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The Freedom of an Armed Society

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Individual gun ownership — and gun violence — has long been a distinctive feature of American society, setting us apart from the other industrialized democracies of the world. Recent legislative developments, however, are progressively bringing guns out of the private domain, with the ultimate aim of enshrining them in public life. Indeed, the N.R.A. strives for a day when the open carry of powerful weapons might be normal, a fixture even, of any visit to the coffee shop or grocery store — or classroom.

As N.R.A. president Wayne LaPierre expressed in a recent statement on the organization's Web site, more guns equal more safety, by their account. A favorite gun rights saying is "an armed society is a polite society." If we allow ever more people to be armed, at any time, in any place, this will provide a powerful deterrent to potential criminals. Or if more citizens were armed — like principals and teachers in the classroom, for example — they could halt senseless shootings ahead of time, or at least early on, and save society a lot of heartache and bloodshed. As ever more people are armed in public, however — even brandishing weapons on the street — this is no longer recognizable as a civil society. Freedom is vanished at that point.

An armed society is polite, by their thinking, precisely because guns would compel everyone to tamp down eccentric behavior, and refrain from actions that might seem threatening. The suggestion is that guns liberally interspersed throughout society would cause us all to walk gingerly — not make any sudden, unexpected moves — and watch what we say, how we act, whom we might offend.

The very power and possibility of free speech and assembly rests on their non-violence. The power of the Occupy Wall Street movement, as well as the Arab Spring protests, stemmed precisely from their non-violent nature. This power was made evident by the ferocity of government response to the Occupy movement. Occupy protestors across the country were increasingly confronted by police in military style garb and affect.

Imagine what this would have looked like had the protestors been armed: in the face of the New York Police Department assault on Zuccotti Park, there might have been armed insurrection in the streets. The non-violent nature of protest in this country ensures that it can occur.

Gun rights advocates also argue that guns provide the ultimate insurance of our freedom, in so far as they are the final deterrent against encroaching centralized government, and an executive branch run amok with power. Any suggestion of limiting guns rights is greeted by ominous warnings that this is a move of expansive, would-be despotic government. It has been the means by which gun rights advocates withstand even the most seemingly rational gun control measures. An assault weapons ban, smaller ammunition clips for guns, longer background checks on gun purchases — these are all measures centralized government wants,

they claim, in order to exert control over us, and ultimately impose its arbitrary will. I have often suspected, however, that contrary to holding centralized authority in check, broad individual gun ownership gives the powers-that-be exactly what they want.

After all, a population of privately armed citizens is one that is increasingly fragmented, and vulnerable as a result. Private gun ownership invites retreat into extreme individualism — I heard numerous calls for homeschooling in the wake of the Newtown shootings — and nourishes the illusion that I can be my own police, or military, as the case may be. The N.R.A. would have each of us steeled for impending government aggression, but it goes without saying that individually armed citizens are no match for government force. The N.R.A. argues against that interpretation of the Second Amendment that privileges armed militias over individuals, and yet it seems clear that armed militias, at least in theory, would provide a superior check on autocratic government.

Our gun culture promotes a fatal slide into extreme individualism. It fosters a society of atomistic individuals, isolated before power — and one another — and in the aftermath of shootings such as at Newtown, paralyzed with fear. That is not freedom, but quite its opposite. And as the Occupy movement makes clear, also the demonstrators that precipitated regime change in Egypt and Myanmar last year, assembled masses don't require guns to exercise and secure their freedom, and wield world-changing political force. Arendt and Foucault reveal that power does not lie in armed individuals, but in assembly — and everything conducive to that.

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