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# The Gun Control Debate: A Culture-Theory Manifesto

Dan M. Kahan\*

Few issues generate more disagreement between ordinary citizens, or peril for elected officials, than gun control. But what exactly is the gun control debate about?

My objective in this essay—manifesto, might be a better description—is not to take any particular position on gun control but instead to take issue with the terms in which the gun control debate is cast. That debate, I want to suggest, has been disfigured by two distorting influences on the rhetoric of both sides. I will term one the "tyranny of econometrics" and the other "circumspection of liberalism." Counteracting these influences almost certainly will not dispel Americans' differences of opinion on guns. But it will go a long way to making our public discussion of this issue into one that honors, rather than mocks, our pretension to be a well-functioning deliberative democracy.

The "tyranny of econometrics" refers to the inordinate emphasis that both sides of the gun control debate place on the tools of social science. Advocates of control use a diverse array of methods—not just econometrics, in fact, but contingent valuation studies, public health risk-factor analyses, and the like—to quantify the physical and economic harm that guns inflict on our society.<sup>1</sup> Control opponents, however, use the same methods to show that gun control creates even more physical and economic harm by making it harder for potential victims to defend themselves from violent predation.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See, e.g., PHILIP J. COOK & JENS LUDWIG, *GUN VIOLENCE: THE REAL COSTS* 15 (2000) (describing the "burden that gun violence imposes on our society" through "impact on public health" and "in dollar terms"); Dan Black & Daniel Nagin, *Do 'Right to Carry' Laws Deter Violent Crime?*, 27 J. LEGAL STUD. 209 (1998) (interpreting data collected by control opponents to reach differing result); Mark Duggan, *More Guns, More Crime*, 109 J. POL. ECON. 1086, 1087 (2001) (using sales date for gun magazine as proxy variable); Arthur L. Kellermann et al., *Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home*, 329 NEW ENG. J. MED. 1084, 1084–85 (1993) (using data obtained from police and medical examiner homicide records and from interviews of proxies for victims).

2. See, e.g., JOHN R. LOTT JR., *MORE GUNS, LESS CRIME: UNDERSTANDING CRIME AND*

I, at least, am not sure who has the better argument here. Indeed, I do not think that anyone can definitively say, based on the extant social science data, whether "more guns" produce "more crime" or "less crime."

But one thing I think we can say with confidence is that empirical studies of this sort—whatever conclusion they generate—cannot resolve the American gun debate. The reason econometrics cannot persuade, the reason I call reliance on such data the "tyranny of econometrics," is that this body of work ignores what that debate is really about: culture.

Indeed, according to a wealth of public opinion research, it is precisely these sorts of cultural allegiances and outlooks that determine citizens' attitudes toward gun control. Positions on gun control vary across social groups, the members of which attach competing social meanings to guns. Control opponents tend to be rural, Southern or Western, Protestant, male, and white.<sup>3</sup> For them guns symbolize a cluster of positive values, from physical prowess and martial virtue to honor to individual self-sufficiency.<sup>4</sup> Control proponents, in contrast, are disproportionately urban, Eastern, Catholic or Jewish, female, and African American.<sup>5</sup> They find the cultural significations of guns to be abhorrent and alarming; they see gun control as symbolizing a

GUN CONTROL LAWS 23–25 (2d ed. 2000) (stating that "only statistical evidence can reveal the net effect of gun laws on crimes and accidental deaths").

3. TOM W. SMITH, 1999 NATIONAL GUN POLICY SURVEY OF THE NATIONAL OPINION RESEARCH CENTER: RESEARCH FINDINGS 19–24 (2000), available at [www.norc.uchicago.edu/online/gunrpt.pdf](http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/online/gunrpt.pdf) (last visited Apr. 5, 2003) [hereinafter NATIONAL GUN POLICY SURVEY 1999]; TOM W. SMITH, 1996 NATIONAL GUN POLICY SURVEY OF THE NATIONAL OPINION RESEARCH CENTER: RESEARCH FINDINGS 5 (1997) [hereinafter NATIONAL GUN POLICY SURVEY 1996]; Gary Kleck, *Crime, Culture Conflict and the Sources of Support for Gun Control*, 39 AM. BEHAVIORAL SCI. 387, 390, 398 (1996).

