

The Gun as Political Object: Transcoding Contemporary Gun Culture under Neoliberal Governmentality

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Abstract

This article argues for a reading of contemporary gun culture in the United States as a transcoded instantiation of neoliberalism. Building on Fredric Jameson's notion of "transcoding," this article maps the historical relationship between neoliberalism and gun culture in the United States in two phases: an initial period of politicization in the late 1960s and 1970s in which early neoliberal reforms (particularly in public and urban housing) altered the demographics of gun owners and re-articulated gun ownership as a politically (if not yet constitutionally) legitimate means of self-defense; and a second phase in the 1980s and 1990s in which the rhetoric of gun culture evoked government tyranny or oppression as the prime threat against which guns protect. During this second phase of politicization, I show how guns effectively ceased to denote actual or empirical objects and instead began to circulate as transcoded objects of the neoliberal critique of welfare state interventionism and collective politics more generally. By theorizing contemporary gun culture in the United States as subsumed within the political logic of neoliberalism – rather than merely existing in a contingent or corollary fashion alongside it – the article concludes with a reading of gun control legislation as a "socially symbolic act" of resistance against the impoverishment of collective politics under neoliberal governance.

Introduction: Transcoding as Neoliberal Critique

The concept of transcoding is not one of the more prominent aspects of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), but it is nonetheless the central interpretive strategy *against which* Jameson constructs his more ambitious dialectical reading of literary texts. After consigning the validity of mechanistic readings of literature (such as McLuhan's formalistic approach or content analysis as determined by publishing profitability) to narrow "subsystems of our peculiarly reified social and cultural life" (26), Jameson poses the core problematic of his thesis, a three-fold problematic that he describes as "analogous to that of cultural studies proper":

Is the text a free-floating object in its own right, or does it simply 'reflect' some context or ground, and in that case does it simply replicate the latter ideologically, or does it possess some autonomous force in which it could also be seen as negating that context? (38)

For those familiar with Jameson's work, it is immediately clear that it is the third path or option that Jameson ultimately privileges and, drawing on Louis Althusser's concept of mediation and the respective "semi-autonomy" of the various structural levels of the totality designated by this concept, Jameson argues that literary texts are indeed capable of exerting political agency despite

their near total subsumption within capital's interiority. While literature is invariably "part of same immense process which expresses the contradictory inner logic and dynamic of late capitalism," as Jameson puts it, literature can nonetheless be read as "a revolt against that reification and a symbolic act which involves a whole Utopian compensation for increasing dehumanization at the level of daily life" (42). By theorizing literary modernism – or any other "text" within the ambit of cultural studies for that matter – as semi-autonomous with respect to the larger totality in which it is embedded, Jameson contends that the literary critic is able to move beyond the politically limited practice of *transcoding*, a practice he describes as involving "the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two distinct types of objects or "texts," or two very different levels of structural reality" (40).¹ While transcoding is apt at identifying homologous correspondence between different levels of structural reality, the "simplistic and mechanical model which is constructed in order to articulate that relationship" offers no obvious political strategy through which the text or cultural object is able to overcome the limitations of its isomorphic entrapment (43).

While the limited political efficacy of transcoding prompted Jameson's advocacy for a more Althusserian approach to literary and cultural analysis, the overarching imperative of Jameson's text – "Always historicize!" – serves as an important reminder that no single interpretive method retains its privilege forever and, accordingly, the thirty-five years separating us from the political context of Jameson's original argument has necessitated something of a revival of transcoding under conditions of twenty-first century neoliberalism. For if there is anything that unites contemporary critics of neoliberalism, it is the recognition that neoliberalism is more than merely a set of economic and political reforms designed to reduce state regulation of the economy and promote private enterprise. In his early assessment, for instance, Michel Foucault insisted that neoliberalism is most distinguished from liberalism proper by its rejection of the latter's insistence on a restricted, *laissez-faire* market in favor of the construction of an entire "enterprise society" in which the subject of neoliberalism – *homo economicus* – becomes an "entrepreneur of himself" in all aspects of everyday life (242, 226). Similarly, David Harvey insists that neoliberalism "has pervasive effects on the ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (3), and for Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is "something other than a set of economic policies, an ideology or a resetting of the relation between state and economy. Rather, as a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves" (10).

For these and many others critics, then, what most distinguishes neoliberalism is its formidable powers of socio-spatial extension, its transformation and amplification from a series of relatively discrete economic and political reforms hatched from the heights of Austria's Mont

¹ Lucien Goldmann's *Hidden God* (London: Routledge, 1964) provides, for Jameson, one of the best examples of "rigorous homology" insofar as it operates according to a "simplistic and mechanical model," whereby "the 'structure' of the three quite different realities of social situation, philosophical or ideological position, and verbal and theatrical practice are [considered to be] 'the same'" (*The Political Unconscious* 44).

Perelin² into a pervasive political logic that circulates with increasing range and determinacy across the entire field of twenty-first century capitalism. It is with respect to neoliberalism's augmentation from a series of economic doctrines to a comprehensive politico-cultural idiom that *transcoding* – or the identification of neoliberal homologues in what are traditionally considered non-economic domains – has re-emerged as one of the central strategies of cultural critique today.³ Transcoding, then, under conditions of contemporary neoliberalism, is guided by an imperative that effectively reverses Jameson's methodology described above: whereas Jameson sought to discover *difference within identity* – i.e., to uncover the semi-autonomy, and thus political agency, of the text despite its near total subsumption within its capitalist integument – the task facing the contemporary critic of neoliberalism is, contrarily, to discover *identity within difference* – i.e., to uncover the extent to which seemingly heterogeneous and disconnected phenomena in markedly differing fields of social life have been re-organized according to the political logic of the larger neoliberal project.⁴

It is according to the renewed methodological importance of transcoding for both identifying and resisting twenty-first century neoliberalism, in all its varied guises, that this article argues for a reading of contemporary gun culture in the United States as just such a transcoded instantiation of the neoliberal project. Transcoding, in the context of gun culture, is an especially useful concept insofar as it provides a more precise analytic than the amorphous and ahistorical notion of “political symbolism” that pervades much scholarly literature on gun culture in the United States. While describing guns or gun culture as politically symbolic does some useful work (inasmuch as it attempts to connect the ostensible particularism of gun culture to a larger political universe), this discourse tends to articulate the symbolic relationship between guns and political concepts like freedom or self-determination in a psychological register that speaks of individual empowerment⁵ and thereby endows the symbolic relationship with too large a measure of non-arbitrariness.⁶ As I demonstrate below, however, there is nothing inherent or predetermined about the relationship between a blunt, material object like a gun and the neoliberal norms with which the gun has become associated in contemporary American political

² For background on the origins of the neoliberal critique, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (ed.), *The Road from Mont Pelerin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³ For a more detailed description of the importance of homology for the critique of neoliberalism, see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 2105): 21-45.

