

Calvin's Problem: Racial Identity and Gun Ownership

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A whole world exists around the ownership of a gun. There is, first, the world of consumption: from gun stores to gun shows, to magazines and web forums, and within these the enormous range of items to purchase—the holster, the ammo, the eye protection, the ear protection, the body armor, the safe, the bumper sticker, and, of course, the gun. The home defense gun, the carry gun, the 1911, the .38, the 9 mm, the .45, the collector's item, the hand-me-down, the .22 starter, and the long gun—bolt action, pump action, combo, semi-automatic, fully automatic. And then, second, is the world of use. What does it mean to use a gun? It is rare gun owners who will ever actually fire their guns in self-defense, and yet many gun owners will fire hundreds of shots each month, spending thousands of dollars on ammunition. Where do they fire these shots? At shooting ranges, at competitions, in tactical classes, on weekend retreats, at large meetings hosted by the National Rifle Association (NRA), as well as smaller ones arranged by the local gun owners' meet-up group.

To be a gun owner, then, means a lot more than simply owning a gun. It means being part of a world, a world of various activities and, importantly, ideas. Because each of the activities that form the world of gun ownership is backed by an idea, an idea not about guns but about gender, race, class, and the economy. Indeed, being a gun owner and participating in the world of gun ownership means having a relationship not simply with a mechanical object but with a wide range of ideological positions. And for some people, like Calvin Mitchell, participating in this world is very difficult.

The difficulty for Calvin is not that he doesn't like guns; he does. And it's not that he is not politically conservative like most other gun owners; he is. The problem for Calvin is that while he is both of these things, he is *also* black. And

like other black men who love guns, Calvin finds his race to be a barrier to his participation in the world of guns.

I met Calvin on April 26, 2015. It was exactly one week since Freddie Gray's spinal cord was shattered while in the custody of the Baltimore police. Calvin and I were among a group of twelve other people attending a firearms tactical training class in Central Texas. Our teacher, like most of the firearms instructors I have met over the course of the past two years, was a white retired police officer. And as has been the case with most of the firearms classes I have taken over the past two years, Calvin was the only black person in the class.

While it is well documented that the gun ownership rate among white Americans is around double what it is among black Americans (roughly 40 percent to 20 percent [Morin 2014]), what is less known is that when it comes to participation in the various settings that make up the gun world—from gun classes to gun shows to NRA meetings—that difference is exponentially greater. Put simply, in those places, people like Calvin are practically nonexistent.

But Calvin was here. And he was here because he loved taking classes. He said: "I love trying to better my skills. And whenever I go, I try to keep them talking about techniques. But inevitably the instructor will go from talking about techniques to talking about local crime, and it will be 'black this' and 'black that.'"

One of the most surprising things I have discovered in my two years attending firearms classes is that the techniques of operating a firearm that Calvin wants to study are actually a small part of what is taught. Certainly, instructors spend a lot of time teaching technical skills, but there is an enormous amount of time spent on teaching people how to think about the world. Most people already arrive at gun schools thinking in the ways the instructors promote, but the schools serve to accentuate and reinforce such worldviews. They are worldviews that sometimes leave people like Calvin unnerved.

About one hour into the class, the weight of Gray's shattered spinal cord made itself known. Our teacher was telling us what to do if we are pulled over by a police officer. It is a common topic of conversation among gun owners, especially those who have concealed handgun licenses and have their guns with them when driving. Our teacher explained that the key to any interaction with the police is "courtesy." For example, while it is not a requirement to inform the officer if you have a firearm, it is good courtesy to do so. "The thing we officers hate the most," he explained, "are people who give us a hard time." He went on to outline other elements of courtesy: be polite, turn off the radio, put your hands on the steering wheel so the officer can see them. Do all that, "and everything will go smoothly."

“That guy in Baltimore,” our teacher continued, “what happened there is that he was being belligerent and not following the officers’ commands. You don’t ever run from the police.”

Beyond overlooking the role of race in policing, throughout class that day our teacher repeatedly used racially coded language when talking about the dangers present in the world—from referencing the need to be wary of “gangbangers” when traveling in downtown Houston to repeated comments about “thuggish-looking people.”

Calvin tells me that the class we attended together was actually not that bad. “I went to an NRA meeting a few months back,” he says. “Even though I’ve had experience in the past with the prevalent racism among gun owners, I thought, well, I should go and see for myself. The entire meeting was ‘[Barack] Obama is an idiot,’ ‘Obama is not a real American.’ . . . Everyone there was white, and I think that everyone there shared those views. It was a very uncomfortable experience.” Such experiences extend from the doors of gun classes to the doors of gun stores, where Calvin says he is repeatedly followed and scrutinized: “I’ve lived in four different states. I’ve gone to shooting ranges in about six different states. One thing is the same, that look I get when I walk in the door.”

Calvin has developed a strategy for dealing with these uncomfortable experiences, indeed for dealing with the attitudes and beliefs about race that repeatedly come up in the gun world: he tries to control interactions he has with other gun owners in such a way that the content of the interaction is focused on what he calls “the technical stuff.” “If I’m at a range and there’ll be these other shooters out there,” Calvin explains, “if I talk to them, I try to keep it focused on the purely technical stuff: ammo, gunsmithing, particular models. I don’t go into any other stuff because I know it’ll be filled with racism.”

