

Book Review

Do Guns Make Us Free?

FIRMIN DEBRABANDER, 2015
Newhaven, CT Yale University Press,
296 pp., £20.00

I came to this book as outsider interested about the relations that the US has with guns and gun culture. For outsiders, there's a perplexing mystery about the US and guns – the US statistics around gun deaths and injury, when compared with other similar societies are hard to believe. For an outsider, the simple answer is that guns cannot make someone free. What Firmin DeBrabander exposes, however, are the nuances that sit underneath the American gun debate, that make it so mystifying, intriguing and intractable. Playing into this debate are the particular ways that fears and freedoms play a larger role in US self-understanding.

In 1996, faced with the largest mass killing in modern history when Martin Bryant shot and killed 35 people in Tasmania, the Australian government instituted a guns buyback scheme, which seems to have been largely successful in helping keep gun deaths in Australia low. This example is often cited as an example of how a government can respond to mass killings, one that the US should follow. However, as DeBrabander's book shows, the US presents a fundamentally different context for guns, their use and control, where a similar government response is not plausible. The US relationship with guns is both unique and peculiar; guns are woven through the history, the politics and the very culture of the US. It is, I suspect, only in the US where guns and freedom form so much of its grand myth that one could ask *Do Guns Make Us Free?*. DeBrabander answers in the negative, though somewhat indirectly.

The book is organised around five chapters, each with a particular focus. Chapter 1, *The Culture Of Fear* sets the stage for DeBrabander's take on the debate, citing various statistics about guns, ownership and violence and the positions of those who believe in and/or advocate the sanctity of the right to bear arms in relation to fear. What was of most interest here was how DeBrabander sets up the problem – of those bearing the costs of gun violence, the vast majority are urban minorities, particularly African Americans. However, those advocating the right to bear arms the loudest are suburban or rural whites, many of whom suffer very little from the direct cost of crime. In describing advocates of the right to bear arms, DeBrabander cites public statements from representatives of the National Rifle Association (NRA) such as Wayne LaPierre. Again, this point of view is both intriguing and perplexing – for the outsider, these advocates hold a position that seems hard to believe.

Freedom then becomes an issue, as Chapter 2 engages with some of the philosophical positions that people use to advocate a right to bear arms, primarily Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The relation between violence, self defence and the state of nature plays a big role, and DeBrabander shows fairly

convincingly how neither Hobbes, Locke nor Rousseau's arguments favour an unmitigated right to bear arms. He uses the examples of 'Stand Your Ground' laws to argue that the US is descending back into a state of nature, something deeply undesirable on his reading of Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau. Chapter 3 follows on by looking at the argument that guns protect the people against a tyrannical government and so are the bulwark of democratic freedom. DeBrabander's counter-argument is that an armed citizenry is no match for the US military, and cites the War On Terror and the erosion of many civil liberties through the introduction and maintenance of the PATRIOT Act to show that guns have not in fact defended against government overreach.

Chapter 4 looks at the impacts of guns on schools, college campuses and political discourse. Beyond the direct death and injury that guns enable, this chapter is highly interesting and deeply disturbing – it puts forwards a convincing case that the profusion of guns through the wider US community has led to a siege mentality in US schools, which DeBrabander sees as deeply inimical to freedom. Importantly, this has shifted schools from a place of education and safety to something more closely resembling a prison, has reduced the freedom of speech on college campuses, and undermined any sensible dialogue in political culture. The final chapter argues that it is not, in fact guns that make and keep a people free. Rather, it is the rule of law. And insofar as people feel powerless, isolated and insecure, the rule of law is the solution to these problems. Moreover, DeBrabander argues, unchecked gun rights undermine the rule of law, and ultimately make people ever more insecure and isolated, further exasperating their disempowerment.

For an outsider, this book was a highly interesting read, exposing elements of American culture and detailing the relations between different historical and philosophical positions in a way that was lucid and engaging. The descriptions of the positions of gun rights advocates was instructive; it seems that many of those who share an ideology about gun rights are in part well motivated – they feel a sense of duty to protect themselves and their loved ones from what they fear.

However, it seems that there are four different sorts of fear: fear of criminals, fear of the mentally ill, fear of external threats like terrorists and fear of a tyrannical government. On DeBrabander's account, guns are not going to help with answering or resolving those fears – many of those advocating gun rights are not directly dealing with the impacts nor causes of crime, one cannot predict a lone nutter, the actual risk from terrorists and other external threats is highly remote, and there is no chance that a citizen's militia, no matter how well organised, could stand up to a government hell-bent on tyranny.

This then brings us to the second strand running through the book – the relation between guns and freedom. I would have liked to have seen a little more analysis of the concepts of freedom here, to help explain some of the nuances and limits in the gun rights positions. There seems to be two sorts of freedoms that the book, and the US more generally, are wrestling with where guns are involved. First is a negative liberty, a 'freedom from'. And the different accounts of what people fear are highly relevant here. In this sense, guns are considered vital instruments of freedom, as they keep the gun owner and society at large free *from* certain threats. In the US context, this is by-and-large freedom *from* the government. That is, guns are necessary instruments to protect all other freedoms. However, as DeBrabander shows, guns don't seem to actually protect this sort of negative freedom.

Instead, perhaps, the gun is not about freedom from, but freedom *to*. That is, the right to possess and carry a gun is simply an expression of freedom itself. Guns are not valued because they protect other important things, they are valued simply because they are expressions of freedom: they are of intrinsic value. It is my suspicion that this idea plays a core role in the guns debate in the US, that guns and freedom are intrinsically linked. In this way, the question is not ‘do guns make us free?’ but ‘what is freedom?’ Having answered that question, the insider and outsider are both in a better position to see the role that guns play in supporting or eroding freedom in the US.

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