

More on Gun Shows and the White Working Class

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My conservative father, a veteran of World War II in the Pacific, was not a hunter, but he owned a Colt Woodsman Match Target pistol and he taught me to shoot. Occasional trips to a Chicago south side target range began when I was about age 11 (the year would have been 1953), about the same time that I signed up for weekly target rifle shooting after school, at the neighborhood YMCA.

Dad regarded his gun as a prudent measure for self defense, and his Army marksman and expert shooting medals as proud achievements, along with his amateur wrestling and chess tournament trophies.

[For readers unfamiliar with guns and shooting sports: The Woodsman is a large, heavy, long-barreled semiautomatic pistol with enormous walnut grips, which shoots exclusively standard velocity .22-caliber long rifle ammunition. It is not concealable, nor does it fit a holster, and it would be virtually useless in combat even in the hands of an expert, though for certain professional assassins it would be the weapon of choice to murder an unsuspecting or helpless victim at close range with minimal noise and mess.]

My father's rationalization for arming himself did not match his choice of pistol. Furthermore, he taught his two sons to shoot it, but not his two daughters, so this was plainly an activity, even a duty, of maleness. Meanwhile, boys at the private school I attended carried homemade zip guns and switchblade knives in vicarious imitation of Blackboard Jungle public school culture as we imagined it to be.

If those had been all of my early experiences with firearms, I'd have left them behind along with the rest of my parents' and middle-class peers' values when I became a socialist in my teens. However, my elder liberal and red mentors, intellectuals and workers alike, also were shooters.

Hunting (rabbits, squirrels, and ducks) on fall and winter weekends, and plinking on vacation camping trips, were typical forms of recreation for most of the men (who also had seen combat in World War II), and for some of the women. Their guns were mostly small revolvers, .22-caliber rifles, .30-caliber military surplus carbines (purchased from the Director of Civilian Marksmanship for \$50 each, a government-subsidized offer exclusively to National Rifle Association members, which was the reason so many joined), and shotguns.

In Illinois during the 1950s, most working-class men and a lot of women, even city dwellers, were small game hunters at least occasionally. In the rural areas, everyone hunted. Among casual hunters, varmint hunters were regarded as cruel fanatics who just wanted to kill something; fox hunters, as drunkards who imbibed while their hounds bayed at whatever animals they scented, and made plenty of noise (dogs and fox hunters both), but rarely brought home any pelts; and deer hunters on the prairie, as demented, as likely to shoot themselves or be shot as to bag a buck.

My first job was in a large downtown Chicago commercial photo, photostat, and printing minimum-wage [then \$1 per hour] sweatshop, when I was 16 years old. The workers there were a grand mixture of African American, Mexican, Asian, and a handful of white (recovering alcoholics, people with criminal records, and people like myself, below the legal age for operating machinery) men and women, bossed by an exclusively white ethnic management (of Irish and Eastern European descent) owned by a socially prominent liberal Jewish multimillionaire.

Each morning a bookie would make the rounds of every department, collecting bets on the day's thoroughbred and harness races, and paying winners of the previous day's bets. He was generous with credit (at ten percent a week interest ["vigorish," we called it], the pawnshop rate without the collateral), and at times many of the workers owed him a lot of money. Favored employees could bail out by borrowing from the company, which usually carried them permanently, but others had to scrounge after a run of losses. The most typical source of easy cash was the sale of guns to fellow workers. Many guns moved from one employee's locker to another, transferring owners at frequent intervals. I bought several for friends and comrades as they became available.

One could summarize the place of guns in American society during the 1950s and early 1960s as pervasive and conventional — banal. As a married parent commuting to Gary in 1964, I sometimes took my shotgun to work during the fall; my fellow workers and I would then go out hunting together in the Indiana dunes on our lunch breaks and after work. Like most of my comrades and all of my friends at work, I bought my son a single-shot .22-caliber rifle and taught him to shoot at age eight.