But very often Calvin finds himself in situations that involve a group of people, situations where he can’t control the dynamics of the conversation. Like many people of color who are continuously defined by their group membership, Calvin wants more than anything, he says, “to be seen as an individual.” But throughout his participation in the gun world, Calvin’s race marks the way people think about and relate to him. “It happens all the time,” Calvin tells me, relaying his experiences at a gun class: [Students] would walk up to me and be like, “So what’s it like to be black?” I mean, they’d be like, “So do you like rap music?” I sort of felt like an ambassador for the race, needing to represent us in a way that is different than the stereotypes they hold. Overall, it went fine. And I thought I did a decent job. But I don’t want that job. I don’t want to be an

ambassador. I just want to be me. . . . People are always talking about me as a *black* gun owner. I just want to be a gun owner.”

One way that Calvin and other black gun owners have found to deal with their experiences of racism in the gun world is to separate from it and join specifically black gun organizations. It is a tradition that stretches back to the Black Panther movement and has been embraced more recently by groups such as the Huey P. Newton Gun Club in Dallas, whose members arm themselves for defense not just of self but of black identity. Such groups promote racial consciousness by raising individuals’ awareness of their membership in a collectivity and empowering them to embrace this often vilified identity. But these are not the type of black gun groups that Calvin wants to join. Instead, he joins a black gun group composed of mostly Republicans—an identity-based group that is filled with people who reject the very premise of identity politics, indeed who seek to escape the world of identity politics that they have been forced to confront.

Calvin’s decision to join such black gun groups is a fraught one. It is fraught because Calvin’s problem is not just that he has trouble being a gun owner; it’s that his trouble being a gun owner leads him to have trouble maintaining his conservative political views. While Calvin talks about his experiences with “overt, unapologetic racism” in the gun world, he is also critical of what he calls “black people’s . . . overblown accounts of widespread racism.” Not one to “play the race card,” as he puts it, Calvin is left with an existential problem: how to continue to embrace gun ownership and his conservative beliefs all the while acknowledging the racism he experiences in the gun world.

Calvin’s decision to participate in black-only gun organizations is, then, a partial and incomplete solution to his problem. On the one hand, Calvin says that joining black-only gun groups helps him “avoid the racism,” but, on the other hand, it makes him engage in behavior that he finds objectionable. “Any group,” he tells me, “that promotes a white or black agenda is promoting racism. And I feel guilty about being on a black-only gun site or going to a black-only shooting match. I feel guilty finding sanctuary in segregation.”

Calvin recently applied for a position with a local gun organization. His application was denied on the grounds that he did not have enough experience. But Calvin says that he believes other motivations guided the decision: “I think they didn’t want a black man to be in a position of power. The gun world is still too close-minded for that.”

There is a jarring complexity and contradiction in Calvin’s accounts of race and racism in the contemporary United States. On the one hand, he criticizes

those who, he states, exaggerate claims of racism in America. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert his disgust for fellow African Americans who bring up racism as being the reason they are denied employment. "The thing I hate the most," Calvin tells me, "is when I hear black people say, 'I didn't get this job because of racism.' They just like to blame other people for their problems, instead of taking any responsibility for their lives." And yet, on the other hand, he himself says that he experiences racism and, indeed, didn't get the position with the gun club because of discrimination.

Calvin wants to have a gun world that is purged of any entanglements with racism. He wants a gun world where he can embrace both his gun and his beliefs that "racism is not the big deal blacks make it out to be." He wants gun ownership to be just about the gun, not the politics. But as Calvin has found out, guns are never just about the gun. The gun world is a world of ideological commitments, a world in which laying claim to the ownership of a gun is about laying claim to the ownership of a set of beliefs.

Calvin's story could have been told by others: by female gun owners, or gay and lesbian gun owners, or people who love guns and reject identity politics but who have sought to overcome their exclusions from the gun world by organizing around their identities.

White gun owners are quick to remark that guns are universal and that in the gun world there is no such thing as race. "I don't care about what color they are," a prominent member of the Texas NRA told me in reference to black gun owners, "but *they* care what color I am. They are the ones who always bring up race." Always feeling that they are subject to racial politics but never the agents of racial politics, white gun owners repeatedly reject the premise that the gun world is exclusionary. "The NRA is an open organization," the same NRA member told me. "Anyone, *anyone* can come to our meetings. So if they don't come, that's a choice they make. It's not my choice, it's *their* choice."

But for all their claims absolving themselves of identity politics, it is precisely these white gun owners who are continuously engaging in identity politics, making race, gender, and sexuality key components of the gun world. And what the struggles of people like Calvin teach us is that when we aim to understand the gun world, we should be careful not to fetishize the gun. Owning a gun is never just about the gun, and the more we focus on the gun, the less we understand its owners.

Morin, Rich. 2014. "The Demographics and Politics of Gun-Ownning Households." Pew Research Center, July 15. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/the-demographics-and-politics-of-gun-owning-households.

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