⁴ In this respect, then, transcoding can be viewed as a political (rather than aesthetic) form of what Jameson later described as “cognitive mapping” (1991 51), insofar as it attempts to re-assemble seemingly disparate elements of a fragmented social existence within a coherent and totalizing picture based on the dominant paradigm of capitalist production, exchange and control (regulation) at any given moment.

⁵ “Owning a gun,” in the words of psychologist David Ropeik, “certainly gives you the feeling that you are doing something...taking control...to protect yourself, and any risk is less frightening if you think have some control over it.” see David Ropeik, “Gun Control: It's Really About Guns as Symbols, not Weapons,” *Psychology Today*, Dec 18, 2012: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/how-risky-is-it-really/201212/gun-control-its-really-about-guns-symbols-not-weapons>.

⁶ It was concern over the non-arbitrary nature of symbols that prompted Saussure to opt for the more neutral or “empty” concept of the sign. “It is characteristic of symbols,” argues Saussure, “that they are never entirely arbitrary. They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connexion between the signal and its signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot” (68).

culture. Reading the gun as a transcoded – rather than merely symbolic – object thus demands a nuanced historical understanding of gun culture’s politicization in relation to the implementation of neoliberal policy in wake of the decline of New Deal and Great Society governance.⁷

The first section of the article, then, shows how early neoliberal reforms in public and urban housing in the 1960s and 1970s created the specific demographic and politico-ideological conditions under which the National Rifle Association (henceforth NRA) shifted from an organization primarily concerned with the leisurely pursuits of target shooting and hunting to an organization almost exclusively concerned with augmenting the rights of gun owners. The deterioration of American cities and the perception of rising crime as a result of the failures of New Deal and Great Society urban reforms not only caused Americans to purchase firearms for reasons other than hunting or target shooting, but the imposition of early neoliberal reforms within urban space also altered the discourse of crime and criminality in the United States in way that aligned the new political prerogatives of the NRA and gun culture with the law and order agenda of American conservatism. Through this initial encounter with neoliberal ideology and policy, the gun was transformed into a politicized object that expressed and objectified the law-biding citizen’s desire to quell what Samuel Huntington referred to as the “democratic distemper” of the 1960s (102). Yet whereas this initial phase of gun culture’s politicization was still grounded in the actual (which is to say perceived) needs of America’s gun owners, if at a reactionary bent, the subsequent convergence between gun culture and the New Right in the 1980s and 1990s shifted the political rhetoric of gun ownership away from the statist law and order framework of the 1970s and produced an increasingly libertarian gun rhetoric in which the state itself became the prime threat against which guns protect. As I show, the shift from crime to government as the defining antagonist of the American gun owner produced a contradictory political logic within the discourse of gun culture in which a republican or civic obligation to participate in collective defense was awkwardly articulated as an individual right of the twenty-first century private citizen. While the anachronistic transformation of collective political obligation into a right of the private individual runs counter to the historical and political logic of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, the reduction of collective political life to the level of the privatized individual virtually defines the political morphology of neoliberalization, and thus the seeming contradiction at the heart of contemporary gun culture’s political rhetoric is resolved, I argue, by reading guns and gun culture as a transcoded extensions of the neoliberal project. Finally, I conclude the article by arguing that interpreting guns and gun culture in this transcoded fashion necessarily re-casts gun control legislation as an important and timely “socially symbolic act” of resistance, in Jameson phrase against the impoverishment of collective political life under contemporary neoliberal governmentality.

Neoliberal Urbanism and the Politicization of Gun Culture

Reading the gun as a transcoded object of neoliberalism begins with the recognition that there is nothing inherent or inevitable about the gun’s political character in contemporary American culture. Despite the political fanaticism of most gun rights organizations today, the

⁷ As Foucault reminds us, American neoliberalism cannot be properly understood unless it is conceived as a response to “all the programs on poverty, education, and segregation developed in America from the Truman administration up to the Johnson administration, and through these programs, of course, state interventionism and the growth of the federal administration” (217).

right to keep and bear firearms has only recently become a point of contention in American political culture. In fact, the NRA, the leading and hegemonic organization of contemporary gun culture, did not traditionally frame gun ownership rights in political or constitutional terms at all. Founded in 1871 by William C. Church and George W. Wingate after the pair witnessed the dismal marksmanship of Union draftees, the NRA was originally more concerned with promoting the sport of target shooting than acting as a political lobby. As a gentlemen's club that "appealed to a moneyed class of men who could afford the time, equipment, and travel to compete in serious games" (Burbick 39), the NRA's "lobbying wing remained incidental to the organization's primary mission of serving hunters and target shooters" (Davidson 29). The relatively exclusive demographic of NRA membership thus went hand in hand with a generalized disinterest in the Second Amendment as a mechanism for promoting the organization or advancing its aims. As Joan Burbick observes in her study of the NRA's signature publication, *American Rifleman*, the Second Amendment is "glaringly absent" from the publication's pages prior to the 1960s. "The gun culture found in the pages of the *American Rifleman*," writes Burbick, "was monolithic on one level, involving mainly white men, but diverse on another":

Guns crossed over into a range of sports from hunting to competitive shooting, and from collecting historical guns from the Revolutionary and later periods to buying the latest remake of a Colt Peacemaker and ogling the military rifles used by the Japanese and Germans in the recently ended War ... What readers of this magazine had in common was a sense that they were using guns responsibly ... They were buying and using guns for sport, recreation, historical collection, or plain consumerism, and they drew upon the language of the frontier, hunting, and previous wars to stress their morality and justify their purchases. (71-72)

Because NRA members saw themselves as belonging to an relatively exclusive subculture of experts, aficionados or collectors, the universalizing impulse to articulate gun ownership in constitutional terms ran counter to the organization's constituency and, accordingly, NRA discourse prior to the 1960s did not consider the Second Amendment a particularly important legal or political mechanism for protecting the rights of its members. What few discussions of the Second Amendment found their way into NRA publications prior to the 1960s were "dusty disagreements," in Burbick's words, exchanged between legal or constitutional experts and were invariably confined to the back pages of NRA literature.

