

# Episode 170-- The Social Lives of Firearms How Guns Are Made...

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## SPEAKERS

JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson, Brandon Hunter-Pazzara

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JJ Janflone 00:08

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JJ Janflone 00:22

Hey everybody, once again, JJ here.



Kelly Sampson 00:39

And I'm Kelly. And together, we're your host of Red, Blue, and Brady.



JJ Janflone 00:44

Welcome back, everybody.



Kelly Sampson 00:45

Yeah. And we're so glad to have you here with us today, as we dig deeper into a very important topic, which is, what is racialized gun violence? And how do firearms, structural racism, and concepts of self-defense interact in the US.



JJ Janfalone 00:59

And this is a huge conversation, one that I can say Kelly and I are both so glad to have Brandon Hunter-Pazzara, join us for. Brandon is an anthropologist, who among other things, has written on how white supremacy doesn't just utilize firearms, it's shaped them too.

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 01:17

My name is Brandon Hunter-Pazzara. I am a PhD candidate at Princeton University in the Department of Cultural Anthropology, also have a background in law. I went to Georgetown University for my law degree. And my research, kind of a broad set of topics. But I'm interested in sort of themes of law, labor, and legality and in different contexts across the Americas.



JJ Janfalone 01:40

So Brandon, I'd love to know why can you explain what this interplay of firearms and race is?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 01:46

So you know, one of the ideas that I was thinking about, or one of the things that I've taken from Critical Race Theory is that you can have racist outcomes without there without necessarily there having to be someone who is intentionally racist in the process. And that comes from doing a kind of social analysis to look at, say, the effects that laws or policies might have. And I started thinking about the relationship between what Critical Race Theory is saying about racism, that racism can occur even when you don't have sort of racists intentionally doing racist things. And the idea that objects or material culture, things like guns or, you know, you can think about anything, a lot of other things are also connected to systems that distribute those objects, distribute things to people in particular ways.

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 02:40

And so in many ways, what this paper was doing was sort of gelling, or bringing those two ideas into conversation with one another, and using guns as a way to talk about that. And for me, you know, when I started doing research on this paper and digging into this idea, the story was sort of right there, right? Guns are a multi-billion dollar industry, it's not as if the gun owner makes the gun themselves or buys from a local manufacturer. In many cases, you know, the gun industry is, is a billion dollar industry, with a handful of gun makers, a huge apparatus of advertising, an entire kind of culture around around it. And so when we talk about guns, when we talk about firearms, we talk about their effects. It was interesting to me that we didn't think about. or the public conversation around firearms, doesn't focus on this broader legal and economic and political structure, that shapes who has access to guns, and, you know, related to the critical race theory part, who is harmed by those weapons? Who receives the harm of those weapons?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 03:46

And when you turn to a more structural analysis that looks at all of the ways in which these things are networked, are connected together, that what you see when it comes to something like racial gun violence is you see certain patterns. Which are, you know, those who are affected by the harm those who perpetrate the harm. And you can tell that story as a structural story as a story of policies, laws, business relationships, better, I think, to explain gun violence, and you can as saying, "Well, the shooter was a racist. And I know this because I know the inner workings of their psychology." And for me, that question is unimportant, just as it's unimportant in Critical Race Theory. It's unimportant, whether the, you know, the judge is racist, or the politician is racist. What's important is thinking about the effects of these policies and the unequal outcomes that they might produce.



JJ Janfalone 04:36

Well, and before we go too far, can we define some terms for our listeners, I wonder if you can explain what racial gun violence means?



B Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 04:43

So for me racial gun violence, with respect to the paper, is really about the role that self-defense logics play when it comes to police or vigilantes, using their firearms on a person of color, right? Using their using their weapons in the concept of self-defense. But I think racial gun violence is a more expansive term, right? So in the paper, I talked about how, you know, the mass shooting in El Paso was an example of racial gun violence, right? Somebody targeted, specific racial group with their weapon. You know, there are other instances of racial gun violence, too. I would say that, or when I, another thing I talk about in the paper is the way that gun use and shootings in minority communities or are often framed as a kind of cultural problem. But if you think about it as a racial gun violence problem, as a political problem that requires policy and legal solutions, to me, that's another example, where, you know, say state authorities are failing to properly tackle this problem. And so for me, it's an example of kind of racial gun violence. So there are different categories, but the one I'm specifically focused on in the paper is when claims of self-defense are being marshaled in the context of like, the use of firearms against people of color.



