The Social Life of Guns

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As a theme for the 2016-17 Copeland Colloquium, we propose to examine the contemporary social life of guns.

This theme originated through a series of conversations amongst a diverse collection of faculty across the Social Sciences and Humanities – conversations related to questions of violence, inequality, and injustice. Our discussions have been wide-ranging, expanding across disciplinary lines to such topics as the cultural rhetorics of violence, artistic depictions of mass violence, and the methodological stakes involved in violent representations and in representing violence. We now hope to focus and extend our hitherto informal work into a college-wide discussion of these important topics. As a means to direct our investigations, we propose to explore the specific object of “the gun” as a contemporary social, cultural, and political phenomenon. The urgency of recent mass killings and social upheavals, and the centrality of the “gun” within these recent events, pose fundamental questions to us as a community. As emblematic symbols and tools of violence, the “gun” stands as a unique contemporary artifact, around which we hope to orient our multidisciplinary approach.

Guns are key markers of disparate cultural phenomena, including resistance, modernity, barbarism, citizenship, science, magic, power, militarization, police, and utility. From their role in mass killings in San Bernardino and Paris, to school shootings in Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech, to gang killings in El Salvador, to police killings (and the resistance of those killings) across the US, as cultural representations in Japanese literature and Hollywood blockbusters and beyond, and as symbols of industrialization and Western progress, debates over and engagement with the presence of guns involves multiple registers of meaning. As artifacts, guns are both supreme forms of individual protection as well as painful sources of threat. As symbols, they invoke freedom and repression. This multiplicity of frameworks reveal the productive means by which the gun can serve for scholarly engagement.

We propose to explore these various registers of the “gun” through a myriad of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Specifically, we contend that only through a
combination of archaeological, legal, psychological, philosophical, literary, political, epidemiological, sociological and anthropological approaches, can we begin to understand the many ways in which guns influence and have influenced contemporary social life. Moreover, we also contend that as fundamental issues of public debate, a Colloquium organized around guns and gun policy is uniquely suited to providing scholars, journalists, and policy experts with an opportunity to focus on questions of why and how these specific objects play the roles they do. Rethinking violence as, in part, a product of material and cultural objects allows us, for instance, to ask new questions about when political or domestic violence is likely to occur or how such notions of protection and threat are reinterpreted through technological change.

We believe that this proposal captures the best spirit of the Copeland Colloquium by investigating the ways in which guns travel across our particular scholarly commitments. For instance, controlling and managing the diffusion of guns is a critical social policy concern for students of public health, law and political science alike, while problems of how firearms are used force us to engage with the psychological and cultural meaning of guns for different groups. At the same time, the literary and artistic representation of guns – as in cinematic works like Robert Altman’s *Gun* and Anthony Mann’s *Winchester ’73* – which base their narratives around the experience of guns themselves – can force us to encounter these objects as actors in their own right. Meanwhile, guns provide crucial evidence of our material past; their manufacture was and is a key site for the transmission of engineering and technological skills across the world. Guns are smuggled, hated, cherished, gifted, and crafted, and our proposal hopes to capture the breadth of the role they play in society, literature, and in our civic life.

Amherst College is well-suited to hosting a Colloquium addressing the polyvalent role of guns. The Pioneer Valley, for example, has been home to a large number of American firearms manufacturers – Smith & Wesson, Winchester Arms, and the Colt Manufacturing Company all made most of their personal firearms on the banks of the Connecticut River. And the College has been the home of a number of innovative scholars like Jan Dizard and Kevin Sweeney who have explored the cultural and technological role of firearms in America’s past and present.

We envision our exploration going far beyond the Valley, however. Part of this will involve scholarly investigation into the role of guns in contemporary American political life. How and why, for example, did guns become an object of social identity, and what explains the importance of these objects as totems of citizenship of so many? In addition, how *should* we think about the problem of gun violence – as an epidemiological issue? As a matter of criminal justice? As a dilemma to be addressed through technology? One of the key dimensions to our proposal is that guns are both policy and cultural objects – hence, we are curious about how guns are explained and understood by journalists and political actors and we will hold at least one forum involving fellows and colloquy participants which addresses the nexus of scholarship on firearms research (which is very fraught in the U.S.) and media representations.
Our engagement will also aim to traverse the global, cultural, and historical role of guns more broadly. Some possible themes include: the importance of guns in colonial expansion by European powers, guns as literary or symbolic markers (e.g. “Chekov’s Gun”), guns as objects of cultural practice and ritual across the world, the arms trade as a medium of technology transfer, and so forth.

Finally, we will consider the ways in which considering guns as objects allows us to reconsider a broader set of questions regarding the materiality of violence in political and social life. How, for instance, are processes of so-called “deviant globalization” - usually defined as the flow of illicit goods across borders - affected by the kinds of objects that constitute those flows? What can the materiality of totems of citizenship tell us about who “belongs” to the imagined community of a nation? How does the availability of particular objects like weapons structure or block collective social mobilization? Guns are, in this sense, mere windows in a very eclectic set of inquiries into the relationship between the material and symbolic spheres of social life.

We will invite applications from scholars across the disciplines who engage with these and other issues in their work. The Copeland Colloquium will also allow us to engage the larger community of the College in a discussion about how to think about guns in a multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary manner.

**Program**

We would like to host four fellows, which could include historians, legal theorists, science study scholars, anthropologists, political scientists, literary theorists, archaeologists, criminologists, epidemiologists, and sociologists who are interested in the social life of guns. There is a possibility that we might nominate some fellows and others may be identified through a national and international search. We would invite both senior scholars and recent post-doctoral candidates to apply.

Each invitee would be expected to give a public lecture (with a paper to be distributed) and would be invited to participate in occasional classes and in a campus-wide “teach in” on the social life of guns. In addition, we would host a one-day conference on our theme and would invite six scholars from outside Amherst to participate. The ultimate goal of this conference would be to publish an edited book or special journal issue related to the colloquy theme.

Our goal is to provide opportunities for informal conversation and discussion in addition to these events, so we would also host regular lunches with the fellows and would invite students and colleagues to participate. Lunches could involve sharing work or debating readings distributed to participants.