During the 1960s, however, the NRA underwent a process of profound political transformation in which the recreational character of the organization was overtaken by a culture of political militancy, and the organization began to take a greater interest in the Second Amendment. "In the seventeen-year period between 1960 and 1977," writes Burbick, "gun advocates writing articles in *American Rifleman* fumbled to reach a high moral ground from which to defend gun owners and finally found rhetorical security in the Second Amendment to the Constitution":

The shift in these years brought a dramatic return to the language of the founding fathers to justify why men – usually white men – needed to control what they owned, and why they owned guns. Ultimately, no one – no person, no law, not even a government – had a right to interfere with the moral prerogative of the individual to buy and own weapons ... and a virulent politics of gun ownership

emerged with an anger and self-righteousness backed up by the United States Constitution. (73)

The changing political tenor of the organization eventually led to a “bifurcation within the [NRA] between those interested only in the recreational aspects of firearms and those who desired a more active political role in support of what they interpreted as a long-existing, absolute constitutional right to bear arms” (Vizzard 60). At the 1977 NRA convention in Cincinnati, the politically militant wing of the organization executed a well-organized coup and seized control of the board of directors. After the 1977 coup, the NRA pursued an overtly political project in which the bulk of organization’s resources were marshaled toward a systematic legal and political attack on any and all gun control legislation in the United States.

Most accounts of the NRA depict the political transformation of the organization (and the politicization of gun culture more broadly) as a reaction against the Johnson administration’s Gun Control Act of 1968,⁸ which was itself prompted by the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy and which sought to ban mail-order sales of firearms, amongst other minor restrictions.⁹ While the Gun Control Act undoubtedly galvanized shifting opinions amongst NRA membership concerning the central purpose of the organization, the Act, in and of itself, is insufficient to account for the outright politicization of the NRA, if only because opposing federal gun control legislation was nothing new for the NRA. The organization had successfully lobbied Congress and the White House in the past, often with great vehemence and success, without undergoing the kind of political transformation that fundamentally changed the organization in the late 1960s and 1970s. In response to the Roosevelt administration’s National Firearms Act of 1934, for instance, the NRA successfully “mobilized constituents who flooded Congress with letters and telegrams denouncing the proposed legislation” and compelled Congress to produce “amended versions of the bill that omitted pistols from the list of weapons to be registered and taxed (DeConde 143). Yet despite this vociferous, grass-roots membership opposition to the National Firearms Act, the NRA did not undergo the kind of organizational metamorphosis that it experienced in the late 1960s and 1970s. To understand the politicization of the NRA, then, we need to look beyond mere legislative opposition and consider the changing demographic composition of the NRA in the late 1960s in comparison to its earlier incarnations. For the NRA membership that opposed the Gun Control Act of 1968 was not at all the same membership that opposed the National Firearms Act three decades earlier: while the latter was still composed of largely rural, hunting and sporting enthusiasts, more and more Americans were purchasing firearms for self-protection in the 1960s and 1970s¹⁰ and, accordingly, NRA members found themselves coming into increasing conflict with long-standing municipal and state gun control laws that prohibited gun ownership

⁸ For an entirely paradigmatic example, see the recent *Frontline* documentary “Gunned Down: The Power of the NRA”: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gunned-down/>: 13:57-15:40.

⁹ The emphasis on banning mail-order guns was a result of the fact that Lee Harvey Oswald had purchased the rifle he used to assassinate President Kennedy for \$19.95 from a mail-order house in Chicago with a coupon clipped from the pages of *American Rifleman*.

¹⁰ “In a 1978 survey,” reports Gary Kleck on the shifting purposes of gun ownership in the United States, “45% of handgun owners stated that protection at home or at work was their most important reason for owning ... the next most common reasons were target shooting, cited by just 17%; gun collecting, cited by 14%; and hunting cited by 9% (74).

in the home for purposes of self-defense. The mounting legal and political conflicts that arose from this demographic shift necessitated, in the view of many of the NRA's newer rank and file members, a more politically robust and militant organization that could lobby for the right of its members to own guns specifically for the purpose of shooting people rather than targets or wildlife.¹¹ The NRA, therefore, was not merely opposing the provisions of the Gun Control Act in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was also attempting to re-define what it meant, culturally and politically, to own a gun in an advanced-industrial polity very different from post-bellum, rural America from which the organization was born.

The politicization of the NRA, and the politicization of gun culture more broadly, cannot therefore be separated from the deterioration of American cities and the concomitant fear of crime and disorder that permeated mainstream American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in this respect the imposition of neoliberal ideas and policy in American city space plays an important yet unacknowledged role in the transformation of gun culture in the United States. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt and Truman administrations embarked on ambitious urban renewal projects grounded in the Keynesian understanding that a healthy urban proletariat was crucial for the prosperity of American industrial society.¹² By the late 1960s, however, direct government intervention in public housing was decried as a failure from both the left and the right,¹³ particularly with respect to the rampant, La Corbusier-style high-rise construction and the resultant creation of what historian Arnold Hirsch called "second ghettos."¹⁴ The inability of public housing developments to solve the problems of America's inner cities provided the first real opportunity for burgeoning neoliberal ideas about the superior organizational capacities of markets to find purchase in a still largely Keynesian political and economic environment. "Attitudes toward government intervention in housing policy changed" observed Daniel Stedman Jones in his historical account of neoliberalism in America, and a growing rhetoric of the "undeserving poor" and "dependent minorities" led to "a different strategy for meeting the housing needs of the poor and closed off the possibility of the large-scale public housing construction envisioned by progressive Democrats":

What emerged instead was a voucher scheme for rent subsidy ... [which] revealed the political impossibility, by the mid 1970s, of mounting a sustained defense of public provision of housing to low-income groups when wider public support had disappeared. The move to grant subsidies and allowances in place of public

¹¹ For more on the changing character of NRA membership in the 1960s, see Feldman, *Ricochet: Confessions of a Gun Lobbyist* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 4.

¹² Most notably, the Roosevelt administration passed the Housing Act of 1934, which established the Federal Housing Administration and the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) and founded the U.S. Public Housing Authority in 1937. And the Truman administration's Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Act of 1949 promised "the construction of 810,000 units of public housing in the next six years, a whopping rate of 135,000 units per year, which dwarfed the earlier appropriations of the 1930s and 1940s" (Biles 144).

¹³ Paradigmatically from the left, Jane Jacob's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), and from the right, Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964).

