthusiasts share more broadly, as evidenced by the similarities between the themes and concepts that these shooters raise and the themes and concepts discussed in such national publications as NRA magazines and gun debate articles published in national newspapers and magazines.¹²

Perhaps the most powerful reason for using ethnography to study gun enthusiasm, however, is simply that ethnography is uniquely capable of humanizing stereotypes.¹³ Because policy is often formulated on the basis of what "those people" think and do,¹⁴ discussing what gun enthusiasts *really* think and do, and what actually motivates their hostility to gun control, may be a valuable step toward advancing the gun debate.

Cultural Conflicts over Guns

The gun debate reflects not only cultural concerns but also cultural conflicts, which made studying gun enthusiasm in Northern California all the more compelling.¹⁵ These cultural conflicts are most obviously articulated in the

Bay Area as sociopolitical differences. Guns and gun owners are viewed with wariness and even downright disgust by many Northern Californians, and local gun aficionados are well aware that their chosen lifestyle is disdained by local politicians, community organizations, and other non-gun-owning citizens. Local politicians have frequently sought to ban certain kinds of guns or limit the presence of guns on county property, and they have had a relatively high degree of success.¹⁶ The area was home to the Million Mom March Foundation (formerly the Bell Campaign), a national, nonprofit gun control advocacy organization that provides a political voice to those victimized by gun-related violence.¹⁷ The San Francisco/Oakland version of the Million Mom March in May 2000, drew up to five thousand supporters with little counterprotest.¹⁸ These examples of organized antigun sentiment help foster an overall sociopolitical environment that throws the thoughts, feelings, and worldview of gun enthusiasts into sharp relief.¹⁹

These conditions provided a fascinating opportunity to investigate gun enthusiasm. Pro-gun and antigun worlds collided regularly in Northern California, as local politicians fought to ban the always crowded gun shows from public spaces and a Democratic governor passed several strict gun laws that banned a variety of long guns.²⁰ Insofar as Northern California maintains an "adversary culture" toward the gun-owning community, shooters in the Bay Area find themselves frequently defending their chosen lifestyle, whether at town meetings, to other parents in the neighborhood, or simply at parties or social gatherings with non-gun owners present.²¹ As de facto members of Northern California's gun culture, they are frequently in a position to defend their interests, often to hostile audiences.

Although frustrating for them, this situation was helpful to me from a research perspective. The shooters interviewed here were well-placed to discuss and defend their views about guns and gun enthusiasm because they do so all the time, and they were often pleased and relieved to discuss these issues with a sympathetic, noncombative audience. Their discussions with me about how they feel about guns, and their struggle to justify their feelings about gun ownership to their friends and neighbors, brought home the extent to which the gun debate has become a true site of cultural conflict on a local and national level.

Shooters in the Study

I started interviewing people almost immediately after I started taking my first set of shooting lessons in the fall of 1997. I met people in coffee shops,

restaurants, and their homes, which was usually their preferred setting. I conducted thirty-three interviews in total with thirty-seven people (four couples were interviewed together).²²

The shooters I interviewed fell into three rather broad categories. They all share some basic characteristics: a love of guns, both handguns and long guns, a love of the gear associated with guns (gear for shooting, as for any middle-class sporting phenomenon, is an industry in itself), and an enjoyment of the activity of shooting, either competitively, for plinking (shooting outdoors at random targets such as tin cans or bottles), or for recreational target shooting. The basic underlying assumptions inherent in being a shooter are that you support private gun ownership and generally endorse pro-gun ideology. In other words, if you are a shooter, your political inclinations are (supposedly) self-evident.

The first group is composed of "general enthusiasts," which included thirteen people.²³ These shooters own guns for several reasons: because they like them, enjoy shooting them, engage in gun sports or hunting (but are enthused about guns and their sport, as opposed to simply enthused about sport), and/or own guns for self- and home defense. This category includes ten men and three women; one is Latino, another Asian, but the rest are white. All of these individuals are middle or lower-middle class, according to their income level and, in some cases, their self-proclaimed class status.