JJ Janfalone 06:00

Well, and I think if we can dig in a little bit to that too. You know, you've mentioned several times now, you know, this idea of, after the fact folks trying to suss out what someone's intention was. In particular, you know, was the shooter racist or not? was the shooting intended to be a racist act? And not on what you lay on the paper are these systemic factors. And I'm wondering if you could explain to our listeners who haven't read it yet, that we will link to it description of this episode, you know, what that actually looks like in practice?



B Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 06:31

I think the public conversation is, at least among certain activists has become a lot more sophisticated around this question. And in some ways this paper, you know, mirrors some of the ways that say. Black Lives Matter talks about gun violence in the United States. But at the

time, right at the time, when I was thinking about this, and I used the Trayvon Martin case, as a kind of case study, to apply some of the ideas I'm working with, people were interested in whether Zimmerman was a racist, and we're trying to find all kinds of clues as to whether he was a racist or not. And to me, that just seemed very exhausting and unnecessary. And, you know, for me, when I'm thinking about, you know, I'm, instead of trying to think about the Trayvon Martin murder, as this singular instance, and in which an alleged racist like Zimmerman shoots Martin, I'm trying to think about all of the times in a single year, for instance, in which an exchange like that happens. And if we think about this less as an individual problem, and more, as you say, as a systemic problem, it changes our viewpoint, right? It changes our perspective, then we're no longer interested, or I would make the claim, we may not be interested in investing in anti-bias training, and, you know, even, you know, video surveillance on cops. We may be actually more interested in, say, upstream policy issues around, you know, how guns are made, how they're designed, the ability for people to, you know, sue other people for the misuse of those guns or for or in the context of designing these products in a way that's reckless or irresponsible. It changes the, for me it would change then the question to policy question of how we deal with this problem.

K

Kelly Sampson 08:14

And I think that's so important and powerful, because at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what was going on in the shooter's heart, you know from the perspective of Trayvon Martin, it hadn't, it ended his life. So I think that frame that you're offering is really important. And another frame that you're offering that I found fascinating, I know, JJ did too, because we talked about it is how your paper you argue that when we think about guns as sort of objects within the framework, white supremacy doesn't just use guns, but it also actually shapes them. And it sort of plays a role in firearm design and functionality and even the perceived purpose. And so I'm wondering if you could explain the interplay between how guns themselves can be shaped and formed by white supremacy?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 09:02

Yeah, yes. Yeah. So that's like the, the key of the paper. I do want to just acknowledge that the first thing you said, which I think is I just want to underscore, which is that even if Zimmerman was not a racist, it's still a problem. I think you're I think what you were saying, too, it's still a problem that we have people shooting people on the street, right? And so even if this even if this question of what made that incident happen, was not about race at all, there's still a public concern that people regularly shoot each other in the street in the United States, that this is a unique problem to our country, in relationship to our peers. So just want to acknowledge that, but in terms of objects, yeah, normally, when we talk about objects and anthropology, you think like, "Oh, here's a vase from an ancient civilization," or "Here is a, you know, an object that this particular community holds dear, and I'm going to tell you what it means to them and its symbols," and eventually anthropology has moved over to this place of thinking about the material, the materialness of objects. So moving away from symbolic representation to actually thinking like, how do these objects affect the world and the environment and ourselves?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 10:08

And this idea might seem really abstract. Kind of already understand it say, in extreme cases

And this idea might seem really absurd. Kind of already understand it say, in certain cases, say drug addiction. Drugs, you know, change the body over time, you know, the addict will have their body, their mind altered by the substance, it's not just a psychological relationship that they have to that substance. We can think about the environment too, right. But that, you know, bad air destroys our bodies. And in some ways, what this line of analysis is getting out with respect to guns, it's saying, you know, gun design doesn't just happen in, you know, some kind of design studio, you know, by a gun maker. Gun design is responding to demand from people. And then gun ownership, right, when gun owners have their weapons, what I was really trying to get it in this paper and really show is that there's an entire culture around how to use that weapon, how to be with that weapon. And there's been some initial studies, psychological studies that show that that you know, independent of the gun symbolic meaning that it's really reshaping the way certain gun owners think about the world and engage with the world.