¹⁴ See Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

housing construction anticipated the almost complete withdrawal that would occur through the 1980s under Reagan. (282-83)

The shift from direct public financing to the use of vouchers and other subsidies that created housing markets for the urban poor drew directly from neoliberal ideas about a “property-owning democracy”¹⁵ that were featured prominently in the writings of neoliberal patriarchs like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. In *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), for instance, Hayek contended that “efforts to reduce the cost of housing for the poorer sections of the population by public housing or building subsidies have come to be accepted as a permanent part of the welfare-state ... we must not overlook the fact that the market has, one the whole, guided the evolution of cities more successfully, if imperfectly, than commonly realized (345, 342). For Hayek, public housing’s attempt to “combat particular evils has made them worse” (342). And Milton Friedman offered a similar critique in his widely read *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). “Far from improving the housing of the poor,” argued Friedman, “public housing has done just the reverse ... if funds are to be used to help the poor, would they not be used more effectively by being given cash”? (179, 178).

While the gradual abandonment of direct government subsidy in urban and public housing was largely ineffective in terms of alleviating urban poverty or re-vitalizing cities,¹⁶ and thus did little in and of itself to deter Americans from purchasing guns for self-protection, what is far more significant in terms of the convergence of neoliberalism and gun culture during this period was the re-articulation of criminality that issued from the imposition of the market in urban space. In addition to submitting the urban poor to the grim dictates of market discipline, the adoption of neoliberal doctrine shifted the discourse on crime from a progressive focus on underlying social and economic conditions to a neoclassical framework concerned with individual responsibility and penal sanction. As Bernard Harcourt convincingly demonstrates in his genealogy of neoliberal penalty, the hegemony of markets in the economic sphere almost inevitably results in the criminalization of those who fail to conform to market norms or metrics within the same social space. “Criminality,” for the neoliberal, “is best understood as an end run around the market”:

Criminal law is therefore best understood as that which prevents this kind of market invasion ... the relationship between the market and penal system is binary: there is a market option, which is the space of ordered exchange, and it is marked off from the fraud and coercion option, which is the space of market bypassing, the space outside the market. (Harcourt 147)

For Harcourt, criminalization is essentially the default categorization for those that the market leaves behind, and thus the neoclassical re-articulation of crime that accompanied neoliberal

¹⁵ The term “property-owning democracy” dates back to a speech given by British Prime Minister Anthony Eden in 1946 at a Conservative Party Conference. “The objective of socialism,” proclaimed Eden, is state ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange. Our objective is a nation-wide property owning democracy ... whereas our opponents believe in State capitalism, we believe in the widest measure of individual capitalism” (qtd. in Jones 298).

¹⁶ For more on white flight and “suburban secession” as the lasting legacy of the abandonment of government subsidy in urban America, see Kevin Krouse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

urbanism during this period provided the specific ideological context in which individual gun ownership was inculcated into mainstream political discourse.¹⁷ “Opposition to gun control,” writes Reva Siegel on this point, “was now expressed in law and order frames. The argument for gun rights divided society into two classes – citizen and criminal – and demonstrated deep estrangement from Great Society Government” (209). Individual, private gun ownership, accordingly, featured prominently in the law and order agenda of 1970s conservatism in a way that identified or affiliated the law-biding, gun-owning citizen with the punitive, law and order state. The 1972 Nixon campaign, for instance, promised to “safeguard the right of responsible citizens to collect, own and use firearms for legitimate purposes,” while the 1976 Gerald Ford campaign more explicitly linked gun ownership with the problem of crime in America: “we support the right of citizens to keep and bear arms. We oppose federal registration of firearms. Mandatory sentences for crimes committed with a lethal weapon are the only effective solution to this problem.”¹⁸ The same ideological concatenation between individual gun ownership and the law and order agenda is manifest in a widely-circulated open letter to *Guns and Ammo* magazine in 1975 written by then Governor Ronald Reagan: “I believe criminals who use guns in the commission of a crime, or who carry guns, should be given mandatory sentences with no opportunity for parole. That would put the burden where it belongs – on the criminal, not on the law abiding citizen.”¹⁹

Early implementation of neoliberal urban reform in the 1960s and 1970s thus had a dual effect on the transformation of gun culture in the United States. While its harsh proscriptions for urban and public housing exacerbated white flight and the perpetuated fear of crime, neoliberal urbanism also re-articulated the discourse of crime in such a way that individual gun ownership was transformed into a politically legitimate means for the average American to protect himself from the crime and disorder sweeping across the United States. Yet despite the formative influence of neoliberal policy and ideology for politicizing gun culture during this period, it would be premature to suggest that gun culture, at this juncture, constitutes a transcoded extension of neoliberalism itself. While the two phenomena are certainly interlinked, the politicization of gun ownership during the 1970s was still nominally rooted in actual, empirical problems afflicting American society (if in a reactionary manner) and thus gun culture retained a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the larger process of neoliberalization that was only beginning to transform American political culture as a whole. During the second phase of gun culture’s politicization in the 1980s and 1990s, however, this nominal connection between gun ownership and the legitimate concerns of the American polity became increasingly tenuous as the NRA and other gun rights organizations increasingly adopted an insurrectionists rhetoric that spoke of government tyranny, not crime, as the most solid ground for the constitutionality of individual gun ownership. As I show in the next section, this marked shift in the political discourse of gun culture produced a contradictory amalgam of legal individualism and political

¹⁷ “The crime issue received an unprecedented level of political and media attention in 1968,” observes Katherine Beckett in her study of the genesis of law and order conservatism, “and by 1969, 81% of those polled believed that law and order had broken down, and the majority blamed ‘Negroes who start riots’ and ‘communists’ for this state of affairs . . . crime, political dissent and race were thus merged in both the rhetoric and practice of law and order” (38).

¹⁸ Republican National Convention, Republican Party Platform of 1972 and 1976: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25843>.

¹⁹ See Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan Champions Gun Ownership,” *Guns & Ammo*, Sept. 1975.

republicanism that is both evidence of the estrangement of gun culture from the realities of gun ownership and use in the United States and suggests the transformation of the gun into a political object that expresses and disseminates a political ethos homologous to that of contemporary neoliberalism.

