Cho, Not Che?: Positioning Blacksburg in the Political

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The power of our media culture was recently demonstrated in the week or so after the killing of 33 people (including the gunman Cho Seung-Hui) on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia on April 16, 2007. Day and night coverage of the event, and its aftermath, blanketed the airwaves, especially on the cable television channels such as CNN and MSNBC. These media framed the event and in so doing produced a viewership which held certain common assumptions and perceptions. The event was portrayed as somehow outside the political, an account that I want to challenge here. This is not to provide an alternative reductionism, which positions Cho and his victims entirely inside the political. The personal and political interpenetrate but they do not overlap entirely. In no way am I suggesting that Cho is a latter-day version of Che, in spite of his meandering messianism in which he defends his scorched-earth policy (replicating Columbine) on behalf of lost souls everywhere. But to view Blacksburg as occurring outside the political, merely as a human tragedy without social and political echoes and underpinnings, is to miss the point: Cho led a 'damaged life,' as Adorno termed it. And some of the damage was done by the world. Critical theory needs a social psychology in order to understand events such as those that occurred at Blacksburg.

How was Blacksburg framed as somehow outside the political?

1. Waves of psychologists and psychiatrists, some of whom were designated as hired hands of the networks themselves, were recruited to tell us that Cho was insane, implying or stating that his apparent mental illness (psychosis, sociopathy, etc.) was the result of organic causes. That might be partially true, but certainly no one could know this so quickly (or ever, given that he is dead).

2. The event was framed as a universal human tragedy and the dead were honored and remembered in collective vigils and demonstrations and by the wearing of Virginia Tech-themed and -colored apparel. By week's end, Hokie pride was on display. In this sense, the Blacksburg events were unifying themes supposedly cutting across political and party lines and thus preempting debate about the social causes and consequences of 'damaged life.' Virginia Tech became the latest version of the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina, although, again, these events, although seemingly 'natural,' were heavily influenced by social and political decisions and indecision. Nature, since the Frankfurt School's writings in the 1940s, is squarely within the realm of the political; and I am suggesting that human nature should be as well.

3. The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which enables citizens to form armed militias in face of government tyranny, was assumed as a given framework not subject to debate. Although gun control was discussed in some quarters, that was matched by the idea that students and faculty should arm themselves in order to prevent further massacres. I heard no one suggest repealing the Second Amendment, which allows individuals to own Uzis and other automatic weapons as a basic Constitutional right. I am not of the view that America was built on violence, that violence is as American as apple pie; rather, America was built on the possibility of revolutionary insurrection, which is a much more progressive reading of the Second Amendment than is offered by the NRA.

4. The psychologism discussed above drowned out consideration of Cho's immigrant status and his marginalization in his suburban Washington, D.C. high school, where he struggled to fit in. And most of the Virginia Tech students interviewed were Anglo and not Asian, suggesting that Cho felt equally marginalized in his university years. The two shooters at Columbine were also estranged from their fellow students and sometimes bullied. Although marginality need not lead to murder, it is important that these so-called mass murders involved young men with access to weaponry who experienced what Durkheim called anomie.

5. Any generationally-inflected cultural/political reading of Blacksburg and Columbine cannot blithely ignore the penchant among young men for violent video games. Cause/effect are difficult to disentangle, just as the psychic and the social/political do not sort neatly. However, solving existential problems by blowing people away is certainly prefigured by violent video games, especially those in which the young players actually simulate 'shooting.' I am not saying that video games 'caused' Blacksburg but that people who like violent video games are alienated and that alienation—the damaged life—is what led to Blacksburg.

6. The deaths at Blacksburg are no greater in number than the deaths in Iraq over a few days. We chose death in Iraq: a political decision. And yet the Blacksburg dead attract much greater attention, largely because we can position Cho outside of the political and thus create a narrative of undeserved death. A demography of death is sometimes betrayed by the media attention given it. From smallest to largest death counts: Columbine, Blacksburg, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, and U.S. casualties in Iraq.

