

I'm the ambassador of murder weapons



“Sorry if I am just not understanding, but is it legal to kill people in the U.S.?”

An Argentine university student in his mid-20s leans forward earnestly as he asks the question. My co-presenter Nick and I immediately exchange a look—how to tackle this one?

Sensing the pregnancy of our pause, the student clarifies, “I mean, I hear very much about guns in the U.S. And many people seem to die, and I hear there are protests where people are very angry about this, like in Baltimore. But nothing seems to happen.”

As Fulbrighters called on to function as both teaching assistants and cultural ambassadors, we’ve just finished our presentation on U.S. geography and culture to students training to be English teachers. As in most classes, where I often feel more like a young RA (Resident American), rather than an actual TA (teaching assistant), this presentation is followed by an extended Q&A session, with students asking anything and everything they’ve ever wondered about the American people. And yet again, as in almost every university class I’ve presented in, I am asked why Americans seem so passionate about killing each other.

At the time of this presentation, Baltimore was pulsing with rage and despair sparked by the brutal murder of Freddie Gray and what had started as a discussion on the Black Lives Matter movement had broadened into questions about American gun culture.

Before Nick can respond, I jump in with, "Technically, no, we can't legally kill other people. But there are many loopholes."

A couple of students aren't sure what a loophole is, so I briefly explain before launching into the differential treatment of violent offenders based on race; the fact that Trayvon Martin's murderer, against all reason, still walks free; the fact that protesters are attempting to claim basic human rights for black people within a society rife with military-grade weaponry in the police force and ridiculous number of guns circulating through private sales.

As I speak, I'm aware that students are surprised that my voice slips from neutrality to a more clipped, urgent tone. I know that I have breached the barrier of cool professionalism expected between student and teacher.

"So, does that mean, if I am on your land and you tell me to leave and I do not hear you, you can shoot me?"

Nick hesitates. Fighting back the rising frustration of having to acknowledge that many people in my country connect tyranny with registration of deadly weapons and liberty with murder over property rights, I respond, "Yeah, in some states. And that's more likely to happen if you're black."

Another student raises her hand. "Does that mean everyone there has guns?"

And suddenly it's clear to me that what is more incredible for the students than the rampant racism I've just described is the matter of guns. And I realize, as Nick and I begin explaining that no, not everyone has guns, and we try to delicately outline the increasing political polarization around gun control, that I had been misreading the situation. The students were intrigued not only by our explanations but by our own blasé attitudes—that, though both Nick and I were critical of American gun culture, we also talked about guns as though they were an inevitable part of life.

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Before I began the grant in Buenos Aires, I was told many times that the city was very dangerous. I was warned that men would yell all kinds of obscenities, that people get drunk and rowdy in the streets, that one of George Bush's daughters had been robbed

of a purse right under the noses of the Secret Service. Well-intentioned advice on how to protect myself poured in from all sources (as though I hadn't already learned since girlhood that I am always potential prey).

One night shortly after my arrival, I hail a taxi after a few drinks. Only after I've closed the door behind me do I realize that I don't have a cellphone and forgot to confirm I was in an official, GPS-tracked "radio taxi." I chitchat with the friendly driver and stare at the official license tacked onto the back of the driver's seat for a few minutes before realizing the black-and-white photo staring at me looks nothing like the glimpses I catch of the face in the driver's mirror. The pixelated face looking grimly back at me is sallow and thin, while everything about this driver is round, including his luminous eyes. I point out the discrepancy and the driver tells me this is his brother's taxi, that he's driving it while his brother visits family in Bolivia.

My mind rifles through every worst case scenario as I gaze out the window. I barely register the intricate neoclassical architecture lit up by flashing electronic billboards, nor the yellow and red ribbons of light that bisect the widest avenue in the world. I wonder if the cityscape will recede into countryside and how much my bullet-riddled body will decay before it's discovered. I wonder (startled to realize that I have already wondered this many times in my life) exactly how it feels to be "riddled with bullets." Or would it be "execution style," a clean one through the head? How likely is it that I would bleed out and die slowly? Would I be bound and gagged? Did I have anything in my bag that could serve as a makeshift weapon? So many phrases and images of varying kinds of violence spill out of some recess in my brain, collected over the years from films and TV shows, and especially the news.

At the same time, I continue chatting, hoping good etiquette might save me. I continue in this vein and don't even recognize my neighborhood until I notice the car slowing, my apartment entrance just a few feet ahead of us. I feel relieved, but also guilty for having fallen into the typical tourist-mentality trap, that of fearing the worst about this man. I remind myself that horrible things happen to women in every major city, that I should not fear the men in this city any more than those in my own (though I continued to check for the official GPS indicator on taxis, just as I always confirm the license plate numbers of Ubers in my home city).

Only months later, after numerous conversations with my students, do I realize how much more likely it is that a gun would play any part in such a scenario in the place where I am from, rather than where I am currently living.

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"Can anyone buy a gun?"

Well, no, but it's generally easier than getting a car. Or a driver's license.

"Do you see guns everywhere?"

Well, no, but you do see them in tidy rows beneath display glass in local Wal-Marts. And pawn shops. And some states do have open-carry laws (cue the inevitable question of what "open-carry" means).

A student in another class asks if I've ever held a gun before. I answer yes, and casually add that I've visited a shooting range once. Her eyes widen and everyone else eyes my 5-foot-2 frame with sudden suspicion. Despite the student's near fluent English, she does not know what a shooting range is. I find myself explaining that, in a state in the Midwestern U.S. called Wisconsin, many people hunt for food, and a shooting range allows people to practice. I dig my hole deeper by using the word "recreational." I tell them of my single gun-handling experience, when I was taught how to shoot empty beer cans by my grandfather, a lifelong hunter. I find it necessary to point out that we stopped shooting that day when my grandfather spotted a gaggle of wild turkeys wandering into the target area, and that we waited patiently for them to clear out before shooting again.

