

# Psychohistory News

Newsletter of the International Psychohistorical Association

Volume 34, Number 4 – Fall 2015



*October 29 Die-In in New York City  
Protesting the Killing of Doctors in Syria*

## Behind the Crisis in Syria by Brian D'Agostino

I recently participated in a “Die-In” protesting the destruction of hospitals and killing of doctors by Bashar al Assad’s government. I was tired of being a spectator to TV news every week on the refugee crisis in Europe and the endless carnage in Syria. The Die-In, which drew several hundred participants and bystanders, was staged on October

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**Harriet Fraad on the  
Gender Psychology of  
Mass Shootings, page 8**

## Mass Incarceration: Legacy of Racial Caste in America by Gilda Graff

The issue of mass incarceration has received increased media attention in the last few years. Two articles, one from *The New Yorker* of June 29, 2015 and the second from *The New York Times* of July 4, 2015 are of particular interest.

The *New Yorker* article details the “rising conservative clamor to rehabilitate the criminal

–justice system” (B. Keller, “Prison Revolt: A former law and order conservative takes a lead on criminal justice reform”), and shows that conservatives and liberals have found common ground on such issues as cutting back mandatory–minimum sentences; using probation, treatment, and community service as alternatives to prison for low level crimes;



*One in every three black males in America is imprisoned at some time in their life.*

raising the age of juvenile-court jurisdictions; limiting solitary con-

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## MASS INCARCERATION

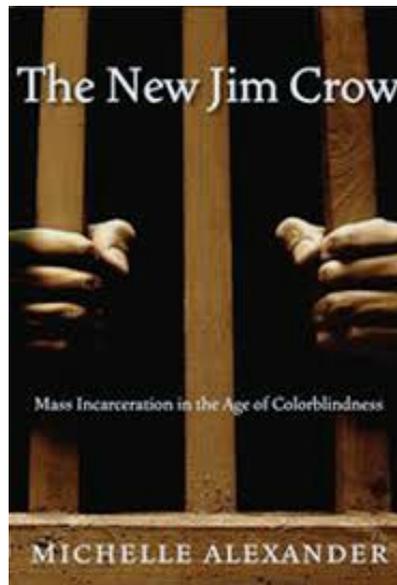
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finement; curtailing the practice of confiscating assets; rewriting the rules of probation and parole to avoid sending offenders back to jail on technicalities; restoring education and job training in prisons; allowing prisoners time off for rehabilitation; and easing the reentry of those who have served time by expunging some criminal records and by lowering barriers to employment, education, and housing.

The *New York Times* article concerns President Obama's plans to make broader use of his ability to grant clemency to correct the excesses of the past (P. Baker, "Obama plans broader use of clemency"). The president can grant clemency by pardoning or commuting the sentences of federal prisoners. This article, like the one in *The New Yorker*, stresses that the drive to rehabilitate the criminal justice system has brought together conservatives and liberals on the issues involved.

These articles recognize that the criminal justice system needs reform. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander documents the 25 year growth beginning in the 1980s of the U.S. prison and jail populations from 350,000 to 2.3 million. About a quarter of the 2.3 million—over half a million people—were in prison or jail because of our failed war on drugs,

while at least half of these drug offenders had committed non-violent offenses and would have been better off in treatment, social service, or educational/vocational programs (see A. Stein, "Back on the chain gang: The new/old prison labor paradigm," *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Spring 2012). Arrests for marijuana possession, usually for very small amounts, account for 44 percent of drug arrests nationwide and disproportionately affect African Americans. Although few have been sentenced to long prison terms, most acquire criminal records that will handicap them for life (see E. Nadelman, "Obama takes a crack at drug reform. *The Nation*. September 13, 2010).



The American Bar Association described what a petty drug offender might face:

*[He] may be sentenced to a term of probation, community service, and court costs...he may be ineligible for many federally funded health and welfare bene-*

*fits, food stamps, public housing, and federal educational assistance. His driver's license may automatically be suspended, and he may no longer qualify for certain employment and professional licenses... He will not be permitted to enlist in the military, or possess a firearm, or obtain a federal security clearance. If a citizen, he may lose the right to vote: if not he becomes immediately deportable (Alexander, 2010).*

Thus, Alexander states, "people whose only crime is drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs for recreational use find themselves locked out of mainstream society and economy—permanently." It is not surprising that within three years almost 68% of released prisoners are rearrested at least once for a new offense (Alexander, 2010).