The second group of shooters are all involved with "cowboy action shooting," a shooting sport dedicated to Old West guns, outfits, and shooting scenarios. This category includes nineteen people, eleven men and eight women. I interviewed one black cowboy shooter; the rest are white.²⁴ This group is full of doctors, engineers, lawyers, and real estate brokers, many of whom are moderately wealthy. Three of these shooters work in the firearms industry and are apparently very successful at it. The few (four) that are not white-collar workers work as low- or mid-level administrators or artists; one was a retired law enforcement officer. There are in fact a good number of active or retired law enforcement officers who enjoy cowboy action shooting. I did not manage to interview more than one of them in this group, primarily because I lacked enough time.

The third group of shooters I call the "Generation X" shooters, not only because they are the youngest group overall (all were born after 1960), but because their thoughts, attitudes, and occupations fit the popular generational portrait drawn from media representations of Gen X. There are only five shooters in this category, all men, four whites and one Asian.²⁵ Several of these men organize shooting activities for themselves and their friends on

public lands several hours outside of any urban center in Northern California. These shooting outings sometimes have a seasonal flavor. I attended a "Pumpkin Shoot" after Halloween, in which vegetables were destroyed with relish (no pun intended). Some of these shoots even make oblique social statements, as in the case of a shooting outing in which shooters fired at old computer equipment.²⁶ This event was called the "Hard Drive-By." It was intended to be social commentary: most of these shooters worked in the computer industry and enjoyed themselves immensely blasting away at computers and AOL disks for several hours. I usually shot with these guys in smaller groups at local shooting ranges or on public land.

Whether these shooters are demographically identical to the population of gun owners across the United States is difficult to say. Research by criminologists indicates that as a whole, gun owners in the United States are usually male, predominantly middle to upper-middle class, Protestant, married, and white. They generally own guns for hunting and sporting purposes, though handguns are owned primarily for defensive purposes.²⁷ This portrait does indeed fit most of those interviewed here.²⁸ However, the factors that make Northern California relatively unique should be kept in mind. The first is that gun ownership in the United States is filtered through a variety of factors, and regional differences (particularly the urban/rural divide) is an important one. The people interviewed here live in a primarily urban setting, and though some did grow up in rural areas, they are now urbanites or suburbanites. Urban dwellers generally own fewer guns overall than those in rural areas, where guns are used for such mundane activities as hunting, varmint control, and livestock management, activities obviously less relevant in urban settings.²⁹

Also, although conservatives overall are more likely than liberals to own guns, the shooters here come from several political traditions.³⁰ About half asserted that they are conservative, and two stated that they are libertarians. About one quarter stated that they are politically liberal and usually vote Democrat.³¹ There may have been even more interviewees with liberal leanings, but I counted only those who spoke openly about their liberal politics. Several liberal shooters expressed annoyance that they are continually assumed to be politically conservative because they own guns. Several shooters spoke eloquently about how their gun ownership is actually very much in keeping with their liberal inclinations, a point that is now counterintuitive because liberal politics are so closely identified with gun control.

A substantial number of the shooters interviewed had been victimized by crime and had used their guns to defend themselves during the incident.

Nine shooters in total, seven men and two women, said they had been physically threatened, almost mugged or robbed, or confronted in some way by someone apparently intending to hurt them. The degree of seriousness of each situation varied, as did the length of time that had passed since the event occurred. Several shooters reported incidents that occurred as long as twenty or even thirty years earlier, and others reported incidents that had occurred in the past several years.³² Shooters mentioned these events spontaneously (I did not specifically ask if shooters had ever used a gun for defense, only if they kept guns for defensive purposes); they were asked to elaborate only if they mentioned that they had used a gun defensively, and/or if they felt comfortable talking about it.³³ Their descriptions of self-defense are discussed periodically throughout the book.