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 11:16

So one study, for instance, that I cite in the paper looked at how those who carry a concealed weapon are more likely to think others around them are carrying a concealed weapon. Even though a lot of people don't carry concealed, most people don't carry concealed weapons. But if you talk to someone who is very invested in their concealed weapon, their assumption is going to be that other people are, have a concealed weapon too, simply because they also possess this gun. And it's that kind of phenomenon that I'm trying to get at in this paper, because what I'm really trying to say is, not only is, are gun owners demanding certain kinds of firearms, which is, which is one part of the argument, they're demanding smaller weapons, they're demanding more powerful weapons that can do way more damage to the human body than say, you could 100 years ago. But also that these guns are, these guns and the way that they're signified and the way that they're practiced in day to day life are also changing gun owners. They're having an effect on their perception of the world. And this is this is more of a dynamic than, say, a one way street.



JJ Janfalone 12:19

I just, I think it's so interesting that there's almost this feedback loop that then occurs, because then once a gun that has a new design, or a new particular type is out there in the world, it's then going to impact how gun owners that operate within it, and then it just keeps kind of going.

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 12:33

Yeah, exactly. I mean, we don't talk a lot in the public conversation around guns, we don't talk about the technology around guns. And you know, in some ways, this is an area where maybe there would be more fruitful conversation on either side of this point, because, you know, one of the things I'm pointing to in the paper a little bit is, you know, the way that gun design moved largely from rifles and, and those sorts of weapons to over the last 50, 60, 70 years shifting to, you know, handguns, and shifting to making those handgun smaller and easier to conceal and more powerful when they are deployed. And I'm really saying that the reason why that's taken place is because the emphasis among the majority of gun owners is around self-defense and personal safety. So the guns that they want

are weapons that they can conceal, to the person they feel threatened by, and that they can be insured will put that person down if they need to. And that, yeah, that does end up creating a really complicated feedback loop. It's not necessarily gunmakers, manipulating gunowners. It's very much an interaction between these two parties. But once you include this broader and more powerful history of white supremacy in the United States, then that kind of relationship between gun makers, gun owners, and this idea of self-defense becomes much more pernicious, becomes something that we should scrutinize more closely.



JJ Janfalone 14:04

Well, and why is this interplay so important?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 14:08

But the other thing I'm talking about when I talk about objects is their social lives, right? The ways in which those objects are taken up and deployed into people's day to day lives, become part of culture, become expressive of culture. And one of the things I'm trying to say about guns, and I'm trying to underscore in the paper, is that it wasn't always this way. Self-Defense is a relatively new kind of way to think about guns, that hunting once dominated the gun market. The use of guns in rural areas once dominated the gun market. The idea that guns were really dangerous, and the average person shouldn't own one was once a very popular idea in the United States. And I want to remind the reader of that because I want to make it seem, I want to underscore that these large gun businesses, they could, they aren't necessarily tethered to self-defense, as the reason why they're making guns. And this means that we can change both the way that we think about how we want to use guns, we can also change how we think guns should look or be designed. So we can think about less lethal guns than the ones we have. We can think about guns that are larger and less, be less, less able to be concealed. We could think about smart guns as an idea. I think that was a little older, maybe that's an idea that is not realistic at this moment.

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 15:29

But what I'm trying to say is that it's much more open ended than I think people give it credit for, and the opportunities to reshape the relationships that people have to their firearms are still there, and they're still open. You know, I think there's this idea that folks who have a strong relationship to their guns are, you know, duped or they are hypnotized or manipulated. And I think that fails to appreciate, you know, how much gun, I felt, I think that fails to appreciate how much gun culture has really changed even over the last sort of 50, 100 years. And the idea that gun owners are lost causes or that there, you know, we can't have a dialogue about proper gun use or gun safety, to me both ignores history, but also like ignores sort of the broader theory of objects. We can make objects, we can give any kinds of meaning we want socially to objects. And that's also a point of social contestation, but it's one we should be engaged in.