4. See, e.g., WILLIAM R. TONSO, GUN AND SOCIETY: THE SOCIAL AND EXISTENTIAL ROOTS OF THE AMERICAN ATTACHMENT TO FIREARMS 287–88 (1982) ("Just to hold [a Colt Model 'P'] in your hand produces a feeling of kinship with our western heritage—an appreciation of things like courage and honor and chivalry and the sanctity of a man's word." (quoting gun collector)); JAMES D. WRIGHT ET AL., UNDER THE GUN: WEAPONS, CRIME, AND VIOLENCE IN AMERICA 113 (1983) ("The values of th[e pro-gun] culture are best typified as rural rather than urban: they emphasize independence, self-sufficiency, mastery over nature, closeness to the land, and so on."); B. Bruce-Briggs, *The Great American Gun War*, PUB. INT., Fall 1976, at 61 ("[The gun culture's] model is that of the independent frontiersman who takes care of himself and his family with no interference from the state."); James D. Wright, *Ten Essential Observations on Guns in America*, SOCIETY, Mar./Apr. 1995, at 68 (observing that for control opponent, the gun "symbolizes manliness, self-sufficiency, and independence, and its use is an affirmation of man's relationship to nature and to history"). See generally RICHARD SLOTKIN, GUNFIGHTER NATION: THE MYTH OF THE FRONTIER IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA (1992) (examining historical evolution of pro-gun meanings in American culture).

5. NATIONAL GUN POLICY SURVEY 1999, *supra* note 3, at 19–24; NATIONAL GUN POLICY SURVEY 1996, *supra* note 3, at 6; Kleck, *supra* note 3, at 390, 398.

competing set of positive values, including civilized nonaggression, racial and gender equality, and social solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Once we control for cultural variables, no significant correlation appears between attitudes toward gun control and the types of experiences, beliefs, or attitudes that one would expect to incline individuals either to support or oppose gun control as a simple policy for reducing crime.<sup>7</sup>

Oftentimes, disputes in criminal law that seem empirical or instrumental are really expressive in nature. In such disputes, citizens care less about how a particular law will affect behavior than they do about what the adoption of that law will say about the authority of contested moral values and about the relative status of the social groups and cultural styles associated with those values. The century's long dispute over temperance, for example, can be understood as an attempt by America's traditional agrarian elite to repel the challenge to their cultural preeminence posed by a commercial ethos associated primarily with immigrant, urban Catholics.<sup>8</sup> Today's dispute over the death penalty has been described as an essentially "symbolic" one, too, on which citizens "choose sides" consistent with their cultural allegiances,<sup>9</sup> and on which legislators vote consistent with their desire to apportion status among competing cultural styles.<sup>10</sup> Proposals to ban flag desecration ignite intense passions because they are understood to be tests of the national commitment to patriotism and, accordingly, of the status of those for whom patriotism is an unproblematic virtue.<sup>11</sup> The rule affording mitigation to cuckolds who kill their unfaithful wives, a staple of criminal law for centuries,

6. See WRIGHT ET AL., *supra* note 4, at 68 (observing that for pro-control individuals, the gun "symbolizes violence, aggression, and male dominance"); H. Taylor Buckner, *Sex and Guns: Is Gun Control Male Control?* (Aug. 5, 1994) (unpublished manuscript, on file with Washington and Lee Law Review) (finding that aversion to "macho" style and tolerance of homosexuality predict support for gun control).

7. See Kleck, *supra* note 3, at 399 (using "nine crime measures" in determining that support for gun control is not "an instrumental response to crime"); see also Dan M. Kahan & Donald Braman, *More Statistics, Less Persuasion*, 151 U. PA. L. REV. \_\_\_\_ (forthcoming 2003) (finding strong positive correlations between attitudes toward gun control and individual cultural orientations).

8. See generally JOSEPH R. GUSFIELD, *SYMBOLIC CRUSADE: STATUS POLITICS AND THE AMERICAN TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT* (2d ed. 1986).

9. Phoebe C. Ellsworth & Samuel R. Gross, *Hardening of the Attitudes: Americans' Views on the Death Penalty*, J. SOC. ISSUES, Summer 1994, at 23.

10. See Barbara Ann Stolz, *Congress and Capital Punishment: An Exercise in Symbolic Politics*, 5 L. & POL'Y Q. 157, 177-78 (1983) (noting that the "inability of Congress to achieve a compromise on issues . . . can often be explained in terms of the symbolic meaning that the legislation has for certain groups").