Finally, because so many Americans own guns, distinguishing between gun owners and gun enthusiasts is important. Not all gun owners are inherently enthusiastic about owning guns. I define gun enthusiasts as gun owners who met the following criteria: (1) have an interest in owning and using guns of any type, (2) legally own at least one gun, (3) take pleasure in talking about guns and shooting with other gun aficionados, and (4) organize regular (weekly, or in some cases monthly) activities around their gun interests. All of the individuals discussed here have no trouble fitting these criteria, and these characteristics do provide a useful starting point for understanding the basic mechanics of gun enthusiasm.

What Is Gun Enthusiasm?

At its most basic, gun enthusiasm is an enjoyment of and enthusiasm for firearms. Gun enthusiasts, like enthusiasts of any kind, take pleasure in the handling and use of the object of their pleasure. Pleasure and enjoyment are slightly different experiences. Pleasure is a subjective, individual sensation, an end in itself; consummation is the goal.³⁴ Enjoyment, on the other hand, is the integration of pleasure with a goal, a specific purpose that lies outside of the sensation of pleasure itself. Enjoyment "implies self-control, the development of skills in the pursuit of voluntary as opposed to spontaneous goals."³⁵ This differentiation is important because gun enthusiasts derive both pleasure and enjoyment from guns, as well as from the voluntary activity of shooting them. However, some gun enthusiasts make a distinction between feelings of handling the guns themselves, taking pleasure in them, and feelings derived from shooting guns with the accompanying skills, images, sensations, and other facets that are part of this activity. Other gun en-

thusiasts only collect guns and never shoot them. Guns can be highly valuable, and some collectors feel that shooting them even once immediately decreases their subjective worth. To a true collector (a gun collector is similar to a car, stamp, or coin collector in this regard), keeping the gun in pristine condition is obviously preferable, whereas a target shooter might find a gun that has been “field tested” to be of the greatest value.³⁶

Shooters themselves are the most informed about what constitutes gun enthusiasm, and they produced fairly similar definitions. Gun enthusiasm can be broken down into three overlapping components: (1) an interest or pleasure in guns as collectors’ items or historic relics, (2) an interest in guns as treasured pieces of sporting equipment (for target shooting, which has a wide variety of subcategories), and (3) using guns to attain or achieve certain feeling states or states of consciousness. This last component of gun enthusiasm could be defined as an enjoyment in the way a gun is used or a pleasure in the feelings derived from the activity of shooting.

Shooters who described their interest in guns as historic artifacts also volunteered that they were interested in different aspects of American history that they strongly identified with gun use. Jonathan, a white administrator in his early forties employed at a large university, explained: “Why do I like guns? To me it’s just like—because I can shoot really well with them, I just have this affinity for them. I love to read about them. I like the history that goes with guns, like all the history of just . . . when I go out and shoot it relaxes me, very meditative and such.” Jonathan is an avid reader, and he enjoys reading or watching documentaries about different periods of American history when guns featured prominently, at least as far as he is concerned. He consumes gun magazines and is particularly interested in nineteenth-century guns used on the American frontier. From his reading and self-educating, he is able to speak quite knowledgeably about what kinds of guns were developed when, how they were used, and the individual flaws and virtues of different guns in different eras of American history. For most of the shooters with whom I spoke, the most interesting periods in American history are colonial America and the movement west during the nineteenth century, the period popularly known as the “Old” or “Wild West.”

Those shooters who mentioned their love of American history did not necessarily discuss this interest with me at length, as most perceived the interview to be about more modern and current issues relating to their gun enthusiasm. But their mention of history in relation to guns is important not simply because they discuss this history and “period guns” among themselves a great deal, but because history and its implications are an important

way that shooters conceptualize their interest in guns now. Guns are rarely understood as objects outside of historical, cultural, and social contexts. They are almost always made meaningful through a discussion of the contexts in which they are owned and used. In other words, context often determines what a gun means to its owner. This is a crucial point for understanding what guns symbolize for shooters and is made more clear throughout the course of this book.