7. The Virginia Tech administration has been faulted for reacting slowly to the first shootings, in one of their dormitories. That shooting occurred at about 7:15 A.M. It is suggested that they could have prevented the slaughter some two hours later if they had immediately called off classes. However, the local Blacksburg police led the Tech administrators to believe that the first shooting involved a 'domestic' situation and not a large-scale murderous rampage. They focused on the boyfriend of the girlfriend killed in the dormitory and kept him in custody all day until they realized that Cho was the shooter. They focused, mistakenly, on the boyfriend because he was a gun enthusiast. Again, the Second Amendment issue, this time leading tragically to many deaths.

8. Most so-called mass murderers are men. If we reject biologism, we must conclude that social and political influences predispose young men to commit these deeds, whereas women deal with their alienation in other ways.

Psychologism, the reduction of human problems to intrapsychic processes, is tempting because it leads us away from the political. Mass murderers are evil monsters, deformed by inherited madness. This explanation allows us to avoid the more challenging project, which is to trace the social in the psychic while refusing to reduce individuality to social structure—explaining away Blacksburg and Columbine.

Psychologism—reading Cho as mentally ill—misses the political and social dimensions of this tragedy which surely interact with his so-called state of mind. It is telling that Cho had no history of violence but suffered his wounds silently and privately. To be sure, he was accused of stalking a couple of women students and briefly institutionalized for this. But many men stalk without killing. More telling is that Cho was invisible, a 'question mark' even to himself (as he called himself in his self-describing screen name). Few adults picked up on Cho's damaged selfhood. Lucinda Roy in the English Department at Tech recognized his need. Nikki Giovanni, a poetry professor, refused to teach him because she said he was "mean." She had begun to read him politically as damaged; that is, she situated him in the interpersonal politics of the classroom in which his anger and self-loathing percolated. Everyone is potentially invisible in a huge bureaucratic institution such as a university. Invisibility should not lead us to psychologism; isolation is a social condition, the lack of connection leading troubled people down even more troubling paths. Isolation is the lack of the social (which is social).

One of my theses is that Cho does not occupy a different world from the rest of us but we belong to his world, in which many of us suffer agony, anxiety and isolation that could, given the right circumstances and crises, lead us down his road. To say he was evil, a rare demonic property, ignores the two, three, many Chos who make up what David Riesman years ago called the lonely crowd. We are not as lonely as Cho, nor as indignant, nor as likely to obtain small-caliber weapons. Perhaps we buffer our suffering with alcohol or drugs or entertainment. But we live in his world, eternally angry. Perhaps we do our violence by acting it out in perverted fantasy lives, allowing us otherwise to appear to function.

My other thesis is that the damaged life, as I am describing it and as Adorno termed it, is not a human inevitability but a product of particular social arrangements in which privatization and the lack of intimacy and commuity are endemic. Many choose to view people like Cho as evil or mad. I view them as damaged, perhaps even right out of the box. But for most people, the damage comes later, as they are mishandled by the world. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a signature work of the time: She argues that Adolf Eichmann, architect of Hitler's final solution to the Jewish problem, was not mad at all, nor evil, nor demonic, nor possessed. He was 'banal,' an ordinary guy carrying out orders. And he had a hand in killing over 6,000,000, not the 32 murdered at Blacksburg. Arendt makes it clear, as did the Frankfurt School in the study of 'authoritarian personality,' that powerlessness mixed with scapegoating can produce monstrous outcomes.

We await Cho's written 'manifesto,' carefully guarded by federal authorities. He may name names of people at Tech against whom he bore ill will. The video we have seen is sophomoric; he acknowledges his debt to the

Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, not to Regis Debray or the Unabomber or Lenin.

When I heard Cho speak on his death-day video, I thought he sounded like a person locked away in solitary confinement who was finding his voice after years of silence. He sounded strange to himself, spewing forth his childish manifesto with a voice that he had rarely heard. Astonishingly, people objected to the airing of this video, claiming that this 'gave him what he wanted'—a platform. But the video was fascinating, showing a person possessed by his own words, which made no sense. No one who listened could possibly understand the roots of Cho's alienation, lacking information about his particular background and sensibility. But everyone could understand that he was angry about something—the damaged life shadowing him.