The Gun as Transcoded Object

The transformation of the NRA from a recreational organization into a political lobby in the late 1960s and 1970s placed the Second Amendment at the core of modern gun rights movement. However legal and legislative interpretation of the Second Amendment, up to this point, heavily favored a collectivist reading of the amendment in which the constitutional right to keep and bear arms was confined to militia duty or service.²⁰ Legal precedent on Second Amendment interpretation was most forcefully codified in the *United States v. Miller* (1939), in which the Supreme Court's ruling was largely determined by an amicus curiae written by then Solicitor General Robert Jackson – who later attained international prominence as the chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials and became a Supreme Court Justice himself – which argued that the Second Amendment “had its origin in the attachment of the people to the utilization as a protective force of a well regulated militia as contrasted with a standing army which might possibly be used to oppress them,” and thus the amendment “is not one which may be utilized for private purposes but only one which exists where the arms are borne in the militia or some other organization provided for by law and intended for the protection of the state.”²¹ Jackson's militia theory stood as the standard interpretation of the Second Amendment throughout the twentieth century and constituted the most substantive legal and political obstacle facing the gun rights movement. In an attempt to alter this legal and political standard, the NRA and other gun rights organizations began massively funding legal and academic scholarship that championed individualist interpretations of the Second Amendment. Through the NRA's Institute of Legislation Action (ILA) and various front organizations like Academics for the Second Amendment, “seed money from the NRA and others helped transform the once barren field of individual-rights scholarship” into one of the most voluminous areas of contemporary constitutional research (Winkler 97). The individualist counter-interpretation of the Second Amendment received critical support in the late 1980s and early 1990s when some of the countries most respected, liberal legal scholars began to publish their own individualist readings of the right to keep and bear arms²² just when gun rights were becoming a potent political issue on the national scene, and the implicit endorsement of the legal establishment produced a sea change in Second Amendment scholarship in favor of the individualist view. “At least fifty-eight law review articles endorsing the individual rights view would be published during the 1990s,” observes Carl T. Bogus, “compared to twenty-nine favoring the collective right decision” (14).

²⁰ According to research conducted by Robert Spitzer, “thirty-nine law journal articles, all referenced in the *Index to Legal Periodicals*, were published on the Second Amendment from 1912 to 1980 ... only nine of these took the individualist position” (367).

²¹ Robert Jackson, Brief of the United States in *United States v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174 (1939). For more detail on Jackson's influence on the Court's decision see Winkler, *Gun Fight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 212-217.

²² The most prominent examples include Sanford Levinson's “The Embarrassing Second Amendment” and Akhil Amar's “The Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment” and “The Bill of Rights as a Constitution,” all published in the *Yale Law Journal*.

Borrowing from the terminology of the natural sciences and proclaiming the existence of a new “standard model” in Second Amendment interpretation,²³ the gun rights movement celebrated a long-awaited victory in 2008 when the Supreme Court, in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, ruled for the first time in the history of the United States that a gun control law violated the Second Amendment on individualistic grounds.²⁴ “There seems no doubt to us, on the basis of both text and history,” argued Antonin Scalia, the author of the case’s majority opinion, “that the Second Amendment conferred an *individual* right to keep and bear arms ... the enshrinement of [this] constitutional right necessarily takes certain policy choices off the table ... includ[ing] the absolute prohibition of handguns held and used for self-defense in the home” (22, 64).

The two decades of tireless work by the NRA and other gun rights organizations to shift legal opinion on the Second Amendment from a collective to individualist perspective is, however, only half the story of gun culture during this period of its development. For at the very same time that the NRA was insisting that the Second Amendment was, first and foremost, a right that applied to the private individual, the organization and its allies began to shift their political rhetoric and proclaimed government tyranny or oppression, not crime, as the ultimate basis for the constitutionality of unrestricted gun ownership in the United States. The anti-statist turn of what was previously a law and order friendly gun culture is generally traced to a series of political controversies in 1980s and early 1990s, most prominently the NRA’s opposition to the prohibition of Teflon-coated “cop-killer” bullets – which produced a lasting animus between law enforcement organizations and the NRA²⁵ – and the two infamous episodes of government violence at Ruby Ridge (1992) and Waco (1993). In the wake of these controversial and violent episodes, the NRA began to exude a political rhetoric that spoke of government authority in these matters as symptomatic of the latent and inherent totalitarianism of the federal government. In an infamous 1995 fundraising letter, for instance, then NRA executive vice-president Wayne LaPierre denounced federal agents as “jack-booted thugs” wearing “Nazi bucket helmets and black storm trooper uniforms” who were bent on “taking away our Constitutional rights” (qtd. in Feldman 236). Coming only a year after LaPierre had described the *New York Times* as a propaganda outlet worse than anything found in Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Russia, the radical, anti-statist turn in NRA ideology caused the organization to slide toward the extreme edge of respectability within American political culture, and consequently a number of prominent U.S. citizens – including former president George H.W. Bush and General Norman Schwartzkopf – resigned their NRA memberships in protest.²⁶ As then Republican Senator John Chaffee wrote in response to the letter, “the apocalypse described in this fund-raising letter is not familiar to me. The Government described in these pages is not familiar to me. This is not a description of reality. It is a description of terror designed for one purpose – to provoke a visceral reaction against the U.S. Government (qtd. in Bijlefeld 58).

²³ On “standard model” Second Amendment terminology, see Carl T. Bogus, “The History and Politics of Second Amendment Scholarship: A Primer.” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76 (2000), 22.

²⁴ In the words of *New York Times* Supreme Court Reporter Linda Greenhouse, “[The Justices] came to opposite conclusions, but proceeded on the premise that original understanding of the amendment’s framers was the proper basis for the decision. See http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/weekinreview/13greebox.html?ref=weekinreview&_r=1&

²⁵ For a more detailed account, see Davidson, “The Bullet and the Badge.” *Under Fire: The NRA and the Battle for Gun Control* (New York: Holt and Company, 1993): 85-114.

²⁶ See “Letter of Resignation Sent by Bush to Rifle Association.” *New York Times*, May 11, 1995.