The rates of incarceration in the United States are higher than in any nation at any time. They are higher than the rates in South Africa at the height of apartheid and the rates in Stalinist Russia at the height of the Gulag. In 1991, the Sentencing Project reported not only that our rate of incarceration was the highest in world history, but that one fourth of young African American men were under the control of the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010).

Current media reports shows that the criminal justice system may finally change what President

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Obama has called the “excesses of the past.” Michelle Alexander imagines that when the drug war finally ends, historians will look back and be fascinated that:

*...a drug war was waged almost exclusively against people of color – people already trapped in ghettos that lacked jobs and decent schools. They were rounded up by the millions, packed away in prisons, and when released, they were stigmatized for life, denied the right to vote, and ushered into a world of discrimination. Legally barred from employment, housing, and welfare benefits – and saddled with thousands of dollars of debt – these people were shamed and condemned for failing to hold together their families. They were chastised for succumbing to depression and anger, and blamed for landing back in prison. Historians will likely wonder how we could describe the new caste system as a system of crime control,*

*when it is difficult to imagine a system better designed to create – rather than prevent – crime (Alexander, 2010).*

Indeed, the absurdity of America’s recourse to mass incarceration as a supposed method of crime control can only be understood through the lens of psychohistory. In “Redesigning Racial Caste in America via Mass Incarceration” (*The Journal of Psychohistory*, Fall 2015), I shed light on this question, viewing the era of mass incarceration as a new tactic in the history of American racism. Slavery was ended by the Civil War, but after Reconstruction, the gains of the former slaves were eroded by Jim Crow (a rigid pattern of racial segregation), lynching, disenfranchisement, sharecropping, tenantry, unequal educational resources, terrorism, and convict leasing. The Civil Rights Movement struck down legal barriers, but we have chosen to deal with the problems of poverty and race not so differently than we have in the past.

Mass incarceration is the modern version of convict leasing, the post-bellum South’s notorious chain gang system of penal labor. My article documents the dramatic change in American drug policy beginning with Reagan’s October 1982 announcement of the War on Drugs and the subsequent explosion in the prison and jail populations, with its devastating and disproportionate effect on inner city African Americans. Just as the Jim Crow laws were a reaction to the freeing of the slaves after the Civil War, mass incarceration can be understood as a reaction to the Civil Rights Movement. Understanding this history can strengthen current reforms and help insure that America does not replace mass incarceration with yet another absurd policy of racial oppression.

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## CRISIS IN SYRIA

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29th in New York's Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, across from the United Nations complex. I was in a sea of medical students, health care professionals, and supporters wearing white doctor's coats and holding signs, each with the name of a murdered Syrian health care professional. The organizers were the Syrian American Medical Society and Physicians for Human Rights.

Assad, himself a doctor, is killing doctors because he wants to deny the population in opposition-controlled areas (more than 80% of Syria's territory) of medical care and other vital infrastructure and services, the principle of medical neutrality be damned. While some of the 313 attacks on medical facilities in the country have been committed by other parties to the Syrian conflict, Assad's forces are responsible for 90%, according to Physicians for Human Rights, as well as 95% of the 679 medical

personnel killed as of October 29, 2015. Such information must be the starting point for anyone wishing to respond to the Syrian crisis in a morally and politically appropriate manner.

### Etiology of the Syrian War

The war in Syria began in 2011 as a response of the Assad government to the Arab Spring, in which the Syrian people mounted massive, non-violent protests that threatened to topple the regime. Assad responded with a violent crackdown, but the legitimacy of his government was so weak that many in the military defected, forming the Free Syrian Army. The conflict then became a magnet for foreign jihadists, with ISIL, Al Qaeda and other Sunni forces fighting the Alawite Shi'a regime in Damascus, and Hezbollah, backed by Iran, supporting it. There is also conflict within the opposition, for example, between the Free Syrian Army and ISIL.

The Assad regime has long enjoyed the support of Russia and Iran, and

has had strained relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. As the civil war dragged on, it increasingly became a proxy war between these pro- and anti-Assad camps. President Obama has tried to avoid involvement in Syria, due mainly to war-weariness of the US public and the administration's desire to shift its foreign policy focus from the Middle East to Asia. The US has sought to limit its involvement to providing a small amount of aid and advisors to the moderate opposition, and mounting airstrikes against ISIL.