11. See generally ROBERT JUSTIN GOLDSTEIN, *BURNING THE FLAG: THE GREAT 1989-1990 AMERICAN FLAG DESECRATION CONTROVERSY* (1996).

now provokes intense disagreement because of the contemporary contest over the patriarchal norms that the rule expresses.<sup>12</sup>

Gun control fits the same expressive pattern. As one southern Democratic senator recently put it in urging his party to back off the issue, the gun debate is "about *values* . . . about *who* you are and who you aren't."<sup>13</sup> Those who share an egalitarian and solidaristic world view, on the one hand, and those who adhere to a more hierarchical and individualistic one, on the other, both see the extent of gun regulation as a measure of their (and their social groups') relative status in American society.<sup>14</sup> What makes the gun control debate so intense is not a disagreement about the facts—does private ownership of guns promote or deter violent crime?—but a disagreement about "alternative views of what America is and ought to be."<sup>15</sup>

Of course, to all of this the econometricians might simply demur. Sure, they might say, the gun controversy reflects a conflict in cultural world views. But they cannot hope to make the two sides agree about the nature of a good society. They do both profess, however, to agree about the value of protecting innocent persons from harm. So let us continue to focus our attention on the empirical issue—whether more guns produce more crime or less—as our best hope to negotiate a peace between the cultural combatants.

The problem with this reasoning, I want to suggest, is that it misconceives the relationship between cultural orientations and beliefs about empirical facts, such as whether gun control reduces or in fact increases crime. Beliefs about the causes and effective responses to societal risks, I want to argue, derive from cultural world views. As a result, we cannot reach agreement about the consequences of gun control unless we have first come to some common ground about what values gun laws ought to express.

This is the lesson of the cultural theory of risk perception, a model of belief formation first used to explain differences in opinion relating to environmental regulation.<sup>16</sup> As with gun control, members of the public disagree intensely with one another about the hazards posed by various forms of technology, like nuclear power, and the merits of trying to abate them through government regulation. The cultural theory of risk perception relates these

12. See Dan M. Kahan & Martha C. Nussbaum, *Two Conceptions of Emotion in Criminal Law*, 96 COLUM. L. REV. 269, 346–50 (1996) (utilizing this scenario to illustrate "the evaluative conception of emotion" and "its power to explain the responsiveness of legal assessments of emotion to changes in social norms").

13. Zell Miller, *The Democratic Party's Southern Problem*, N.Y. TIMES, June 4, 2001, at A17 (emphasis added).

14. Kahan & Braman, *supra* note 7.

15. Bruce-Briggs, *supra* note 4, at 61.

16. See generally MARY DOUGLAS & AARON WILDAVSKY, *RISK AND CULTURE* (1982).

differences in view to individuals' allegiance to competing clusters of values, which construct alternative visions—egalitarian and hierarchist, individualist and communitarian—of how political life should be organized. The selection of certain risks for attention and the disregard of others affirm (symbolically as much as instrumentally) certain of these visions over others. Thus, in line with their commitment to fair distribution of resources, egalitarians are predictably sensitive to environmental and industrial risks, the minimization of which reinforces their demand for the regulation of commercial activities that produce disparities in wealth and status. In contrast, individualists, precisely because they are dedicated to the autonomy of markets and other private orderings, tend to see environmental risks as low—as do hierarchists, in line with their confidence in and deference to institutions of social authority. Hierarchists and individualists have their own distinctive anxieties—the dangers of social deviance, the risks of foreign invasion, or the fragility of economic institutions—which egalitarians predictably dismiss. These conclusions are based on sophisticated survey techniques that show that differences in cultural orientations explain differences in individual risk perception more completely than any other set of factors, including wealth, education, personality type, and even political ideology.<sup>17</sup>

It turns out that the gun control debate maps perfectly onto the cultural-theory-of-risk framework. Like debates over dangers of various environmental hazards, the gun control debate turns on competing perceptions of risk: the risk that too many of us will become the victims of lethal injury in a world that fails to disarm the vicious (or the merely careless), on the one hand, versus the risk that too many of us will be unable to defend ourselves from violent predation in a world that disarms the virtuous, on the other. Just like divergent perceptions of environmental risk, these competing perceptions of gun risk correlate with opposing clusters of values: egalitarianism and social solidarity, on the one hand; honor, deference to lawful authority, and individual self-sufficiency, on the other. These competing values construct alternative visions of the good society. And in advancing policy positions in line with their respective perceptions of risk, individuals involved in the gun

