

'Bowling for Columbine': So Why is the USA So Insecure?

Merrelyn Emery

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These notes do not pretend to be anything more than a simple reflection on some very basic starting points for answering the question in the title.

It is perfectly true that Michael Moore's film does not explain what USA citizens are afraid of or why they have embraced violence and the gun culture to the extent that they have. It also seems true as Janis Nowlan suggests that Moore did not understand himself what he was asking others to understand.

So the mystery about this most obvious fact of USA culture remains. Is it capable of explanation? Have others attempted to analyze and explain it? I don't know. But I suspect that if it could be nailed down, we may be able not only to better understand the USA's international policies and moves at the moment, but we could also use that understanding to better deal collaboratively and diplomatically with the USA, towards a more peaceful world.

I tend to believe a violent culture is an historical accident, a combination of forces which taken one at a time can be found to be shared by other countries and cultures, but when taken together present a unique configuration or profile. Most cultures present some unique mixture of their histories, the people and cultures who played major roles in forming them, and their land, those physical environmental forces that exert irresistible but sometimes almost invisible powers over the behaviour of the people.

In many ways the USA seems blessed. An immensely rich land comparatively lacking in hostility and threat, colonized by a variety of diverse peoples from a range of circumstances should have favoured an enriched and diverse culture and it has. Everybody from UK convicts to the Puritans to the French to African slaves has contributed to the mix. Taken one by one, the circumstances of America's development seem unexceptionable. They share their convicts with Australia, the French with the Canadians, their indigenous peoples with just about everybody else. The Puritans had a strict and harsh God but that is not unique. Slavery may seem an exception but Australia imported the Kanakas although on nothing like the same scale. Not all other countries have endured armed revolution for their freedom nor a civil war but these may well be symptoms of a prevailing cultural undercurrent rather than the origins of the problem.

Early visitors to the USA of whom de Tocqueville is probably the best known, always commented on the health and vitality of American democracy. Is it possible that the problem lies hidden somewhere in the form of that democracy? I would begin to look by examining the forces that led to 'Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. This is unique to the USA I believe and note that it does not include fraternity. I do not know enough about USA history to take this analysis further but what did lead to this national purpose? What forces led to the pursuit of happiness being widely interpreted as individual happiness?

Today's circumstances are better established. First time visitors to the USA are frequently struck by one characteristic they did not expect to find, the very strong streak of authoritarianism (segmentation) in the culture. They also find a lack of humour and a deadly seriousness about themselves that is most uncommon in Western industrialized nations, particularly those that have origins in British culture. These features clearly distinguish the USA from Canada, Australia, South Africa and India, to name but a few. The other countries who owe at least part of their culture to the British heritage are politically more cynical, more relaxed about their virtues and their faults and practice to varying extents, a self deprecating humour.

No other Prime Minister or President enjoys the reverential treatment received by the President of the USA. Press questioning is mild by most standards and there is relatively little joking about or ridiculing of the President or his behaviour. Perhaps the Lewinsky affair may provide contradictory evidence but despite the worst Starr and the press could throw at him, there was a continuing high level of support from the ordinary citizen. While the USA shows historically and today, a syndrome of attitudes that can be summed up as anti-government, this syndrome does not extend to the President¹. He appears to be valued at a level way above that experienced by political leaders anywhere else with the possible exception of the Japanese

Emperor, if Japan can in fact be put in the same category of Western industrialized nations as the others mentioned above. That matter is still subject to debate but see the graph below.

The authoritarianism is also found in the extremely high level of religiosity and belief in God. This latter factor is in itself again most unusual in the first world. Even naughty boy Clinton apparently is sincere in his religious affiliation and practice. The USA alone seems to have retained this characteristic while the others have moved further from established religions and the expressed monotheism of the Christian variety, towards more secular states. In fact, David Wilson says that "America has become more religious over the course of its history, not less, despite the influence of science and engineering" (quoted by Jared Diamond, 'The Religious Success Story', *The New York Review of Books*, 7 November 2002, p32). The separation of church and state is far more strict and enforced elsewhere than it is in the USA where the lines are blurry or seem at times not to exist.

And then there is the patriotism. Americans often find it difficult to believe that Aussies or Brits for example, do not go round wearing their patriotism or their flags on their sleeves. In the USA the flags abound in ordinary gardens and the days after 11 September are memorable for the astounding display of flags alone.