While the NRA's fanatical vilification of the federal government initially undermined the legitimacy and efficacy of the organization,²⁷ the culture of American conservatism itself was increasingly adopting a more libertarian position when it came to state intervention in social life, and the new antagonistic, even violent, relationship between the average American gun owner and the federal government articulated in NRA discourse began resonate with the New Right's antipathy toward collective politics mediated by the state apparatus. For a new generation of Republicans reared on the writings of neoliberals like Hayek, Friedman and the novels of Ayn Rand,²⁸ the NRA's rhetoric of freedom *from* the state was far more compelling than the state affiliation implicit in the law and order discourse of the Nixon years, and thus the radical anti-statism of the NRA offered the New Right a resonant social issue in which the vilification of welfare state interventionism could be further impressed into the culture of American politics. "Republicans had turned the 1994 election into a referendum on the competence of government," observes Reva Siegal, "and [Newt] Gingrich appealed to guns rights to express the themes about government and the body politic that had been echoing since the Johnson era" (228). In *To Renew America* (1996), for instance, Gingrich explicated endorsed the NRA's insurrectionist interpretation of the Second Amendment. "The Second Amendment has nothing to do with deer or duck hunting," exclaimed Gingrich, "it has nothing to do with target practice or owning collector's weapons. The Second Amendment is a political right written into our constitution for the purpose of protecting individual citizens from their own government" (202). The encounter between the fringe politics of the NRA and the proto-tea party politics of the Gingrich Republicans endowed the insurrectionist discourse of the NRA with a new political pedigree and, in turn, "the right wing of the Republican Party [got] access to a message machine that churns out anti-progressive propaganda not just during election season but year in and year out" (Horwitz and Anderson 5). This re-articulation of gun rights from a predominately law and order issue to a cipher for expressing ideological opposition to state interventionism has since become a permanent feature of American political culture, such that virtually no contemporary Republican – and pitifully few Democrats – dissent from the insurrectionist constitutionalism of the NRA's contorted political views. On his 2008 campaign website, for instance, Ron Paul stated that a "gun in the hand of a law-biding citizen serves as a real, very important deterrent to an arrogant and aggressive government"²⁹ and in the words of Mike Huckabee, the Second Amendment "gives me that last line of defense against tyranny, even the tyranny of my own government."³⁰

One of the most striking and telling aspects of the anti-statist turn of contemporary gun culture is that its political purchase and vitality is in now way undermined by the flatly contradictory and anachronistic logic of interpreting the Second Amendment as a right of the private individual and a collective right of popular defense simultaneously. As constitutional historians Saul Cornell and Nathan DeDino point out, "the idea of liberty at the root of militia

²⁷ In the immediate aftermath of these controversies, "the [NRA's] membership decline by twelve percent, and its contributions to political action committees dropped by more than a fifth" (Siegel 231).

²⁸ For more on the rise of this generation of libertarian republicans, see E.J. Dionne, "Politics Without Government: the Rebirth of Libertarianism." *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

²⁹ See <http://www.ronpaullibrary.org/document.php?id=16>.

³⁰ See

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/vote2008/blog/2008/03/huckabee_concedes_gop_race_aft.html.

was not part of a radical individualist and anti-statist ideology, [rather] the Minutemen ideal was a quintessential expression of the idea of civic obligation” (494). Indeed, Cornell and DeDino go so far as to describe the Second Amendment as essentially a form of government taxation in its original application:

Each individual had a responsibility to help secure the collective rights of all by sacrificing some measure of their liberty to participate in a well regulated militia ... the state could compel one to serve in the militia, outfit oneself with a weapon, expend ammunition, while bearing absolutely no legal obligation to compensate citizens for their expenses. In essence, bearing arms was a form of taxation. Rather than stake out a claim against government, the original understanding of the right to bear arms gave government a strong claim on the lives and estates of its citizens (494, 496).³¹

Making a similar observation, Wendy Brown argues that the contemporary republican-insurrectionist reading of the Second Amendment, which harkens back to Machiavelli’s insistence that an armed citizenry constitutes “the heart and the vital parts” of a republic (410-411)³² does not express a republican sensibility at all, but rather “signifies a liberal overtaking of such sensibilities” in which a “diffident and depoliticized populace squares off against the state, in which there is no political heart at all but only hands and head and feet all armed against one other.”

Machiavelli’s passionate plea is not on behalf of the liberal individual – acquisitive, privatistic, concerned with hunting quail, protecting his property, or defending rights to his woman – but the republican citizen oriented toward civic, public life. I cannot imagine a less appropriate appellation for the contemporary American citizenry, which bears a shared commitment to almost nothing, least of all a common good” (663).

The contradictory logic of flouting a republican, civic obligation as an individual guarantee against government encroachment into one’s private life is, of course, only one of the more prominent contradictions plaguing the political philosophy of contemporary gun culture. For instance, there has been no shortage of critics who also recognize that an armed citizenry doesn’t amount to a particularly effective check on government power in the context of 21st century American global military power.³³ The entire purpose of codifying the right to keep and bear

³¹ For more on the collective origins of the Second Amendment, see Cornell, Saul. “Commonplace or Anachronism: The Standard Model, the Second Amendment, and the Problem of History in Contemporary Constitutional Theory.” *Constitutional Commentary*, vol. 16 (1999): 221-246.

³² The republican tradition of the “citizen-warrior” in fact goes back further to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, yet here too the “right” to bear arms is not a right of the individual but a collective obligation to the state. In its classical Greek formulation, the discipline of the Greek phalanx, which was comprised of middle-class farmers that could afford their own armament, “trained citizen soldiers to understand their civil and social rights and duties by making the polis their primary source of obligation” (Kagan and Viggiano, xii), and thus the Athenian citizen soldier held political views that were at odds with the state-phobic membership of the contemporary NRA, to say the least.

³³ Gun rights advocates will often point out that there are plenty of examples of a guerilla insurgency triumphing over a modern military power. “The Russians lost in Afghanistan, the United

arms in the Constitution, as Robert Spitzer aptly reminds, was “to allay the concerns of Antifederalists and others who feared that state sovereignty, and more specifically the ability of states to meet military emergencies on their own, would be impinged or neglected by the new federal government, which had been given vast new powers, particularly and alarmingly over the use of military force” (351). Following the disastrous performance of citizen militias in the War of 1812, however, “planners realized that no matter how often politicians glorified citizen-soldiers, reliance on the common militia to reinforce the regular Army was chimerical” (Millett and Maslowski 129), and henceforth the United States relied on a professional standing army, supplement by a popular draft. If the NRA and similar organizations genuinely desire to return to the days of militia defense, massive de-funding of the American military apparatus should rank just as highly as ensuring sufficient citizen access to weaponry, if not higher. And, of course, there is also the more basic problem of assessing what in fact counts as government tyranny in the first place. Were organizations like the NRA seriously committed to protecting American citizens from the oppressive tendencies of their own government, the First Amendment ought to be at least as much concern as the Second. The massive influx of moneyed interests that have penetrated the American electoral system in recent years, particularly after the Supreme Court struck down government bans on corporate election contributions in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), has led many scholars to point out that the oligarchic transformation of the United States government is no longer an abstract potential to be feared but rather the quotidian reality of the political decision making in the United States today. As Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page put it in their widely-cited study of U.S. government policy formation, “when the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy” (575). The idea that an atomistic and isolated citizenry who own handguns and rifles amounts to a reasonable check against this kind of oligarchic transformation is not only farcical, but propagating this mytho-political understanding of firearms only further oppresses the hundreds of thousands of American citizens affected by the approximately ten thousand firearms-related deaths documented each year in the United States.³⁴