By then, a political dimension had been added to the firearms culture, discreetly at first. When SNCC comrades went South to organize in Alabama and Mississippi, they took their guns along. Despite the N for Nonviolent, there were plenty of armed clashes with the Ku Klux Klan and Americans for the Preservation of the White Race. Hartman Turnbow became a SNCC hero (and his legend, a song) after he routed the KKK with his blazing shotgun. When the Deacons for Defense and Justice emerged in Bogalusa and spread quickly to Natchez and throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, the public presence of an armed contingent to the Southern Freedom Movement became evident to everyone, echoing what Robert Williams had done several years earlier in Monroe, North Carolina. Arms became a central feature of the movement nationally with the birth and spread of the Black Panther Party and the Republic of New Africa.

Yes, by 1968 and 1969 there was a tendency to romanticize weapons, particularly among white New Leftists enamored of the Little Red Book. I recall especially, in this connection, Clark Kissinger's gun store, Harper's Ferry Arsenal. But after the RNA's successful armed defense of its gathering at the New Bethel church in Detroit when police attacked, and then, in August 1971, against the dawn raid by Jackson, Mississippi, police and FBI agents, the argument was carried by the survivors. Had they not been armed, trained, and prepared, they would have been massacred.

I moved to Mississippi in the fall of 1971, on the staff of the Southern Conference Educational Fund. Among my duties was to organize white Mississippians in solidarity with the RNA eleven who, having survived and prevailed in the FBI-police attack (in the RNA's defensive fire, a police lieutenant had been killed while another cop and an FBI agent were wounded), were then in jail awaiting trial, and later were convicted and imprisoned for most of the decade. That was certainly a daunting challenge, but we experienced gratifying success over the next few years, not the least of which owed to respect, even awe, for the foresight and bravery of the RNA leaders in their preparation for the inevitable attack by armed agents of the state.

Meanwhile, we on the SCEF staff were also engaged in labor organizing, which involved us in a strike of pulpwood cutters against Masonite Corporation and the paper trusts that spread across four states in 1972 and 1973, and in a series of strikes in broiler chicken processing factories after that. I don't think I ever met a worker in any of those situations who wasn't armed. Woodcutters were so poor that they typically poached game for the dinner table as they worked. Labor organizers, from the Mississippi AFL-CIO president on down, like civil-rights leaders, regarded carrying a firearm as a sensible precaution.

When I moved from Illinois to Mississippi, I brought with me a single-shot .22-caliber pistol for target practice and a 12-gauge shotgun for hunting. Though I had not considered political implications other than their possible use for self-defense, my guns contributed to my acceptance among poor and working-class Southerners who had not previously encountered SNCC organizers or other militants during the 1960s glory years.

By 1977, the Ku Klux Klan was resurgent for the first time in a decade, riding the crest of a violent wave that washed across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. We quickly identified a white sheriff, deputies, police officers, business owners, and a Jackson Daily News editor who were Klan members and supporters, and from whom it would have been useless to seek sympathy or protection. Movement security once again took on a military dimension.

After a 1978 demonstration in Tupelo, Klansmen chased a carful of demonstrators returning to their home, forced them off the road, and beat them with tire chains. Black marchers in Northern Alabama were bloodied twice in encounters with the Klan. In 1979, KKK members and Nazis gunned down demonstrators in Greensboro while television cameras filmed the massacre.

Bennie Thompson, then the mayor of Bolton, Mississippi (today a Representative in Congress), and I received telephoned death threats on the eve of a march against police brutality in Jackson at which we were scheduled speakers. I taped the threat, and a reporter friend identified the voice as that of a violent, almost psychotic Klan organizer (who later went to prison as a participant in the KKK's abortive mercenary invasion of Dominica).

Although I was then employed by the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker pacifist organization, I went out and bought a Smith and Wesson .357 magnum revolver, which I carried for the next 16 years, the rest of my time in Mississippi. (My AFSC superiors were good sports about this. I could not advocate violence while "wearing my AFSC hat," they said, but I wasn't required to be a pacifist myself. Thus, for example, when I wrote articles in left publications that were sympathetic to armed struggle, I used a different byline.)