Yet this picture is that of the people or culture at large. It is often far from the behaviour and attitudes of USA citizens individually expressed. It is the public not the private face.

At the personal level many Americans show individual flair, vitality and frequently, extremes of behaviour, nothing like the passive authoritarianism discussed above. They can be energetic and creative with a huge range of opinions and beliefs. The extremism can range from alcohol and drug usage to altruism, generosity and sociability. But there are times when the people come together in displays of the collective cultural behaviours, rituals, again as in the days after 11 September.

It was extremely difficult to find a dissenting voice to the aggressive messages emanating from the authorities, once the original shock had worn off, anywhere from any ordinary USA outlet. There appeared to be only one view, one perspective. The 'axis of evil' speech which caused consternation around the world appeared not to be much contested in USA media.

So why do so many foreigners experience such a difference between the 'culture at large USA' or its 'people en mass' and its individual people? And what are consequences of this discrepancy, as it is perceived as a discrepancy. We will return to this question after we have dealt with the consequences of the more generalized authoritarianism. This subject was canvassed in detail in the classic *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno et al.

By definition, authoritarianism is the handing over of individual control to a higher authority. Individuals for whatever reason relinquish control over many aspects of their lives, thereby living in dependence on the goodwill and beneficence of that authority. This is a form of 'them and us' and more importantly, is a major source of insecurity. That is the main reason that the passive maladaptation of authoritarianism finds its complement in the active maladaptation of Law & Order. Authorities (earthly at least) understand, explicitly or implicitly, that without their reinforcement of law and order, insecurity may rise to dangerous levels, endangering the very authority delegated to them. Insecurity without adequate levels of law and order itself breeds violence.

Once the individual has handed over this responsibility and power, they are by definition less powerful. They may even feel powerless and this will be seen through such indices as the Y2K fiasco in the USA. America typically shows more evidence of doomsday scenarios than comparable western countries. From the point of view of those receiving the power, this is an essential component to preserving power. They have their own insecurities and for those wedded to the necessity of the first design principle from Machiavelli onwards, without power there is no security. Thus, the insecurity applies to both 'them and us'.

It is also in this sense that the 'war on terrorism' provided the perfect opportunity to bring populations under better control. Many of the legislative and administrative changes implemented after 11 September, 2001,

can be seen as nothing more than pacification of the people. Extreme measures such as canceling civil rights and security measures which amounted to nothing more than shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted, causing huge inconvenience and disruption, had little chance of lowering the risk of terrorism, which terrifies in part because it is unpredictable.

However, there also seems to be a vicious circle involved in authoritarianism, insecurity and violence. The more one delegates responsibility, the more powerless and insecure one becomes, and the more insecure one is, the more likely it is that one's behaviour will become impulsive and subject to fight-flight responses. Even when relevant authorities impose adequate levels of law and order, there are many situations where individuals will perceive themselves to be alone or at immediate risk, and it is in these situations that the impulse to fight-flight will break out of the controls. A case in point is foreigners getting shot after knocking on a door to ask directions.

This impulsiveness is reinforced by the prevailing individualism and dissociation. Where individual rights outweigh collective responsibility or responsibility towards others or the whole, we have personal *laissez-faire*. This is dangerous when individuals believe they are entitled to pursue for themselves their liberty, defence and 'happiness'. High gun ownership renders this impulsiveness and *laissez-faire* lethal.