Unlike Americans who have heard this story, these students don't find this anecdote heartwarming or endearing. As we say our goodbyes and I leave the classroom, I realize how sensible their reaction is.

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I live in the city's oldest neighborhood, San Telmo, now a vibrant *mélange* consisting of hippies, expats, artists and the working class. The streets and buildings evince hundreds of years collapsed into layers—uneven cobblestones and perilously cracked sidewalks lead to dilapidated buildings with new facades, street-art works caked onto each other, some resembling Rauschenberg's combines, others gorgeously intricate and popping with pastel hues. I spend one Sunday morning with a Rastafarian from Ghana, who tells me he learned Spanish in three months by wandering the streets. Boys offer me drugs, saying they need the money for acrobatics classes. I learn from another boy that these packs of small-time drug dealers love to call themselves acrobats—a bizarre attempt at legitimacy in my eyes, but I also find it endearing.

I fall in love with my neighborhood and probably spend too much time walking around alone in the dark. When I meet people who live in other parts of the city center, such as Palermo, San Telmo's moneyed, northern neighbor, they either gush about its eclectic nature or sniff at its grunginess. Regardless of their preference, they ask over and over again, isn't it so dangerous there?

During my eight months while living alone in my first apartment, a man lunges at me in the street. His drunken, gnarled hands briefly graze my body, and my friend, who easily towers over him, cusses him out and into submission. Another time, sitting in the courtyard of a restaurant, delirious with fever from a throat infection, I don't even notice until the bill arrives that my purse has silently disappeared from my side.

These two events are the worst that happen to me in my time there. I say this not to suggest that Buenos Aires is safe. Almost everyone I know has at least one tale of being mugged or otherwise accosted, and drug use is relatively high, street harassment and sexual assault tragically common.

But guns? It's not just my personal experience that tells me they're a different matter altogether. From my students' reactions, I get the sense that merely wielding a real, actual gun is a different kind of violence—stupid and unnecessary. You have to really try to kill someone with a knife. You have to really try to kill yourself with a knife. With guns, people do both all the time, sometimes unintentionally. While living in Buenos Aires, I never see a gun. I never hear a gunshot or hear of someone who has been shot. I hear stories of guns (real or fake is always unconfirmed) involved in threats while mugging people, but always with the same shake of the head, the same incredulous tone.

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None of this is to say that Argentina is immune from guns. After brutal cycles of dictatorships throughout its history as a nation, gun violence peaked around the time of its 2001 economic crisis and then began to fall, aided by laws requiring gun registrations and offering buyback programs, to the point that in 2012, 5.21 people were killed for every 100,000, compared to 10.69 in the United States in the same year. Argentina allows gun possession for all the same reasons we (ostensibly) do. But one cannot walk into Wal-Mart equivalent megastores for guns, open-carry is an alien concept, and private gun owners must register where they store their guns. These differences seem to contribute to an entirely different cultural attitude. These regulations don't just keep Argentine citizens safe from gun violence, they also help to

foreground the reality that is the violence intrinsic to guns.

When I discover these numbers, I am surprised, given my student's attitudes, that the statistic isn't lower in Argentina. It dawns on me that, for them, guns are not frightening by virtue of their rarity but for a different reason.

We can talk all we want about guns as self-defense, guns for hunting, guns as an inalienable right, guns as collectors' items, and every other rationalization that concretizes guns as part of American culture. But one basic fact that we Americans skirt around or just forget, is entirely obvious to the rest of the world.

Violence is intrinsic to guns.

These weapons are not multifunctional objects. They may serve different purposes, but they do so through one mechanism, that of extreme force propelling a small object at a high enough velocity to seriously injure or kill another living being. Or, one could argue they serve a secondary purpose by threatening that scale of injury. Either way amounts to the same thing—violence at a speed and scale otherwise unimaginable. And it comes in sizes that could fit in a child's hands. We easily forget when we live in the belly of the beast how bizarre, how dystopian the champions of guns and purveyors of gun culture are. The rhetoric of freedom stretches to surreal extremes, with corporations free to pretend they are people and act like psychopaths, and gun owners proclaiming their instruments of destruction as an exercise of freedom. The ability to kill (so quickly, so easily) is distorted as a citizen's right, and even for some, a duty.

After a day of back-to-back class presentations, I take the long way home to my San Telmo apartment. Weaving my way through the evening crush of workers released from their downtown offices, I return to my grandfather's home in northern Wisconsin. The intensity of my collective childhood memories that took place there temporarily transports me from the noise and frenetic energy of the city back to the quiet of his home. One wall of his guest room is lined with hunting rifles. Several shotguns lie, seemingly in wait, under the bed. I know that my grandfather has been handling guns since he was a boy. I know he has never accidentally injured himself or intentionally hurt another human being. I know the likelihood that in such a town, where everyone knows not only everyone else's name but also the kinds of guns they too own, the possibility that some coldblooded killer could steal the cache that fills the room and go on a murderous rampage is very slim. I know all of this and try to think of my grandfather's guns as what they are: inanimate objects. But their purpose persists—

that extreme velocity of such a small object translating into violence, inevitably violence. I know I will eventually visit my grandfather and sleep in that guest room again, and that nothing will happen to me. But, now, the thought of resting, that most vulnerable of human states, amid all the murder weapons makes a chill run through the length of my spine. And I am glad for it.