An important activity of the early 1980s was the struggle to free Eddie James Carthan, Tchula's first black mayor, who had been framed up on a murder charge. By the time we won, our organizing efforts had spread around the world, but always they were based in rural Holmes County. Often those of us in the leadership would work out our strategy while we hunted rabbits in the cotton rows. As we walked along behind Eddie's beagles, community people would join us one

by one, until the fields were filled with a mostly black army. It was easy to see what the planters feared.

Contrary to the allegations of Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St.Clair, and perhaps others who are frustrated with the current low level of activism and are in search of scapegoats on the left to blame, radical organizers did not and do not turn our backs on alienated insurgent white people who have a different political viewpoint from ours. (The tactics of involving them are certainly a matter of ongoing debate. In SCEF, we insisted on explicitly anti-racist programs, with African Americans and women in positions of leadership. UE organizers with whom we worked regarded our approach as sectarian, and although they were exemplary advocates for the class, they limited their union's demands and programs to least-common-denominator economic programs.)

Because most of our arenas of activity were industries or communities where African Americans took the lead, we encountered relatively few right-wing white people who were eager to join our movement. An exception was our antinuclear organization, the Mississippi Catfish Alliance, which mobilized in opposition to the Yellow Creek nuclear reactor that TVA proposed to build in Northeast Mississippi, and the Grand Gulf reactor built by Mississippi Power and Light Company at Port Gibson.

When we held a demonstration at the Yellow Creek site, Catfish was mainly white and rural, mostly poor people who bitterly resented the TVA's plan to drastically change their environment without any concern for their wishes, but it also included contingents of students and faculty from Ole Miss and Mississippi State, possibly mobilizing 200 people. At Grand Gulf, the crowd was about ten times bigger, with African Americans outnumbering whites about five to one. Most were local Claiborne County people, probably the most militant mass constituency in the state, with additional contingents from Alcorn, Jackson State, and (white students and faculty from) the University of Southern Mississippi.

In Jackson and Hinds County, the Catfish Alliance comprised mostly seasoned leftists, black and white, but also a fervently antinuclear group of rightwingers brought to us by a Liberty Lobby supporter, the wheelchair-bound proprietor of a pawnshop who had once been elected coroner during the segregation and prohibition era. A young white woman organizer and I met with him on several occasions to work out the terms on which we agreed to include his group. When we told him that racial epithets would not be tolerated, he sulked, but then said he would practice our etiquette by treating his Choctaw Indian store manager with respect, and would stop disparaging him. I also informed the man that my own heritage is Jewish, whereupon he denied holding anti-Semitic views.

After building a mass base for Catfish, we ran an electoral campaign for the state's three Public Service Commission posts on an independent antinuclear platform. In the Northern District our candidate was Linda Lewis, white proprietor of a health food store in Oxford; in the Central District, Sarah Johnson, African American councilwoman from Greenville; in the Southern District, Ayres Haxton, a welder from Natchez. As a matter of principle (perhaps reluctantly) accepted by our right-wing white supporters, we required that the campaign literature include all three candidates and a single statewide platform. Of the three, only Johnson came close to challenging the victorious Democrat, but the campaign did get a lot of press, and TVA canceled the Yellow Creek project. The reactor at Grand Gulf was completed even after a tornado cracked its containment dome, and is today the main generator owned by Entergy Corporation. Catfish never received support from the antinuclear or environmental movements nationally, perhaps because it was predominantly black in membership and constituency.

The coalition with our Liberty Lobby pawnbroker and his group did not endure after our defeat at Port Gibson, and in any case most of his followers hankered for overtly racist political expressions. None of them became permanent converts to our cause, although lots of other poor and working-class white Mississippians did. But one element of the collaboration was interesting in the context of our present discussion: The pawnshop sold a lot of guns to black activists, with a wink and a nod to the paperwork requirements.

Meanwhile I had begun attending gun shows in the mid-1970s, which — pace Alexander Cockburn — were not and are not “fun.” They were held at the Jackson Trade Mart two to four times each year, and were infamous for hosting Ku Klux Klan and Nazi recruiters. A Jackson television news program once had featured the enormous swastika banner across the side wall at one gun show; thereafter all cameras were banned.