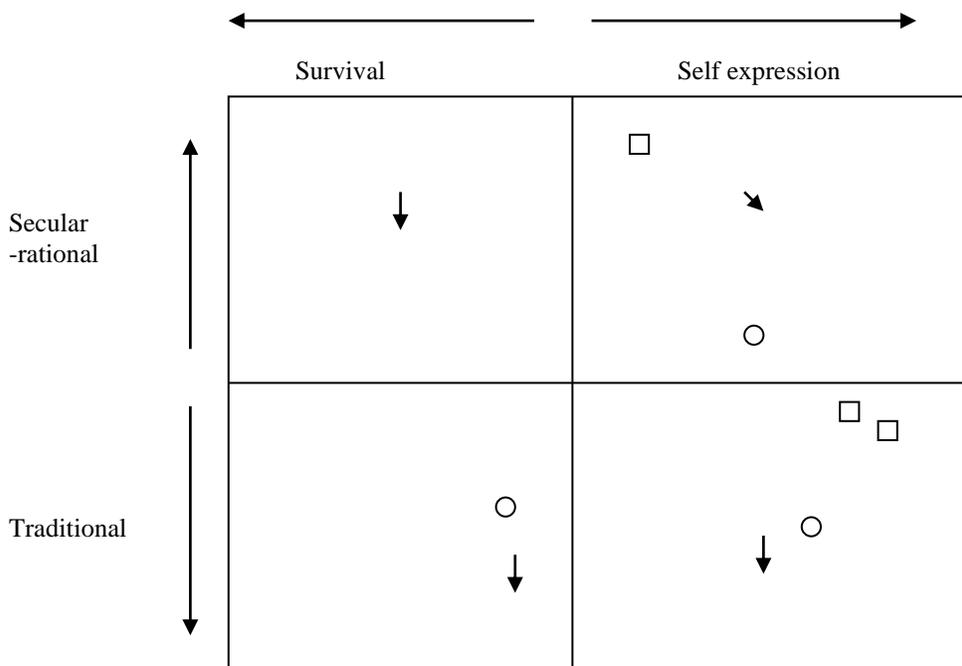
Another aspect of authoritarianism is the urge to conformity. This too is tied to insecurity as we see the greatest conformity in appearance, language and rituals among adolescents immersed in the rapid rewiring of their brains and the turmoil of the unfolding of their mature selves. Perhaps the lack of dissent after Sept 11 is a symptom of this as perhaps also was the strength of the McCarthy inquisition although in both cases we saw and see today, a growing opposition, today to the war on terror and its current manifestation in the build up to war on Iraq. Witch trials such as those held in Salem may have been a precursor.

The streak of authoritarianism, and its associated phenomena, is of course, in conflict with the extent of individualism and dissociation in the USA. Amply documented by many sources such as *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putnam, 2000), the USA is characterized by this scenario. How do we reconcile this with the underlying bent towards authoritarianism. Perhaps it is not necessary to do so. Perhaps we simply accept that both are present and that the difference between individual and mass American behaviour noted by outside observers is an expression of the conflict and contradiction.

Some days after starting these notes, by total accident I came across some data pertinent to this subject while clearing up some neglected reading matter. *The Economist* of 4-10 January 2003 has an article entitled 'Special Report, American values: Living with a superpower' (pp18-20). Because it addresses precisely the issue of the conflict between authoritarianism and dissociation, I am quoting it at length.

The article discusses the latest data from the world values survey run by the University of Michigan. It covers 78 countries with 85% of the world's population and has been running for 25 years. Data is arranged on 2 bipolar axes, 'traditional' versus 'secular-rational' values and 'survival' versus 'self expression' values. Michigan's theory is that industrialization turns traditional societies into secular-rational ones while post-industrial development produces a shift towards self expression. This holds true for most countries, i.e. poor countries show high levels of traditionalism and high levels of survival and rich countries such as those of western Europe show high secular-rationalism and high self expression.

However, America's position on the graph is odd. "It is far more traditional than any west European country except Ireland. It is more traditional than any place at all in central or Eastern Europe. America is near the bottom right corner of the chart, a strange mix of tradition and self expression (p19-20).



Arrow in top left is Belarus; arrow in top right is Norway, circle in top right is Britain, square is Japan; circle in bottom left is India, arrow is Iran; circle in bottom right is USA, arrow is Ireland and the 2 squares are Canada and Australia with Canada slightly above & left.

"Americans are the most patriotic people in the survey: 72% say they are very proud of their country (and this bit of the poll was taken before September 2001). That's puts America into the same category as India and Turkey. The survey reckons religious attitudes are the single most important component of traditionalism. "...

"Of course, America is hardly monolithic. It is strikingly traditional on average. But to generalize wildly, that average is made up of two Americas: one that is almost as secular as Europe (and tends to vote Democrat), and one that is more traditionalist than the average (and tends to vote Republican)." And as they say, this makes the USA even more distinctive.

The gap between Europe and the USA is widening. Since 1981, every Western country has shifted markedly along the spectrum towards greater self expression, The USA is no exception. "But on the other spectrum America seems to have become more traditional rather than less.