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17. See Karl Dake, *Orienting Dispositions in the Perception of Risk: An Analysis of Contemporary Worldviews and Cultural Biases*, 22 J. CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOL. 61, 76 (1991) (arguing that cultural biases orient risk perception at the collective as well as the individual level); Aaron Wildavsky & Karl Dake, *Theories of Risk Perception: Who Fears What and Why?*, DAEDALUS, Fall 1990, at 50 (stating that "cultural biases provided predictions of risk perceptions and risk-taking preferences that are more powerful than measures of knowledge and personality and at least as predictive as political orientation"). See generally Ellen Peters & Paul Slovic, *The Role of Affect and Worldviews as Orienting Dispositions in the Perception and Acceptance of Nuclear Power*, 26 J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 1427 (1996).

control debate—like citizens involved in the environmental debate—promote their preferred vision and discredit that of their cultural adversaries.

These, at least, were the hypotheses that anthropologist Don Braman and I decided to investigate. We designed our own study to determine whether cultural orientation measures can explain attitudes toward gun control. And we found that they do—the more egalitarian and communitarian a person's outlook, the more supportive of control, but the more hierarchical and individualistic a person is, the more opposed to it. Indeed, it turned out that individuals' cultural orientations furnished stronger predictions of their attitudes toward guns than any other facts about them, including whether they were male or female, black or white, Southern or Eastern, urban or rural, and even liberal or conservative.<sup>18</sup>

Insofar as individual attitudes toward gun control fit the psychological profile associated with the cultural theory of risk, there is essentially no prospect that econometric and other forms of empirical data will buy us peace in the American gun debate. The vast majority of individuals lack the expertise to evaluate conflicting statistical studies on gun control for themselves. Confronted with competing factual claims and supporting empirical data that they are not in a position to verify on their own, ordinary citizens will naturally look to those whom they *trust* to tell them what to believe about the consequences of gun control laws. The people they trust, unsurprisingly, will be the ones who share their cultural outlooks and who, as a result of those outlooks, are more disposed to credit one sort of gun-control risk than the other. In this sense, what one believes about consequences of gun control will be cognitively derivative of one's cultural world views.

The cultural theory of risk also implies that what individuals believe about the consequences of gun control will be morally derivative of their world views. Once the contribution of cultural orientations is exposed, it becomes clear that those involved in the gun control debate are not really arguing about whose perception of risk is more grounded in empirical reality; they are arguing about what it would say about our shared values to credit one or the other sides' fears in our law. For the opponents of gun control, it would be a cowardly and dishonorable concession to our own physical weaknesses for us to disarm all private citizens in the interest of public safety. For the proponent of control, it would send an unacceptable message of mutual distrust in each other's intentions, of collective indifference to each other's welfare, and of the legitimacy of traditional status differentiations to rely on each citizen's decision to arm himself as a means of keeping the civil peace.

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18. Kahan & Braman, *supra* note 7.

No amount of econometrics can tell us which of these attitudes about guns and gun-control risks we should accept. Only a frank and open discussion of what stance the law should take toward the competing cultural visions that underlie these risk perceptions can tell us.<sup>19</sup> That sort of discussion, however, is exactly what the second distorting influence on the gun control debate—the "circumspection of liberalism"—bans from mainstream democratic deliberations.

Liberal discourse norms that direct those engaged in public debates to disclaim reliance on contested visions of the good life and instead base arguments on grounds acceptable to citizens of diverse moral outlooks heavily influence American political culture.<sup>20</sup> Consequentialist modes of decisionmaking seem to satisfy this standard. Furnishing apparently "objective procedures and criteria" for policymaking, econometrics, cost-benefit analyses, contingent valuation studies, and the like are "decidedly divorced from statements about morality."<sup>21</sup> Because they elide contestable judgments of value, instrumental arguments are the "don't ask, don't tell" solution to cultural disputes in the law—not just over gun control, but over policies like the death penalty, hate crimes, welfare reform, environmental regulation, and a host of other controversial policies.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, it isn't really the case that we never see appeals to contested cultural values in such controversies. We are all perfectly familiar, for example, with what culturally partisan appeals sound like in the gun control debate: excruciatingly judgmental and intolerant. Control partisans ridicule their adversaries as "hicksville cowboy[s]," members of the "oversized belt

19. See DOUGLAS & WILDAVSKY, *supra* note 16, at 73, 80–82 (arguing for discussion of "what is wrong with the state of society" from an individual's standpoint rather than "unload[ing] the decision-making process onto institutional processes").