By September 2015, more than 80% of Syria's territory and nearly half its population (now less than 18 million) were controlled by opposition forces, including Kurds in the north, ISIL and other jihadi groups in the center of the country, and secular opposition forces in the west. Russia then intervened with airstrikes and ground forces coordinated with the Syrian army and with Iran, intended to regain territory for the Assad regime,

which Vladimir Putin regards as a bulwark of Russian interests in the Middle East.

The consequences of this prolonged civil and proxy war for Syria's civilian population are beyond devastating. More than a third of the country's population has been driven from their homes since the killing began in 2011. Of these displaced people, some five million have fled to neighboring countries, and more recently to Europe, fueling the largest refugee crisis since World War Two. Nearly eight million remain "internally displaced" within Syria. Some 220,000 people have been killed, tens of thousands maimed, and thousands more tortured. The Assad regime, according to statistics compiled by non-partisan human rights observers, has been by far the biggest perpetrator of this killing, cruelty and destruction. And every one of these numbers represents a broken human life.

### Deeper Causes

What is behind these grotesque facts and what remedies should the concerned public be promoting? Many psychohistorians have a tendency to view all wars as driven by mass psychology. In this case, we can indeed point to the psychology of fascism on the part of Assad and many of his supporters, and the psychology of violent fundamentalism in the case of the jihadi fighters. Some of the "moderate rebels" also show irrational motivations and are responsible for human rights atrocities, but for the most part should be viewed, in my opinion, as a popular resistance to tyranny that began in a non-violent form with the Arab Spring and has become

increasingly militarized in response to violent repression.

That said, mass psychology only goes so far in explaining large-scale political violence, which only occurs under special circumstances. In Yugoslavia, for example, there was little political violence until the multi-ethnic communist state collapsed in the 1990s. Similarly, the Arab Spring that began in 2011 has shaken the legitimacy of dictatorships in the Middle East, bringing down regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen.



*Refugees fleeing war-torn Syria*

As with the fall of communism, the current crisis of Middle Eastern dictatorships reflects an interaction that includes political-economy, geopolitics, culture, and psychology. Fundamentalism, for example, arises out of the interplay between capitalist modernity and psychological factors. It is a world-wide phenomenon today that is salient across the entire religious spectrum, including the Buddhist right in Southeast Asia, Narendra Modi's Hinduism, the Salafi and Iranian Principlist movements, religious Zionism, the Opus Dei current in the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical right in the United States.

Viewed from this perspective, ISIL and Hezbollah may have less to do with Islam than with the general religious backlash against capitalist modernity that motivates fundamentalists in all of the world's

religious traditions. While fundamentalist groups each arise out of a unique historical context, they also share common characteristics, most notably sex stereotyping, authoritarianism, and apocalyptic thinking. Each of these characteristics has its own psychohistorical origins, which I will now discuss briefly.

Nancy Chodorow has examined the basis of sex stereo-typing in the widespread (but not universal) assignment of infant care to women, which has asymmetrical psychological effects for girls and boys. For girls, gender role conformity means identification with the mother introjects, while for boys it means negation of them and consequent gender insecurity. These divergent psychologies reproduce the gender caste system across generations, but can be transformed by involving males more equally in infant care. That provides "masculine" and "feminine" self-objects for children of both sexes, and thus creates androgyny and gender equality.

Research on authoritarianism by Wilhelm Reich, Theodore Adorno, Alice Miller, Lloyd deMause, and others suggests an etiology rooted in punitive parenting and sexual repression. Courses in humane parenting can reduce authoritarianism, and, when required for boys as well as girls, can simultaneously transform the gender caste system.

The third of the above-mentioned complexes, apocalyptic thinking, apparently arises from the splitting off and projection of good and bad objects originating in the paranoid-

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## MASS SHOOTINGS

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socialization in non-aggressive self-presentation, negotiation, compromise, and desk work were assets in the expanding service, pink collar, and white collar sectors.