The Economist asks whether traditional values help explain differing attitudes to the projection of power. Their answer is that "in principle, two things suggest they might. Patriotism is one of the core traditional values and there is an obvious link between it, military might and popular willingness to sustain large defence budgets. There may also be a link between America's religiosity and its tendency to see foreign policy in moral terms. To Americans, evil exists and can be fought in their lives and in the world. Compared with Europe, this is a different world view in both senses: different prevailing attitudes, different ways of looking at the world."

Other studies reviewed show data which reveal the extent of some of these differences in immediate terms. A striking example is that while Europeans generally support the American led war on terrorism, over half of them say the USA does not take other countries into account. 75% of Americans think their government does. That huge difference helps explain the current difficulties in the UN Security Council.

The Economist points out that the USA and Europe have managed differences before in order to work together on mutual interests but two things are different now. "The first is that the values gap may be widening a little, and starting to affect perceptions of foreign-policy interest on which the transatlantic alliance is based. The second is that, in the past, cultural differences have been suppressed by the shared values of American and European elites – and elite opinion is now even more sharply divided than popular opinion. It is the combination of factors that makes the current transatlantic divisions disturbing. And it is little consolation that, in the face of some mutual hostility, the Bush administration is insisting it is all just a matter of politics, and not of something deeper" (p20).

This data and its implications certainly support the view that the USA is wracked by inherent discrepancies and hence, confusion. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful internal conflict than that between authoritarianism and dissociation as the behaviours associated with each scenario are opposites. Insecurity could well be the product of such internal conflict.

Add to this the vicious cycle springing from the consequences of this insecurity, namely the violence and the homicide rate and the obvious failure of a generalized policy of 'zero tolerance' about everything, and it would appear that the USA is locked into a spiraling crisis of violence and attempts to overcome the problem and its symptoms by uniting the people into grand military demonstrations of strength and might. With growing worries and insecurity about the economy, a massive display of power may be believed to dampen the overall level of unease.

This could be a risky strategy if our diagnosis is correct. Any failure or perceived failure of the military demonstration or of its leaders is likely to result in massive outbreaks of dissociation, increased superficiality and outbreaks of evangelicism that may take violent and bizarre forms. Those who continue to put their faith in the authorities will come into conflict with those who, while suffering their own internal conflicts, are exercising passive or active resistance. Far from achieving unity and reassurance, the strategy could result in greater fracturing and the sort of long lasting damage we saw after the Vietnamese war.

Can anything be done? In the short term probably not. Reconstructing such a deep seated inherent dilemma will require action based educational strategies on a broad scale. But this will not be easy given that the USA appears to be moving further from the mean.

On the international front, views are typically gloomy. A recent example comes from Paul Kennedy ('The Modern Machiavelli', *New York Review of Books*, 7 November, 2002, pp52-55) who quotes Mearsheimer (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*). "Hopes for peace will probably not be realized, because the great powers that shape the international system fear each other and compete for power as a result. Indeed, their ultimate aim is to gain a position of dominant power over others, because having dominant power is the best means to ensure one's own survival. Strength ensures safety, and the greatest strength is the greatest insurance of safety. This is tragic he says but there is no escaping it "unless the states that make up the system agree to form a world government. Such a vast transformation is hardly a realistic prospect".

Kennedy not only agrees with these sentiments but looking further into the future, sees the USA and China contesting the position of the number one power. Barring some internal disasters in China, "this contest is not just likely but inevitable" (p53). He doesn't do a lot of analysis or say who will win but it becomes very clear that if the USA's adventure in the Middle East does not go well, its weakened position will speed China's rise¹.

Such long term scenario building is a long way from our starting point but does illustrate the continuing potential for global instability and the growing need to find ways others than violence and militarism to calm the insecurities that surround us all. Both at the individual, community and global levels, we need to address such insecurities with collective strategies. USA culture and *Bowling for Columbine* as case studies may help us think and work towards them.

¹ This appears to have happened.

ⁱ This phenomenon appears to be one very strong factor behind the terrible mess America got itself into when Trump attempted to overturn the 2020 election. Reverence for the presidency and the belief that he could do no wrong led many to overlook his highly visible faults. Some incited by his fiery rhetoric combined this belief with the other seemingly contradictory anti-government sentiments that are also deeply held by many, to storm the Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Other factors are discussed in 'Trump – the latest case of evangelicism' (2016) published in Appendix of *Did 9/11 change the world?: Tracking the future* (2021), Amazon.