20. See BRUCE A. ACKERMAN, *SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE LIBERAL STATE* 8–12 (1980) (arguing that a "power structure is illegitimate if it can be justified only through a conversation in which some person (or group) must assert that he is (or they are) the privileged moral authority"); AMY GUTMANN & DENNIS THOMPSON, *DEMOCRACY AND DISAGREEMENT*, ch. 2, at 5 (1996) (discussing the sense of reciprocity in deliberative democracy as seeking cooperation on terms fair to all members of society); JOHN RAWLS, *Lecture VI*, in *POLITICAL LIBERALISM*, at 215 (1993) (stating that "[p]lainly, religious, philosophical, and moral considerations of many kinds may here properly play a role").

21. Martin Rein & Christopher Winship, *The Dangers of "Strong" Causal Reasoning in Social Policy*, *SOCIETY*, July/Aug. 1999, at 39.

22. See generally Dan M. Kahan, *The Secret Ambition of Deterrence*, 113 HARV. L. REV. 413 (1999) (discussing death penalty); Rein & Winship, *supra* note 21 (discussing welfare reform); Note, *The CITES Fort Lauderdale Criteria: The Uses and Limits of Science in International Conservation Decisionmaking*, 114 HARV. L. REV. 1769 (2001) (discussing environmental regulation).



buckle" crowd<sup>23</sup> whose love of guns stems from their "macho, Freudian hang-ups,"<sup>24</sup> while NRA President Charlton Heston declares "cultural war" against "blue-blooded elitists" who threaten an "America . . . where you [can] . . . be white without feeling guilty [and] own a gun without shame."<sup>25</sup> Most citizens undoubtedly find this culturally chauvinistic style of debate exceedingly unpleasant. Indeed, it is precisely the judgmental tone of expressive condemnation, one would believe, that explains the appeal of public safety arguments in the mainstream gun debate.

But the hope that the gun control debate can be made less contentious by confining it to empirical arguments is in fact an idle one. On the contrary, the unwillingness of most academics, politicians, and ordinary citizens to engage in a frank airing of their cultural differences ultimately deepens the acrimonious quality of the gun debate. Most Americans are not cultural imperialists, but as the gun debate starkly illustrates, at least some are. For them, the liberal norm against public moralizing lacks any constraining force. By speaking in the muted tones of deterrence in a (vain) effort to avoid giving offense, moderate commentators, politicians, and citizens cede the rhetorical stage to these expressive zealots, who happily seize on the gun debate as an opportunity to deride their cultural adversaries and stigmatize them as deviants.<sup>26</sup>

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23. Margery Eagan, *Rally Proves Gun Lovers Are Still Out There*, BOSTON HERALD, May 18, 1999, at 4; see also Richard Cohen, *The Tame West*, WASH. POST, July 15, 1999, at A25 ("[Republican gun-control opponents] all pretend to be upholding American tradition and rights, citing in some cases an old West of their fervid imagination and suggesting remedies that can only be considered inane."); Ted Flickinger, *Letter to the Editor*, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, June 1, 1999, at A10 ("The widespread availability of guns in a society in which many so-called adult males still embrace the frontier mentality makes it a certainty these periodic adolescent outbursts will be tragically repeated. It's still Dodge City out there, boys. Wahoo."); Perry Young, *We Are All to Blame*, CHAPEL HILL HERALD, Apr. 24, 1999, at 4 ("[W]e seem crippled by a mythological 'tradition' (a frontier gun world that ceased to exist 100 years ago and was wrong even then) and bullied into submission by a ridiculous minority of airheads like B-movie actor Charlton Heston and the National Rifle Association.").

24. Norman W. Nielsen, *Letter to the Editor*, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 30, 1999, at B6; see also Robert Reno, *NRA Aims, But Shoots Self in Foot*, NEWSDAY, May 2, 1999, at 5H (reporting sign at gun control rally read: "Gun owners have penis envy").