Savage Beauty

For many shooters, guns are beautiful objects. The intricate carvings on the frame or stock of a rifle or the smooth lines of a well-made revolver bring shooters a good deal of pleasure. Combining the excitement of shooting sports with the beauty of the equipment makes these activities highly enjoyable. For most of the shooters I met, shooting is a physically demanding activity that necessitates hand-eye coordination, concentration, and skill. Elliot, a white commercial artist in his midforties, describes the enjoyment of shooting this way:

[The reason I like guns is] . . . well, first and foremost, I think because they’re exciting. They’re exciting to shoot. I like the bang, I like the flash, I like the smoke. And it was certainly—there’s a sense of power that you cannot deny, that you can literally obliterate anything standing in front of you. And they’re so precisely made, the good ones, and there’s a kind of a savage beauty to them, I think. Part of it because they’re just so beautifully crafted, with an eye to detail and an eye to the kind of an elegant sense of line. And partly because they’re capable of such utter destruction. And there’s kind of a delicate balance, which I think is kind of exciting. I like to handle them. I like to talk about ’em, I like to read about ’em.

Elliot’s definition of gun enthusiasm conveys the relish that gun enthusiasts feel when shooting. Shooters often get highly technical in describing certain guns and how they work, and it’s easy to get lost in the minute and intricate details of barrel rifling, powder measurements, and sight adjustments. Elliot also elaborated later on the inherently social aspects of shooting: showing a collection to interested friends and fellow shooters, talking with other people about a gun’s history, and describing the experience of shooting each different gun. In fact, socializing is an important facet of shooting: gun enthusiasts are involved in gun-related social activities all the time.

Elliot also mentioned the inherent power of guns, their capability for de-

struction and violence. The fascination with such a powerful object is an important part of gun enthusiasm. Guns can be dangerous, and most shooters understand and respect that fact. Some shooters feel that sometimes, however, there is a lot of pleasure in simply destroying something: a paper bull's-eye, a glass bottle, even food (pumpkins, squash, etc.). Shooters spoke of the enormous excitement of these activities. Shooting guns that have been described as "bad" or "evil," such as high-powered assault weapons, can be enjoyable because the act itself is so transgressive. There is a perverse pleasure in doing something others find inherently repulsive. And the more those guns are considered innately repugnant and evil, the more some shooters dig in their heels and discuss among themselves the pleasure of actually shooting them.³⁷

For some shooters, the thrill derived from shooting a gun borders on the sexual, and several spoke of their erotic pleasure in touching and handling guns. Though this point is not necessarily shared by all or even the majority of shooters I befriended, this point became apparent in some interviews. Morris, a white building inspector in his sixties, explained: "I'm content and I'm happy just to hold a gun in my hands. I can't describe it . . . it's . . . it's a work of art, a thing of beauty. . . . There's art, there's beauty, and then there's form and there's function. . . . Okay, for a man to tell you this . . . I would rather fondle a fine firearm than I would a naked woman. Now does that make sense?"

For some enthusiasts, the gun as a phallic symbol is obvious. Indeed, the metaphoric relationship between guns and penises has been a part of popular discourse on guns for some time.³⁸ But what is interesting about the eroticization of guns for some shooters here is that contrary to common stereotype, the gun was eroticized or fetishized as feminine rather than masculine. When shooters did eroticize guns, they characterized their guns as aesthetically pleasing in the ways women might be characterized by heterosexual men. This eroticization of guns as feminine runs counter to how guns would be conceptualized if they were extensions of literal and figurative manhood, as they are stereotyped in somewhat crude psychoanalytic interpretations.³⁹ Rather, guns are thought of as beautiful; they are aesthetically pleasing objects of figurative desire. Gendering a valued object as female is not uncommon; cars, boats, even musical instruments are likewise "feminized" (B. B. King's guitar Lucille comes to mind). Thus, for male gun enthusiasts, guns are gendered as female.⁴⁰