K

Kelly Sampson 16:32

Yeah I just found that fascinating when you were talking about changing the demand and

Yeah, I just found that fascinating when you were talking about changing the demand, and everything, because it's a different way of thinking about gun violence, to think about not just like policy, but also demand from a sort of consumer perspective. And going back to the social lives of guns, and Trayvon Martin, in particular, you talked about what happened with the weapon that was used to murder him as sort of an example of the social life of guns. and that's in May of 2016, the, that particular weapon was auctioned for \$250,000, to a woman who was looking to purchase it as a present for her son. So you talk about that as an example of the social lives of weapons and how this firearm can be transformed into an icon of self-defense and freedom for people who are enjoying their white privilege. So can you talk about what this example can teach us about the social lives of firearms?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 17:29

So yeah, so when it comes to the social lives of guns, you know, as you mentioned, you know, Trayvo3n, the murder weapon that's ever been used against Trayvon Martin was turned into a gift, it was turned into this symbolic object of the Second Amendment, but guns, you know, have all kinds of different meanings. And, you know, I think, you know, anthropological scholarship, gun studies scholarship has shown the different ways in which the gun takes on new meaning in society. The gun can be a symbol of masculinity, in certain, you know, the gun can be a sentimental object, it can represent history, right? The gun is oftentimes reduced in public conversation, on both both sides of maybe sort of gun debate, is oftentimes reduced to a tool. Guns don't kill people, people kill people, right? That that line and you know, I want to say like, guns are more than just tools, right? If we, if that's true, if guns are just, you know, inert tools that don't mean anything, why do people fight so hard to either regulate them or to keep them unregulated? Right? If they're just simply one kind of tool. It's obvious, I think to everyone that these are more than just tools, that they can substitute can be a substitute for freedom, right?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 18:43

I think the other thing I'll say about the social lives of guns is because guns have so many social meanings, not just one particular kind of social meaning. It means that those social meanings are up for debate, that there, that people compete with one another as to what is the right way to think about guns. And this, I think, becomes a kind of interesting thing to see in the United States where, you know, there's an idea that guns should be one way or the other. And I think what I'm what I'm really trying to get at by drawing from this anthropological literature on objects is actually, we should at least be able to make mental space for the multiple meanings that guns might have in people's lives. And I think sometimes, and I think approaching it that way, then maybe make someone a little more compassionate or understanding to say why somebody would want to hold on to their weapon. It's not just a tool for them. It's not just, it's maybe not even a question of rights. It might be a sentimental object, it might be an object that has meaning that has to be kind of understood and talked about. And you know, as an anthropologist, the thing that I try to do in my work, I think that all anthropologists try to do is we try to get close and intimate to the things that we're studying as a way to show, that as a way to, show that they have nuance, as a way to show that, in a particular context, a gun can save lives in a particular context, a gun can ruin a life, in particular context, a gun can sit behind a glass case and be admired. Guns have all kinds of different contexts. And we have to

kind of remember that, or I would insist, as an anthropologist that we remember all of the different contexts in which they're in, you know, as a way to open up a conversation that's maybe less sort of accusatory and maybe less binary and more sort of open ended.



JJ Janfalone 20:31

Well, in speaking then, of this representation, you know, of what guns mean to people. Can you explain, you know, how maybe something like, Stand Your Ground plays out?



Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 20:40

Yes. Right. So right, so. So, I don't know if you guys have been watching the show called "Cobra Kai." And if I'm allowed to say it on the podcast, but...



JJ Janfalone 20:49

Of course. Yeah, we love Ralph Macchio.



Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 20:51

Right? One of the things that's so funny about this show is that it comes to a time in the I guess, late 70s, early 80s, when self-defense meant taking karate, right? When self-defense was about your ability to protect yourself in the context of a fight. And it's so fascinating now that self-defense is about, buying a weapon that can with a single shot, do incredible damage to another person's body. And I think that just goes to show you some of the ways in which the idea of self-defense itself is open ended and subject to change. Because we could we could think about self-defense in a lot of different ways. And in some ways, what's been kind of unfortunate is that the self-defense conversation is largely about one's ability to defend themselves with a firearm. And, you know, returning to an earlier point about demand, what if self-defense was was the demand for better schools? What if the self-defense demand was the demand for a cleaner environment and better air quality? Right, I mean, air, these studies that have been coming out show how damaging air quality can be to people and their day to day lives. But instead, we think about self-defense, and we have conversations around self-defense in the US in such a narrow way, focused only on one's ability to protect themselves with violence. And in that way, we're stuck then in this in this public debate in this paradigm around guns.



Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 22:18

And I think, in many ways, what I'm getting at, or trying to hint at, in this paper is, you know, we could reconceive of self-defense, you know, we could reconceive of what safety means. You know, one of the opportunities there is just to say, look, we don't deal with the level of crime that we did two, three decades ago, that we are, we are a lot safer, and a lot less violent of a society now than we used to be. And we still do have problems with violence, acknowledging where we've succeeded, figuring out, you know, what evidence based crime

prevention looks like, and implementing it as a policy is one way around encouraging people to think about their self-defense, or their sense of safety in a more collective way, than to think about it as something one is individually responsible for, and thus has to turn to a weapon to get it.

K

Kelly Sampson 23:09

And throughout this conversation, we've kind of been weaving together some strands, one of them is sort of firearms themselves and how they are both influencing and influenced, and then racial gun violence and self-defense. And so just to kind of give listeners sort of the upshot, how does racial gun violence sort of stem from and interact with this notion of self-defense being interpersonal, and firearms being the main tool for self-defense?

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 23:43

Yeah, so that's, that's for me was maybe one of the more interesting parts of the research on this paper, is, I just went down the rabbit hole of going into the world of gun enthusiasts. And, you know, there are lots of different kinds of gun enthusiasts out there. You know, I don't want to paint too broad of a brush. But the thing that I saw across all sort of online platforms was this idea of self-defense as a lone, dark, dangerous figure, trying to do something harmful to you. And you know, the media representations of this are abundant. I'm not the first to say this. There have been other gun studies, scholars who have looked at this in print media. The thing that I underscored in this paper was that when you go to the web, where I think a lot more gun enthusiast activity happens, and where major publishers aren't necessarily controlling what can be said and what can't be said. You get a sense of what folks who defend this idea of self-defense mean, or what they what they're thinking about when they think about self-defense. And what they're thinking about is a thing that does not happen very often. Not to say it doesn't happen, but the thing that they're thinking about, is a lone stranger is going to attack you at random or come into your house and attack you, and you need to be prepared for it. And there's a whole bunch of racial coding along the way to tell you who that dangerous person is going to be.

B

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 25:12

And the fact of the matter is, is that that's really just not how most murders happen in the United States. That's really not how a lot of crime takes place. And so there's this kind of distortion, this racialized distortion of what crime is and how it unfolds. And the only solution available, right, the only solution available is a gun, and then click this link, and you can buy yourself a gun. But it's, you know, there's a business element to this as well. But there's also, and you know, I didn't do this work in the paper. And I think, I think other people have done this work or will do this work. But the relationship between these notions of self-defense that emerge in the 80s and the 90s, and tracking that relationship to the "tough on crime" kind of culture that emerged. I think those two things are, are playing into each other very much, and are very much entangled in this contemporary gun enthusiast culture. That so much of the way that crime is thought about, you know, Broken Windows is a completely discredited theory of crime, it is a completely credible theory of crime in the gun enthusiast world. So I think there's, there's a way in which those two things are very much related.