Of course the larger and overriding argument I am making here is these and other criticisms are have virtually no effect on gun rights organizations and advocates precisely because the politics of gun culture in the United States is not actually about guns in any real, empirical sense at all. Instead, guns, in contemporary American political culture, function primarily as transcoded objects that extend and amplify the neoliberal vilification of welfare state government and of collective politics more broadly. Guns, in this sense, operate in an “economic” fashion that bears a family resemblance to Sarah Ahmed’s description of the circulation of hate speech. “The passion of these negative attachments to others [i.e., hate

States in Vietnam, and the French lost Indo-China” (LaPierre, 20 [1994]). While this may be true, it doesn’t make much sense to defend the constitutional right for citizens to keep and bear arms to its most extreme end while meekly accepting the worst-case scenario in which this right is thought to be effective. Thus consistent or honest insurrectionist should be just as critical of military funding as they are of gun control laws.

³⁴ To put this in some perspective, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have led to the deaths of fewer than seven thousand American military personnel, which is fewer than the number of Americans killed in firearms-related incidents in a single year.

speech]” writes Ahmed, “is redefined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined subjects brought together through the repetition of the signifier, ‘white’:

The ordinary white subject is a fantasy that comes into being through the mobilization of hate ... The emotion of hate works to animate the ordinary subject, to bring that fantasy to life, precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim ... Importantly, then, hate does not reside in a given subject or object. Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement ... [and its] affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation (118-119)

Hate speech, for Ahmed, does not so much identify or denote actual racial minorities in a positive sense as much as it circulates as a kind of currency for constituting a certain “white” normative subject as perpetually in crisis. Guns, similarly, do not primarily denote material objects of steel and plastic, but are better read as political tokens that circulate in within American political culture as a transcoded objectifications of neoliberalism’s animus toward state interventionism and which constitute a highly gendered and racialized view of the normative gun-owning, law-biding citizen that is forever besieged by the visible hand of democratic government. “The idea that individuals must be prepared for a violent confrontation with the state,” as Joshua Horowitz and Casey Anderson put it in their description of contemporary gun culture, “is only one tenet of a worldview that is hostile toward – or at least suspicious of – public education, immigration, international institutions, and almost any type of social program, especially when run by the federal government” (2). The discourse of contemporary gun culture is both entirely unconcerned with the realities of gun crime or violence in the United States and entirely impervious to the historical and logic criticism of its claims, precisely because guns, in the rhetoric of the NRA and others, do not really reference material objects at all but rather function as a kind of discursive bulwark against any form progressive social, economic and political policy.

This hostility of gun culture to collective, democratic politics is perhaps most vividly manifest in the emergence of the “social engineer” as one of, if not the, central villains in the political drama of gun culture in its anti-statist phase. In a famous 1996 speech, for instance, then NRA president Charlton Heston declared (using characteristic racial undertones), “no amount of oppression, no FBI, no IRS, no big government, no social engineers, no matter what and no matter how, they cannot cleave the genes we share with our Founding Fathers” (168). This discursive transformation of the gun into a specialized political weapon for combating the dystopian visions of social engineers that re-energized gun culture under the leadership of Heston has since become and increasingly dominant trope within contemporary gun culture, and, I argue, most clearly demonstrates the marked extent to which gun culture in the United States has become estranged from the realities of gun ownership and gun violence today. In his most recent book, *America Disarmed: Inside the U.N. and Obama’s Scheme to Destroy the Second Amendment* (2011), NRA president LaPierre rehearses this paranoid political drama by repeatedly informing his readers, as NRA executive director Chris Cox puts it in the book’s foreword, that “government poses a much larger threat than the guy next door” (xi). Recalling, on very first page of the book, how “self-appointed social engineers of all over the world were silently cheering for the [2000] Gore campaign” (1), LaPierre proceeds to describe his

encounters with U.N. committees and sub-committees as a existential battle between advocates of totalitarian social engineering and freedom-loving, American gun owners. “I told the crowd,” writes LaPierre in reference to a public debate with Rebecca Peters, the head of the International Action Network on Small Arms, “that we [the NRA] saw the IANSA mission for what it was: the reemergence of the same old socialist fantasies of the twentieth century – fantasies that prey on citizens who fall for the false promise of social engineering ... I counseled the audience to study the history of where the social engineers have had their way, and suggested they should think twice about the bargain ... Americans simply won’t fall for it, I explained. We are the freest nation in the world, and the false promise of the social engineers is precisely the bargain rejected by our forefathers.” (17)

As an object that gains its political significance by virtue of its capacity to combat the threat of social engineering – i.e., collective, democratic politics – the gun is thus best read as a transcoded object of neoliberalism, or an object that homologously extends the neoliberal critique into non-economic domains. For while the political narrativization of the gun in the discourse of contemporary gun culture is historical, legally and political nonsensical, it does nonetheless effectively condense and objectify the essential and defining feature of post-war neoliberal thought – particularly as manifest in the movement’s founding texts, Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), Ludwig von Mises’ *Bureaucracy* (1944) and Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945) – namely the indiscriminate conflation of any other form of government intervention into social life as “collectivism,” a neoliberal pejorative for the “the progressive and social democratic belief in collective solutions to social needs” (Jones 34).³⁵ As Hayek influentially argued in *Individualism and Economic Order* (1948), the central antagonism facing Western civilization is not merely communism versus capitalism, or totalitarianism versus democracy, but a more fundamental conflict that pits the “true individualist” against “the design theorists of social institutions” and the “characteristic attitude of the engineers to social problems” (10). This guiding and axiomatic opposition between political individualism and state planning was adopted by the next generation of neoliberal policy advocates from the 1950s through to the 1970s, particularly in the work of Freidman and Chicago School, and virtually defined the ideological project of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations during the 1980s. This heedless language of political totalitarianism to describe any form of collective politics has, by now, undermined the mid-twentieth century belief in the efficacy and the moral superiority of collective politics, and it is through the use of a homologous discourse that contemporary gun culture carries on and extends the neoliberal attack on collective politics and institutions today.³⁶

³⁵ I should say, here, that I do not regard National Socialism as a “progressive and democratic” form of government. Rather, Nazism features in the work of the early neoliberals as the inevitable end product of state intervention in social life, and thus any form of democratic governance, over and above the rudiments of democratic representation and participation tolerated by liberal-market capitalism, is always considered an embryonic and latent form of totalitarianism.