In its most extreme form, this eroticization could be viewed as a form of misogynist pathology, as in "Trust a gun over a woman any time" or even

"Women and guns are dangerous and deadly."⁴¹ But arguments suggesting that gun ownership is innately pathological (or, more precisely, pathologically psychosexual) would need to be supported with empirical evidence, and criminologists agree that no such evidence exists to support that characterization.⁴²

The third aspect of gun enthusiasm voiced by a number of shooters recognizes the relationship between guns and their owners as more complex. This aspect of gun enthusiasm suggests that guns are enjoyed because they provide, in the words of one female shooter, an "avenue towards a feeling." The feelings that guns invoke are diverse, but the point is that guns are not enjoyed only for themselves but rather for the feelings they engender in the shooter. Andrew, a white journalist in his late twenties, talked about how he feels a sense of comfort derived from owning guns. He discussed growing up near Los Angeles and feeling vulnerable during the riots of the early 1990s: "How do I define a . . . gun enthusiast? I think somebody who enjoys shooting a gun because of—how can I say it without sounding . . . I think it gives you a sense of well-being in a way, gives you a comfort to know that you can use something as a weapon if there's ever an emergency. The understanding of something that can kill you. I think that's really . . . I think that it's important to be aware of what's around in your surroundings." Andrew believes that guns are a fact of life in certain geographic parts of the United States, and he feels more safe owning and knowing how to use guns. He wants to know and understand something that he feels he might eventually encounter, even if it is in a deadly situation.

Safety and Power

Other shooters talked about how owning and using guns is exciting or even sexy, and how guns incite feelings that the shooter doesn't necessarily associate with the more mundane or "average" aspects of his or her life. Thea, a white attorney in her late forties, elegant and articulate, said she enjoys the feeling of playing against type. She put it this way:

So I think . . . it's a feeling. It's an avenue toward a feeling, toward safety, toward power, toward being part of the group, toward being kind of . . . having a new skill and an in-crowd kind of thing, toward being kind of a rebel, you know. The other thing, too . . . I think one of the things that this really does for me is, it makes me feel young and powerful instead of forty-eight and menopausal. . . . This is something that makes me kind of feel sexy and hot and like I've got something going on besides estrogen depletion.

Thea mentioned the social aspects of shooting, of being a part of a community that she enjoys and respects, as being an important part of the enjoyment of gun ownership and use. She takes pleasure in identifying with the shooting community, which has taken on a kind of rebel status in the more urban parts of the Bay Area. Politics in Northern California, particularly in the densely urban coastal areas, veers to the left, and as such, the area has experienced a certain politicized and institutional hostility toward gun ownership.⁴³ This hostility or distrust made analysis of gun enthusiasm all the more interesting, if somewhat uncomfortable for local gun enthusiasts.

Both Andrew and Thea mentioned feelings of safety associated with guns. Andrew feels safer knowing that he can have access to a gun in an emergency. Thea also mentioned safety; she meant that she feels physically safer because she has a working knowledge of guns and can use one if she needs to defend herself. Both shooters raise an interesting aspect of gun enthusiasm: most of the shooters interviewed felt that defending themselves with guns was an integral part of their gun ownership. Though most of the shooters I met use guns for sport or recreational purposes, all but two of the thirty-seven stated that they also keep guns in their home for self-defense purposes. Though keeping a gun for self-defense is not necessarily their primary reason for gun ownership, it is indeed a concern to them. In this sense, the shooters interviewed are similar to gun owners who report in nationwide surveys that home defense is not the primary reason for gun ownership, but it is an important one.⁴⁴