B

### Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 26:24

But yeah, I think what I'm what I'm really trying to say in this paper is that self-defense has, over time meant two things, defending yourself against someone, presumably a person of color, that could be an immigrant, it could be whatever, right? But that, that that's there. And then the second thing is, the only way you can defend yourself against that threat, is by having the power to enact violence on them to stop them. And you know, that's, that's the framing of self-defense, we're already you've already lost, right? If you're on the other side of that, because there's no way out of that paradigm. And what I'm trying to push against in the paper and really encourage is, is those who are interested in gun control to say, "Hold on a second, we don't, that's not how crime works. We're not actually as unsafe as you think some of these problems of crime that you're referring to, there are better ways to deal with this problem than telling individual people to go pay, you know, \$100, \$600, \$1000, \$5,000 for a weapon, and all of the accessories that come with it." And and I think for me, that's where the, that's where the stakes of this paper become high, right? This is more than just an intellectual exercise, bringing Critical Race Theory into conversation with anthropological ideas. The stakes of this conversation for me are, we really need to have a different kind of conversation about what we mean about self-defense.



### JJ Janfalone 27:47

I'm wondering if you could explain to our listeners, maybe, you know, just what are some paths forward? You think?

B

### Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 27:53

Yeah, I think the first step, or I think maybe the first strategy was what I sort of ended on. Call out the self-defense arguments. Are we really in need of self-defense? Who are we defending ourselves from? Is this the most effective way we can defend ourselves? If 100 people, you know, spend \$1,000 on a weapon? Right? Where that's \$100,000 of safety? Right? Is that the best use of those 1000s of dollars of safety to put them in the form of a gun that 100 individuals sort of have? Or is there, is it better to put that in, you know, education? Is it better to put that in social services that will help folks, who will help folks who are in need, who might have to resort to crime because of poverty, but otherwise, you know, wouldn't if they have the services that they need.

B

### Brandon Hunter-Pazzara 28:47

And I think I maybe have said it a little bit, but I just want to repeat it, because I think it needs repeating, is none of this stuff is set in stone. You know, none of this none of these battles we're having over guns and gun control. You know, maybe we've hit a dead end when it comes to the what the conversation that we're having right now. But there's always opportunity for things to change, and for the conversation to be different. And for the lines of contestation or the things that are dividing us to alter as well. And, you know, if we're not the ones who are agentively part of that change, we're missing an opportunity, I think, to to, to instigate a change that's going to happen, right? I don't suspect in 50 years, we're going to have the same

conversations about firearms that we have now. If we do it would be very unfortunate, but I just don't suspect it's going to happen. There are very few things that we talk about now that 50 years ago, we talked about in the same way, and guns are no exception to that. And so this policy question this, this social problem question, it's going to change and you know that what we need to be thinking about is in what ways, and in what direction are we hoping it's going to change and how can we sort of get involved in that, that process. And I think the other thing I'll say is related to that, that I guess I would leave is go talk to gun owners. I mean, I think maybe and I know some folks do and I know for some folks make a point of it to humanize gun owners and, I'm that's not what I mean. Gun owners are humans like you know, there's no that there's no reason to humanize these folks, they are already humans there are already people who have lives and they love and complicated people like everyone else, who just really love guns. What I mean is have a conversation about what those guns mean to them right? And, and, and what they, what value they have in them. Because I think that maybe we'll give you an insight then or present openings to maybe find common ground.



JJ Janfalone 30:39

Oh Brandon, that's that's an excellent point to end on. Always want to end on a coalition. So thank you so much for coming on. And for all that you do. And folks, please, please check out his article. It'll be linked in the description of this episode.



K Kelly Sampson 30:54

So I absolutely loved our time with Brandon. And I have to tell you, I think what he said about how you look at objects, especially objects, like guns is so important, and it can really have a dramatic effect of how we treat gun violence.



JJ Janfalone 31:05

Absolutely. And I really do think it's brilliant and so important, how he laid out like guns don't exist in a vacuum, just like the effects of gun violence don't occur in a vacuum either.



JJ Janfalone 31:19

Hey! Want to share the podcast? Listeners now get in touch with us here at Red Blue and Brady via phone or text message. Simply call or text us at 480-744-3452 with your thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, whatever! Kelly and I are standing by.



K Kelly Sampson 31:33

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