By the 1990s, women were also surpassing men in college enrollment, a gap that has increased to 10% at present among whites and even higher for Blacks and Hispanics. This has meant women replacing men in many jobs requiring a college or graduate degree. While women advanced economically and men declined, men still lagged behind in assuming domestic tasks and child rearing, making them undesirable as marriage partners. Women still want children, but increasingly forgo marriage if a potential mate cannot support them financially and will not assume the role of raising them. 42% of American children are now born outside of marriages (see *Thinking Straight: The Power, Promise and Paradox of Heterosexuality*, Chrys Ingraham, ed., 2005.) Marriages for the mass of Americans are now as precarious as jobs, and nearly 70% of divorces are initiated by women.

Heterosexual American males are poorly equipped psychologically to cope with these daunting challenges. Women have traditionally valued supportive relationships, and include friends, relatives and children in their emotional support systems. These communal webs provide stability in the wake of divorce or breakup with significant others. By contrast, men, who have typically been socialized to be emotionally detached and individualis-

tic, are typically more emotionally dependent on partners and wives, and thus more devastated by the loss of these relationships, especially when facing the concomitant loss of economic security. Mass killers rarely have girlfriends when they commit massacres. They are isolated and alone.

In summary, American men, particularly white heterosexuals, have lost a manhood defined by good jobs, provider roles and domination of women in the home. They are lost, and this dislocation correlates strongly with the spike in mass shootings in recent decades. Boys, like the 11 year old and teenage mass killers, are socialized into a macho world of violent video games even as they confront a bleak future of social and economic marginalization. Getting only precarious validation from their girlfriends, if they have girlfriends, they seek to re-establish as individuals a sense of respect and dominance no longer afforded by society.

Into this painful void in the lives of boys and men steps the brilliant capitalist gun industry, preying on male gender insecurity, touting their product as the way to reclaim lost manhood, and framing the second amendment right to bear arms as masculine entitlement to the power over others conferred by guns.

Mass killers like Oregon's Christopher Harper Mercer are men who could not live up to traditional images of masculinity. Like Elliot Rogers of Isla Vista California and Adam Lanza of Newtown Connecticut, Harper Mercer lived with his mother. Like most mass killers, he

was bereft of a meaningful job, social connections, and prospects for a secure future. He reclaimed his status and masculinity at gunpoint.

In one of his blog posts, the Oregon shooter observed, "Seems like the more people you kill, the more you are in the limelight" ("Mass Killings Are Seen as a Kind of Contagion," Erica Goode and Benedict Carey. *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2015). In death and killing, Harper Mercer and his fellow shooters become important people. They become as noticed and significant as they were invisible and marginalized in their former lives. This violent path to importance is so compelling for so many men that law enforcement professionals in the US are becoming reluctant to publicize the stories of mass killers in order to avoid inspiring imitators.

The proliferation of guns in the US is not the sole culprit. Canada, Norway and Switzerland are nations with pervasive gun cultures and easy access to guns. However, none of them conflate gun ownership with constitutionally protected rights to be manly, defend one's ground, and command respect. It is also worth noting that, unlike the United States, these countries have generous welfare programs and social services that insulate men from the vicissitudes of the capitalist labor market. Masculinity is not under attack in these countries and unsuccessful men are not left to fend for themselves.

That said, policies that reduce access to guns can unquestionably reduce the level of gun violence in the United States, especially given

the country's glorification of guns and aggression as symbols of male power. But that glorification of guns, the male gender insecurity it purports to eradicate, and the dysfunctional economic arrangements that stimulate such insecurity are the roots of the problem. While advocating more effective gun con-

trol, psychohistorians also, and more importantly, need to address these deeper sources of gun violence. We must help create an egalitarian society that provides economic security for all its people and satisfies the deep human need for connection.

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## SYRIA

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schizoid position of infancy examined by Melanie Klein. While this position is a part of normal development, adult disorders associated with it can be largely prevented through visiting programs by postpartum doulas and pediatric nurses to encourage healthy attachment and parent's capacity for mentalization/reflective function.

In summary, fundamentalism appears to be associated with psychological complexes that are found across a range of cultures and that have common remedies in the reform of parenting arrangements and practices.

If we ask why so much of Muslim fundamentalism is taking a violent form today, the answer probably has to do with the politically repressive environment in which it lives. This repression, in turn, is enabled by the military aid and diplomatic support that Middle Eastern dictatorships receive from foreign powers, most notably Russia and the United States. For example, US support for Egypt's Mubarak (and now el-Sisi) and Iran's Shah Reza Pahlavi undermined secular democratiza-

tion, setting the stage for religiously inspired, armed resistance to tyranny. Similarly, Russia propped up dictatorships in Afghanistan and Syria.