Guns can thus be enjoyed for a variety of reasons that touch on enjoyment and interest in history, an aesthetic pleasure in a well-made machine, and because they engender certain kinds of feelings or emotions. In this last vein, guns can speak to the politics of pleasure for some shooters, the now oft-maligned sentiment that some things (e.g., eating fatty foods or smoking a cigarette), although not necessarily good for you, are undertaken because they give people pleasure.⁴⁵ As the question of whether or not guns are good for you is rancorously debated (to say the least), suffice it to say here that gun ownership is a valued and meaningful activity for *all* of the shooters I met. Gun ownership gives shooters both pleasure and enjoyment. They have little desire to give up this interest, regardless of the supposed inherent dangerousness of guns. In other words, trying to convince culturally motivated gun owners to give up their interest in guns would be "as difficult as convincing individuals to change religions."⁴⁶ Eradicating the gun culture, which has been the stated goal of a number of gun control advocates in the past several years, will be well-nigh impossible.⁴⁷

Shooters: Good Guys or Bad Guys?

The gun culture is a vast and complex institution, and a variety of gun subcultures exist within the larger whole. Some of these subcultures include "sporting subcultures," such as competition and target shooters, "criminal subcultures" that use guns to commit crimes, and "rural hunting subcultures" that use guns for hunting and gun-related recreation. Guns are literally and symbolically important within certain gun-owning subcultures because they signify certain kinds of values, traditions, and/or ways of life that those gun owners see as part of their cultural heritage.

In that vein, some sociologists have astutely pointed out that gun ownership is a part of the American ethos.⁴⁸ Gun ownership is a way for some individuals to make a commitment to what they perceive as the "American Way."⁴⁹ This description aptly summarizes the worldview of the shooters with whom I worked, although they are also accurately characterized as part of a sporting subculture.⁵⁰ Though several grew up hunting and continue to hunt, most own guns for protection as well as recreation.⁵¹ But all of these shooters stated that they own and use guns because guns give them pleasure in and of themselves, hence their self-identification as enthusiasts.

Shooters know and understand the ways that the gun debate has deeply politicized and stigmatized their interest in firearms. During the course of my fieldwork and interviews, shooters took great pains to dissociate themselves from popular culture's negative stereotypes of gun owners. Shooters employed "dignifying accounts" when they discussed their interest in guns, telling narratives designed to illustrate the inherent decency and dignity of their gun enthusiasm.⁵² These kinds of dignifying accounts also tend to draw moral boundaries between self and other; in the context of stories about guns, dignifying accounts tend to make the shooter a hero of sorts, a moral actor who should be differentiated from the criminal other, despite the fact that both share the characteristic of gun ownership.⁵³ In this vein, gun enthusiasts perceive themselves to be the "good guys" who own guns, in contrast to the "bad guys," that is, criminals, neo-Nazis, militia members, white supremacists, and other undesirables who are more usually associated with the gun culture. These criminal others presumably share literal space (i.e., guns shows) and discursive space (i.e., pro-gun advocacy) with shooters, but are more likely than shooters to represent the public face of guns and shooting in American civic consciousness.

Shooters made these categorical distinctions to assure me that shooters were not those criminal others, and I shouldn't assume that they had any-

thing in common with “the bad guys” per se. As far as shooters are concerned, they do not rob, cheat, steal, or hurt people with their guns. They are not interested in blowing up federal buildings or starting a so-called race war. Shooters wanted me to understand that they are not “the problem” and should not be confused with people who are violent with guns. Their discursive tactics served the classic sociological function of identifying deviance and criminality, helping to solidify the community by identifying points of in-group commonality and out-group difference.⁵⁴ In other words, shooters’ self-delineated categories helped to affirm their own moral sensibilities while providing symbolic distance from the kinds of people shooters themselves consider deviant and immoral.

But the point is not that shooters are indeed the good guys and everyone else who owns guns are the bad guys. These are obviously ideological categories, meaningful mainly to the social actors who use them and usually for the reasons described. Questions about whether shooters are the good guys or the bad guys, or even whether guns are good or bad, do not yield objectively meaningful answers.⁵⁵ But critics of the gun culture have sometimes argued that whether or not most gun owners *actually* go out and shoot people is really besides the point. They *could*, and therein lies the problem. Critics of gun ownership tend to argue that access to guns straightforwardly increases gun violence.⁵⁶ Shooters firmly disagree with this point, but like their critics, they are profoundly concerned about these issues.