It is important to position Blacksburg inside the political in order to resist the spectacular psychologism that turned Cho into an evil madman and not a person who suffers the world perhaps more intensely than the rest of us. This is not to deny organic causes and consequences of his behavior but to observe that these organic issues interact with the social and political in ways that produce variable outcomes. Not everyone who is bullied in school, or marginalized, picks up the gun. And in some societies, there are no guns to pick up. And just because some tried to help does not mean that mere helpers could penetrate Cho's psyche to its core after years of isolation that emerged as self-hatred. His murderous behavior, pumping over 100 bullets into the bodies of his victims, led to his own self-inflicted demise. He committed suicide, which lay on the far side of his rampage. He could not differentiate himself sufficiently from the world in order to avoid bringing everyone down, murder/suicide blending to the point of indistinguishability.

The kids trapped in the classrooms of Norris Hall on the Tech campus were huddled behind desks and pretending to be dead, struggling to survive. They describe the eerie silence that followed Cho's suicide. Most of the kids still alive did not realize he had killed himself; his own mortal wounding sounded exactly like all the others. The disturbing video taken by the student outside of Norris Hall whose soundtrack is punctuated by those echoing gun shots stands with the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination as a video chronicle of our times. Kennedy's death, it could be said, ended the sixties before they got going and issued in decades of right-wing hegemony. This hegemony has deepened a culture of violence in which anyone can acquire automatic weapons (and bullets by eBay). And it could be said that Zapruder and Walter Cronkite, who broadcast the assassination weekend, initiated a media culture in which Cho copied Columbine and CNN positioned Blacksburg outside of the political, accompanied by the meaningless gestures of Americans wearing Virginia Tech colors in solidarity.

We should be worried about two, three, many Chos, souls so damaged that they cannot understand themselves in relation to the world. That Cho took the innocent down with him is literally correct: nearly all of the college kids interviewed during massacre week were sympathetic and caring. It was left to the Fox pundits, abetted by their dime-store psychiatrists, to spin the narrative of Cho's irreducible insanity, thus distinguishing him from the rest of us.

We want him to occupy a different space from the rest of us. He must lie on the far side of civilization, as its Other. But he is borne of this society; he is the 'question mark' produced by alienation (Marx's word) or anomie (Durkheim's word). By that they meant people who lack social connection, community, intimacy, love, friends. To say that Cho became who he was (which we will never fully fathom, except via his deed) 'because' of the crushing aloneness that he seemed to suffer risks sociologism, the opposite mistake of psychologism. Self and society interpenetrate, intermingle, overlap to the point of near identity. Adorno's point was that the self is also 'objective,' frequently object—like, in a society in which people's inner recesses are occupied by social, economic and cultural imperatives. Kids play videos games because they lack social connections. When I was a kid we went outside to play after school. Today kids either have too much homework or, if they don't, there is no one outside when they seek playmates.

Imagine how bad this must be for petit-bourgeois Koreans in an affluent D.C. suburb. This is not to deny that Cho probably had serious issues before he came to America. But his probably already damaged self became more damaged at Virginia Tech, a virtual small town of 26,000 other students, none of whom connected with him, nor he with them.

The only rescue for damaged selves—and we are all damaged in our various ways, some hiding it better than others—are the nucleic utopian moments when we occasionally count for something. We are cherished, befriended, celebrated, sheltered. But in this atomized, individualistic world in which no one plays outside anymore only a lucky few achieve these utopian moments that prefigure larger political and social movements. During my childhood and then adolescence, we had an ample politics of everyday life in which young people could seek and find community and even move beyond into a humane politics. Our role models were Tom Hayden, Bob Moses, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Betty Friedan. These people embodied utopia, an otherness achievable by small changes that

accumulate into a new politics. The New Left, both black and white, was a politics of small gestures, both kindnesses and protests, that remade selves and reshaped national agendas. Today kids such as Cho identify with the Columbine killers; they lack utopian icons and ideas. They have no heroes.

Much of my argument about the objectivity of subjectivity that led to Cho's damaged life is drawn from Adorno. But I depart from Adorno where he proposed only a 'negative utopia,' a utopia defined by what it is not. His argument was compelling: the total society damages almost everything and everyone. Simply to gain distance affords room to move. But Marcuse, more grounded in early Marx and a certain reading of Freud, argues for a positive utopia, which in is 1955 book Eros and Civilization he calls a 'rationality of gratification' and in his 1969 Essay on Liberation he terms the 'new sensibility.'