My reason for attending, even before the KKK’s mass resurgence, was to monitor the recruitment of mercenaries to fight for white Rhodesia. Much of my solidarity work with the Zimbabwe African National Union consisted of documenting and publishing data on mercenary recruitment, which was directed in the U.S. by the Army Special Forces Reserve at Arlington Heights, Illinois (a CIA front), the unit from which Soldier of Fortune publisher (and later NRA leader) Robert K. Brown held the rank of colonel.

Mass recruitment of mercenaries was conducted by Soldier of Fortune staff; gun shows provided congenial ambiance for those activities, which grew significantly as the Carter administration ratcheted up its counterinsurgency war in El Salvador. Mercenary recruitment escalated exponentially during the Reagan years; gun show organizers came to regard enlisting fighters for the Nicaraguan contra cause as their patriotic duty.

That is not to say that thousands of men and women who drove into Jackson from 30 outlying counties were coming to sign up for combat duty in Central America, not at all. The great majority were hunters, and a significant minority were competitive shooters, in search of weapons, ammunition, supplies, and equipment. Despite their economic importance, they and the dealers who served them were accorded no special welcome. But the hundreds of police, highway patrolmen, sheriffs’ deputies and constables who came were honored guests, usually admitted free if they attended in uniform. (So much for Cockburn’s delusion that gun shows are gathering places for anti-government insurgents.)

The central themes of gun shows I attended were always twofold — the romance of military combat, and flagrant (I want to say, inhuman) cruelty. Thus the main aisle contained a large display of fully automatic weapons, with a .50-caliber water-cooled machine gun as the centerpiece, and video screens showing combat training exercises recommended for owners of all sorts, from Uzi machine pistols to Browning Automatic Rifles.

Bipod-mounted .30-caliber BARs were sentimental favorites of World War II and Korean veterans, but could only be purchased legally, with a full paper trail, license, and payment of the BATF’s federal transfer tax. Buyers who wanted off-the-books automatic weapons were sold hardware kits that easily converted Colt AR-15 “sporting” rifles into fully automatic M-16s.

Stands for mercenary and Klan-Nazi recruiters, also given prominent floor locations, included sales of such wholesome publications as torture manuals (I excerpted the worst examples several years ago in a CovertAction article) and “Official Running N—r” racist caricature targets (a police favorite). One ghoulish display included photographs of burns that police interrogators had inflicted on their captives with stun guns and cattle prods, as advertisements flogging sales of those very devices. Brass knuckles were another favorite product.

It's true that mercenary recruiters disappeared after the Sandinista defeat in Nicaragua, and that gun show culture in Jackson became more subdued in the 1990s. But the essential themes of armed combat and cruelty, and the law enforcement presence, were as strong as ever the last time I attended one several years ago.

In 1993 I moved from Mississippi to Pennsylvania, and have lived here ever since. No longer do I hunt, and my target shooting is infrequent. Nevertheless, gun culture is more pervasive here than it ever was in Mississippi. Opening day of buck season is a holiday for every blue collar worker, and for many high schools. (My sweetheart says Firstdaybuck is one word in the Pennsylvania vocabulary.)

Certainly many facets of U.S. working-class culture ought to be challenged by leftists as we organize and propagate our vision of the good society, but it seems to me that tilting against gun culture is not a good idea, certainly is not a priority, and is doomed to fail if attempted. On the other hand, the Cockburn-St.Clair infatuation with right-wing gun culture is far worse, especially in light of Katha Pollitt's evidence that St.Clair's advocacy is personally hypocritical.

In the absence of a popular leftwing insurgency, they seem to have decided that any insurgency is better than none, while at the same time castigating the left for having failed to ignite one. St.Clair's riposte to Pollitt is laden with esteem for the NRA's virility in contrast to the Sierra Club's timidity, but neither organization can serve as a model for activists. Both of those, in different ways, derive their power from bourgeois and corporate sponsorship, and government indulgence.

Cockburn and St.Clair are certainly not the first among us to promote a get-rich-quick mirage for organizers, but their message cannot be permitted to drown out the simple truth. Our grandest and perhaps most difficult task is to project by example, even in relatively quiet times or backward circumstances, the vision we seek to reify, as we prepare to intervene when history again favors our cause.

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