³⁶ That guns or gun culture would be become transcoded in this fashion should not be particularly surprising given the declining functionality of the firearm in twenty-first century America. As conservative columnist David Frum has observed, the number of American’s that actually own and use guns is reaching record lows. “Only about one-third of American households now own a gun, compared to about one-half in 1973” writes Frum, and “only about 6 percent of Americans hunt even once in a year. That’s just slightly more than the number who attended a ballet performance: 3.9 percent. Add it all

Conclusion: Transcoding as Political Resistance

“Long ago,” writes Adam Winkler in his history of gun culture in the United States, “high-profile shootings often led to significant reform of gun law”:

The St. Valentine’s Day Massacre of 1929, for example, led to the first major federal gun control effort, and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 helped speed enactment of the Gun Control Act. Yet little followed in the wake of more recent shootings. The Columbine High School shootings in 1999, in which two students killed thirteen people, and the 2011 attempt on Representative Gabrielle Giffords that left a federal judge and five others dead did not spark any meaningful reforms. (x)

Not only have recent mass shootings in the United States failed to produce any substantive gun control legislation, as Winkler observes, but, in fact, gun ownership has actually been greatly *enhanced* over the past decade,³⁷ despite the persistence of these shootings. Reflecting on the failure to pass meaningful gun control legislation in recent years, Winkler laments the fact that “there are just too many guns and too many gun owners unwilling to give them up” (18). “Every proposal has its downside, and no reform can hope to make a serious dent in gun deaths given the 300 million guns already in circulation” and thus gun control legislation, despite its best intentions, is unlikely to be anything more than “a *symbolic* act to please people’s desire to do something – anything – even if it was unlikely to save lives” (Winkler xi, xiv, emphasis added).

If nothing else, interpreting guns as transcoded objects of neoliberalism does at least account for the reversal of the prior trend in which mass shootings actually produced meaningful gun control laws. The most basic claim I have made in this article is that guns are not temporally uniform cultural objects, but have rather been radically transformed over the past several decades. Guns have been progressively dislodged or abstracted from their empirical moorings as

up, and the core gun constituency looks a lot like the Tea Party on the firing range. Two-thirds of American households own no guns at all. The vast majority of households that own a gun own only one. Opposing them, a small minority—about 6 percent of American households—have amassed 65 percent of the nation’s privately owned firearms.”³⁶ Yet whereas the utility of a device like a personal firearm in a post-industrial environment like the United States is on the wane as far as the average citizen is concerned, distrust in government is, contrastingly, reaching all time highs. According to a 2013 Gallup poll, “seventy-two percent of Americans say big government is a greater threat to the U.S. than is big business or big labor, a record high in the nearly 50-year history of this question. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166535/record-high-say-big-government-greatest-threat.aspx>

³⁷ “All 50 states now issue concealed-carry permits to allow approved gun owners to carry firearms into public places. In many states, permit holders may carry guns even into bars and non-TSA-patrolled areas of airports. In 2008, gun advocates persuaded the Supreme Court to overrule a century of precedent and redefine the Second Amendment not as a right of state governments to form militias but as an individual right to acquire private firearms. Gun advocates persuaded Congress in 2004 to let lapse the Clinton-era ban on assault rifles. In the mid-1990s, they voted to halt government research into the public-health effects of gun ownership when that research yielded uncongenial evidence. No crime or atrocity, not even the massacre of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School, has checked the strong trend of U.S. public policy to make ever more lethal weapons ever more easily available to ever more people, including people with histories of domestic violence.” See Frum, “Why Gun Rights Backers Win While Other Conservatives Causes Lose.” *The Atlantic*, April 29, 2014.

a result of their convergence with neoliberal ideology and policy and now circulate in American political culture as transcoded objects of neoliberalism itself. With this transformative process in mind, we can understand why gun control efforts have become more difficult in recent years. While the NRA still opposed gun control legislation passed by the Roosevelt and Johnson administrations, and did so with widespread, grass-root support from its membership, the gun was a very different object during those decades. Gun rights, during these years, were not generally articulated in constitutional terms and guns themselves were still thought of as objects with a relatively high degree of material utility or use-value for large segments of the American public (mostly rural constituencies). As objects still anchored in the empirical realities of their material use, their restriction through law, while still unappealing to many Americans, was not an impossible political feat. Today, however, guns are not objects anchored in the empirical realities of their use in any real sense, but rather circulate as transcoded objects of the specific rationality or governmentality that increasingly determines the parameters American political culture itself. They are icons that vilify big government and obscure the anachronism of rural, rugged individualism in an age of post-industrial plutocratic hyper-inequality, and thus to restrict the ownership of guns under these conditions is a far greater matter than merely regulating a hazardous consumer product.

Yet by the same token, the transcoded relationship that has rendered meaningful gun control legislation so difficult in recent decades also, I argue, endows gun control efforts with new political impetus and force. As noted above, recourse to the notion of “symbolism” is relatively common in the literature on gun culture today and is generally deployed as a term of political lament. That most gun control legislation is doomed to be, in Winkler’s words, “a triumph of symbolism over substance” (39) is meant to highlight the pragmatic ineffectiveness of most gun control legislation in a country in which 300 million firearms currently circulate. Yet the reading of gun culture I have provided here tells us that gun culture – and hence gun control legislation – is already by definition symbolic and that it is precisely the political symbolism of guns – not their sheer quantity – that has made gun control legislation so politically difficult (were guns mere objects of utility like automobiles or chainsaws, their regulation, no matter their absolute quantity, would pose no great challenge). Thus rather than dismissing gun control legislation on the grounds that it is *merely* symbolic, I want to conclude here by insisting that it is precisely the symbolic – or more precisely the *transcoded* – status of guns that makes gun control legislation a particularly substantive and timely political act today. In Jameson’s understanding of literature as a “symbolic act” (79), transcoding offered limited political agency because it conceives the text as a one-dimensional reflection of the larger totality in which it is embedded. Yet as I observed above, the criticism, and resistance, of contemporary neoliberal fundamentally depends on the ability to detect and resist the one-dimensional reflections, refractions and reproductions of neoliberalism in non-economic spaces. If the power of contemporary neoliberalism lies in its ability to expand into all spheres of daily life, then these sphere become, of necessity, the spaces in which the battle for a more substantive democratic politics and ultimately a more just society will be fought. Restricting the ownership and uses of firearms not only for the pragmatic reasons of public safety, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because these objects now serve as transcoded instantiations of a corrosive vilification of democratic politics, thus becomes a political victory and a successful act of resistance all on its own.

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