Today, with no progressive social movements and a clannish society of fraternities and football, the Marcusean imagery seems overly abstract. My wife and I just finished a book, Fast Families, Virtual Children, in which we argue that family and school can become radical ideas if we understand family as convivial intimacy to be sought in public as well as in private and if we understand school to be a lifelong Chautauqua in which schools occupy a meso level in between private and public—a town meeting and a site of continuing education. Today, families, like childhood, are attenuated, and schools are prisons blending adult authoritarianism and rote learning. I have thought more than once about the Tech students who decided to attend morning class on that chilly April day instead of sleeping in and staying home. Perhaps they were called by the life of the mind and classroom conviviality, or perhaps they were worried about their GPAs. We will never know.

Cho had no such luck, either in high school, where he was marginalized, nor in college, where his marginality deepened and became malignant. To be sure, we should worry that there could be two, three, many Chos. But for every Cho who erupts, no longer able to accept his own agony, there are many more who suffer in silence. On a pre-patriotic school spirit campus such as Virginia Tech, in which Hokie-ism must be suffocating for skeptics and outsiders, kids like Cho are ticking bombs. But the damage of alienation/anomie/aloneness is much more general in an individualistic society in which 'community' is equivalent to collegiate sports fandom, remininscent, of course, of the mass rallies captured by Riefenstahl during the Third Reich.

I hated school spirit from the beginning of my school days, perhaps recognizing that this was a form of pre-patriotism and an augur of the martial state, in which support of football teams suggests the support of armies. Watching the relentless Hokie-ism in the week after the deaths in Blacksburg gave me the creeps; I would have been on the outside looking in, not wearing orange and purple nor attending pep rallies. Few in America had heard of Hokie Nation before Cho, and I predicted to a friend of mine that high-school student applications to attend Tech will actually rise now that the nation has witnessed the Gemeinschaft demonstrated on the drill field on which Norris Hall sits. People will be drawn to the hallowed ground of the Tech campus, as the media spectacle of the ensuing weeks suggests to them their own participation in the group psychology of fascism, which is what big-time football schools are all about. The word 'hokie' already decides in favor of a sham—as in 'hokey,' make-believe.

Psychologism is an evasion. Cho wasn't evil; he was damaged. I am enough of an anti-psychiatry person to have grave doubts about posits of individual psychopathology as if the flimsy boundary between psychic health and pathology is in fact firm and obvious to trained professionals. The fact is that Cho wandered around aimlessly, with his indignation fermenting.

During the sixties, utopia abounded as a possibility, even if COINTELPRO, the White House, the police, the Klan beat back the New Left and presaged decades of mounting right-wing hegemony, which endures to the present. Kids could affiliate to causes and in communal projects in which their mortal aloneness could be buffered. Could a Korean-American kid have found meaning in the hectic fraternity life at Virginia Tech or in the stands at football games? Imagine how he felt walking the halls of his preppy white high school. Perhaps his parents applied relentless pressure on him to duplicate the academic successes of his Princeton-bound sister. I know a Korean girl in my daughter's high school class who is not allowed to recreate, having to keep her nose to the academic grindstone. She is 'grounded' if her grades sink below 95. She experiences America as a series of hurdles; she is old before her time.

We did damage to Cho by ignoring him. I have had problematic, angry students for whom I didn't do enough. We are ourselves damaged by the same social forces at play in his life. To be sure, we did not pump three bullets per victim into their agonizing bodies, as he did. Most of us are too bound in, or we have everyday opportunities for utopia—friends, hobbies, exercise, creative outlets, perhaps even a restorative politics.

One day we may piece together Cho's sad life, triangulating the interaction of his mental illness and his social isolation that led to April 16, 2007. In the meantime, we must not ignore the social and political as if Cho came

from another planet and walked among the Hokie Nation, which has only sane and decent citizens. Although no one reading these words is close to planning a murderous rage and videotaped confession, there are times when we want to lash out at enemies real and imagined. In the same way, we must recognize the Eichmann in all of us, the diligent engineer who does what he is told. More important than recognizing Cho and Eichmann in ourselves is recognizing them in others, who we can help or redirect. This redirection amounts to political action of a sort—acknowledging, even reaching out to, those who appear damaged by a world we recognize as our own.