25. See Charlton Heston, *The Second Amendment: America's First Freedom*, in GUNS IN AMERICA: A READER 199, 203 (Jan E. Dizard et al. eds., 1999) (exhorting those who "prefer the America . . . where you [can] pray without feeling naive, love without being kinky, sing without profanity, be white without feeling guilty, own a gun without shame" to join and "to win a cultural war"); David Keim, *NRA Chief Proves Big Draw at Vote Freedom First Rally*, KNOXVILLE NEWS-SENTINEL, Nov. 2, 2000, at A1 ("Our country is in greater danger now than perhaps ever before," Heston warned. "Instead of Redcoats, you're fighting blue-blooded elitists.").

26. Cf. JAMES DAVISON HUNTER, CULTURE WARS: THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE AMERICA

In order to civilize the gun debate, then, moderate citizens—the ones who are repulsed by cultural imperialism of all varieties—must come out from behind the cover of consequentialism and talk through their competing visions of the good life without embarrassment. They must, in the spirit of genuine democratic deliberation, appeal to one another for understanding and seek policies that accommodate their respective world views. An open debate about the social meanings the law should express is not just the only philosophically cogent way to resolve the gun debate, it is also the only practical way to resolve it in terms that embody an appropriate dedication to political pluralism.

This conclusion presupposes that expressive debate in law can be simultaneously pertinent and tolerant. The liberal anxiety that it cannot be—that the only way to avert "the domination of one cultural and moral ethos over all others"<sup>27</sup> is to cleanse public discourse of appeals to contested cultural views altogether—is far too pessimistic. Anthropologists, sociologists, and comparative law scholars have in fact cataloged many examples of communities successfully negotiating culture-infused controversies—ones between archaeologists and Native Americans over the disposition of tribal artifacts,<sup>28</sup> between secular French educators and Muslim parents over the donning of religious attire by Muslim school children,<sup>29</sup> and between the supporters and opponents of abortion rights in France and Germany.<sup>30</sup> Rather than hide behind culture-effacing modes of discourse, the individuals involved in these disputes fashioned policies that were expressively rich enough to enable all parties to find their cultural visions affirmed by the law.

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321 (1991) ("A . . . condition . . . essential for rationally resolving morally grounded differences in the public realm would be the *rejection by all factions of the impulse of public quiescence* . . . . [T]here is a tendency among those Americans in the middle of these debates to hesitate from speaking at all.").

27. *Id.* at 42.

28. See Gene A. Marsh, *Walking the Spirit Trail: Repatriation and Protection of Native American Remains and Cultural Items*, 24 ARIZ. ST. L.J. 79, 94–101, 109–24 (1992) (detailing legislation that determines how Americans and Native Americans may treat remains of Native Americans); Jack F. Trope & Walter R. Echo-Hawk, *The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act: Background and Legislative History*, 24 ARIZ. ST. L.J. 35, 45–75 (1992) (same); see also Robert Winthrop, *Resolving Culturally-Grounded Conflict in Environmental Change* (Aug. 1999) (unpublished manuscript, on file with Washington and Lee Law Review) (describing cultural dispute resolution techniques used to resolve conflicts over development of sacred Native American lands).

29. See MARC HOWARD ROSS, *THE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT* 5–7 (1993) (discussing controversy regarding Islamic scarves in French schools).

30. See MARY ANN GLENDON, *ABORTION AND DIVORCE IN WESTERN LAW* ch. 1 (1987) (discussing the process of forming abortion law in Western Europe).

I do not mean to understate the difficulty of adapting this strategy of pluralistic expressive deliberations to the gun control issue. Our society has grown so accustomed to the constraints that liberalism places on political discourse that we seem to lack the vocabulary and habits necessary for debating cultural issues in a constructive way.<sup>31</sup> When the constraining force of liberal discourse norms break down, as they inevitably do, we lapse into acrimony and contempt.

This breakdown is the problem that scholars and others who want to make a constructive contribution to the gun debate should dedicate themselves to solving. The construction of a pertinent yet respectful expressive idiom for debating gun control is a task that will require at least as much energy and creativity as has been invested so far in the study of gun control's consequences. It is a project, however, in which anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers are likely to have a larger role to play than economists.

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31. See HUNTER, *supra* note 26, at 34 (noting that Americans "lack ways of thinking" about cultural conflicts).

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