### What is to be Done?

The above analysis suggests the need for responses on multiple levels. The refugee and humanitarian crises require immediate action from the UN Security Council, which in Resolution 2139 (in 2014) pledged to protect Syria's civilian population but has failed to do so. Global and national publics should be demanding that the Obama and Putin administrations withdraw their support for dictatorships in the region. As leaders in the UN Security Council, they should be working for political settlements in Syria, elsewhere in the region, and in Africa, at least with the parties to these conflicts who are willing to join or can be drawn into good faith political negotiations. There is an emerging international consensus, which even Russia is now beginning to entertain, that no political settlement in Syria is possible as long as Bashar al Assad remains in power.

On a longer term basis, the reform of child rearing arrangements and practices worldwide is a fundamental requirement for creating a humane

and peaceful future. In addition, billions of dollars currently being squandered every year on military aid to dictatorships must be re-deployed as locally controlled economic development assistance, for example, as seed money for small businesses and worker cooperatives, as well as for education for children of both sexes. In summary, there are no magic bullets, but there are viable alternative policies that can support the emergence of democratic civil society in Syria and elsewhere. Psychohistorians can and should join with like-minded groups in other parts of the world on behalf of such an agenda.

To learn more about the crisis in Syria and how you can help the Syrian people in their hour of need, visit [www.sams-usa.net](http://www.sams-usa.net) and [www.physiciansforhumanrights.org](http://www.physiciansforhumanrights.org)

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# ***Mass Shootings and the Crisis of American Masculinity***

## **by Harriet Fraad**

When 26 year old Christopher Harper-Mercer fatally shot a professor and eight of his fellow students on October 2nd, it was the worst mass shooting in Oregon's history and the most recent of nearly 300 mass shootings in the United States in 2015. More than one mass shooting—a gun killing with four or more victims—per day! Why is this happening? Why are Americans today world leaders in mass killing? In order to answer these questions, let us look at who is doing the killing and try to understand why.

The mass murderers are overwhelmingly white men. The youngest were 11 year old Andrew Golden and 13 year old Mitchell Johnson. The oldest, Frazier Glenn Cross, was 71. They are typically isolated, disempowered, and enraged. Mass killers are most often virulent racists, anti-Semites, haters of other ethnicities, or anti-feminists, not liberals or leftists. Few, if any, are involved in intimate relationships with women, even though they want involvement. Even the 13 year old, Mitchell Johnson, had recently been rejected by his girlfriend.

Mass killings became a phenomenon in the US in the 1980s, and have accelerated ever since. What has happened to men in the US, particularly white men, in the last 40 years? Before the 1970s, labor unions had given most white

males in the United States access to relatively well paid jobs and benefits. Although the majority were not union members, unions raised the level of wages across the board. Beginning in the 1970s, corporations began to move production from the unionized Northeast to low wage states in the South and West, and eventually to still lower wage regions abroad. These developments accelerated under President Reagan, who also extended the attack on unions to the public sector. At the same time, increased automation has been eliminating millions of other jobs.



*Oregon Shooter  
Christopher Harper-Mercer*

Also by the 1970s, in the wake of the feminist movement, large numbers of women entered the paid workforce, depressing wages generally. At the same time affirmative action gave women and people of color more equality of access to the increasingly scarce well-paid jobs. The small business sector,

another source of good livelihoods for white males in the past, was increasingly colonized by big retail and service corporations. Small stores and restaurants owned, operated, and handed down from father to son were replaced by mega-chains like McDonalds, KFC, Home Depot, and Walmart, who offered only low wage, precarious jobs.

The end of the “family wage”—an income and benefits sufficient for a man to support a middle class family—created another reason for women to enter the workforce, accelerating the transformation of gender arrangements. This especially affected white women, millions of whom had previously enjoyed the option of being full time homemakers. There was little to prepare white males for changing gender arrangements and the need to assume shared responsibilities for domestic work, childcare, and elder care.

Blue collar men who had prized their physical power in jobs like construction and industrial production found themselves redundant in an economy where such jobs were becoming mechanized or outsourced. As the structure of the US economy changed, employers increasingly passed over men in favor of women, who cost less and whose traditional

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