Thinking about all these issues and the ways that the gun debate structures discussions about them reveals the core difference in how pro- and antigun advocates conceptualize violence in society and what should be done about it. Shooters believe that society is a violent place, so they hone their skills and prepare for the possibility of doing violence themselves. They view this position to be the most responsible one they can take in relation to their own and their family’s safety. Antigun critics also believe that society is a violent place, filled with guns and people willing to use them. They believe the most responsible position is to severely restrict access to guns for just about everybody, thereby reducing everyone’s capacity for violence with guns. In contrast, shooters do not believe that forcible disarmament will reduce violent peoples’ access to guns or the willingness to resort to violence. Shooters see gun control largely as a fantasy perpetuated by people who don’t live under violent conditions and don’t have to worry about being victimized by crime. All of these issues are explored fully in the following pages.

Guns and American Core Values

We usually talk about the gun debate as if it were simply about guns—whether or not Americans can legitimately own them, and whether widespread gun ownership positively or negatively affects American crime rates. But in many respects, the gun debate poses far more broad and fundamental questions. The gun debate has actually become the locus for arguments about three profoundly contentious concepts in contemporary American society: citizenship, public safety, and moral order. How Americans are thrashing out these concepts (in all their complexity and ambiguity) within the gun debate is more clearly revealed when we recognize what the debate is really asking of Americans. The gun debate is in effect posing a series of questions: What constitutes moral citizenship in the United States today? What does American history say about citizenship? Is that history still relevant today? How should individual citizens work to make themselves and their communities safer? And finally, how should Americans strive to maintain moral order within American society as a whole?

These are the issues and concerns that lie at the heart of the American gun debate. They all relate on some level to cultural formulations of citizenship and morality and have serious implications for public safety. But one of the reasons that the gun debate is so contentious and so seemingly unresolvable is that these questions have few inherent “right” answers. They engender responses that are as subjective as people’s feelings about guns. Yet, many Americans now address these questions, and communicate their answers, through gun debate politics. Thus, at its most basic, the gun debate is about how Americans choose to define themselves as Americans and think about what being a good American actually means. Engaging with the gun debate, particularly by choosing to own guns and/or talking about guns publicly, means engaging with the notion of American identity in profound and complicated ways.

Through formal interviews, visits to shooting ranges, gun stores, and shooting competitions, and time spent simply sitting with people as they talked about their guns, I explored what it means to be a gun enthusiast. For shooters, guns signify American core values: freedom, independence, individualism, and equality. Thus, in essence, shooters believe that being a gun owner means being a good American. Through their own words and stories, I discovered that gun enthusiasts perceive the core values embodied in guns as both vibrantly alive and deeply threatened in the contemporary United States. Shooters in effect use their gun enthusiasm to infuse their core values

into their day-to-day lives. For them, gun ownership is a central aspect of both individual and national identity, and for that reason, they hear attacks on guns as deeply personal attacks not only on themselves, but also on their family and community, even on their way of life.

Only by directly addressing what gun ownership really means to gun enthusiasts, and by recognizing and exploring the *attraction* that so many Americans have to guns, can we begin to have a constructive conversation about the role of guns in contemporary society. This is most effectively accomplished by considering what gun enthusiasts actually say about their gun enthusiasm and by carefully looking at and understanding the kinds of social activities with which gun owners are concerned. Much attention has been paid elsewhere to the values and principles of people who oppose gun ownership and support gun control, and how their values embody the best of American culture. But in fact, the principles that underlie gun enthusiasm are also intimately connected to larger, broader values and principles that run through American culture more generally. Only by understanding those connections and recognizing how and why guns are meaningful to their owners can we begin to understand why guns remain such an integral part of the United States today.