

▼ "Shooting Guns: It's Rather Fun, Actually" was published in February 2015 on the *economist.com*, the Web site of the Economist, a widely read weekly magazine published in London; half its readers are in the United States. The Economist's target audience is "highly educated, cultured readers," especially those in business and policy. D.K., the author, identifies as "a liberal European reporter" and uses spellings we'd expect from a European writer and a British publication: centre, realise, neighbourhoods, organisation, and Mr without a period. The piece appeared in a regular feature of the Economist, "Democracy in America," which seeks to describe aspects of American democracy that differ in crucial ways from, say, democracies in Europe. As you read, consider the stereotypes D.K. is calling into question and those he or she is perpetuating. Likewise, try to assess whether you believe D.K. is male or female and why you draw that conclusion; doing so may give you insight into how stereotypes work.

Shooting Guns: It's Rather Fun, Actually

D.K.

Shooting a handgun at a target is a thrill; don't let anyone tell you otherwise. You load bullets into a clip, push it up into the gun, turn off the safety catch, take careful hold of the gun with two hands, aim and shoot. The thing jumps in your hand and you see the bullet knock a hole in the target and spark off the floor at the back of the range. There is an extraordinary rush and then you do it again. Another spark; perhaps this time the hole in the target is a little closer to the centre. Soon you have fired the whole clip and you're loading the deadly weapon in your hand again.

That is just to preface a more obvious point. To a liberal European reporter, from afar, American gun culture appears utterly insane. Americans are far more likely to murder someone or to kill themselves than people in almost all Western European countries, largely because guns make it easier. That almost 33,000 people are killed with firearms each year in America (including three Muslims in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, earlier this week) is a colossal and largely unnecessary waste of life. That people celebrate these deadly devices and carry them around while shopping, picking up their children from school or working, seems monstrous.

Yet shooting is fun. And what Europeans—and liberal Americans—often don't realise is that these deadly weapons are also an accessible, affordable and interesting hobby for millions of people. My experience of firing a pistol took place at a shooting range in the Maryland suburbs, about half an hour's drive outside of Washington, DC. I had until then never visited a shooting range and I had no idea of what to expect. But the experience was actually oddly familiar. This place was not a temple to violence. Rather, it mostly closely resembled the golf driving range that my father would occasionally take me to as a child.

Most of the building's space was given over to sales. **Punters** could buy all manner of guns, from something that resembled a sniper rifle to a pink pistol around the size of a mobile phone. But they could also buy clothes: camouflage hunting jackets; bright high-vis jackets; Smith and Wesson baseball caps and T-shirts. Much of the gear was police-themed, since police officers are

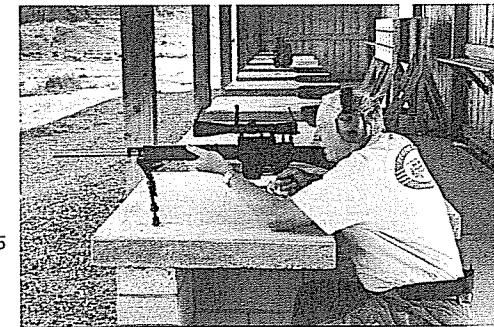
punter: in British English, an informal term for a client or customer.

apparently loyal customers (which is also true of driving ranges). T-shirts commemorating dead cops, bullet-proof jackets and leather badge holders sat a little awkwardly alongside more conventional sporting gear.

In the range people fired 5 guns gleefully at targets. Some were white, male, middle-aged and so fit the stereotype. But not all. Across from where I fired my pistol, two black women, one with a small son, were taking turns (the child heavily supervised). Shooting targets was a fine family day out. At a practice target outside of the range, plenty of people were learning how to hold a weapon for the first time, without pointing it at anyone, dropping it or injuring themselves as it recoiled. Again, it resembled a driving range: people hitting targets for fun.

And the truth is that in the range, the violence that guns inflict on America felt extremely remote. A few stickers here and there made political points ("My right to own a gun is what protects your right to tell me I can't," said one). But mostly, the idea of guns as a means to kill somebody was absent. And so it is for most people who fire guns. The most dangerous neighbourhoods for gun violence in America are in poor cities, not in the suburban areas where most gun owners live. Most of the 21,000 or so suicides in which guns are used take place behind closed doors. And the numbers, while devastatingly high, are not so high that most Americans will know someone who was killed with a gun.

For the majority of gun owners, being told that their harmless hobby is somehow responsible for the deaths of other people must be deeply unpleasant. Worse still is when they are told it by **metropolitan** types with more money than them. Michael Bloomberg, for example, New York's billionaire



Sunpix Travel/Alamy

ex-mayor. Or possibly me. And it makes me wonder whether one of the problems—certainly not the main problem, but one of them—with attempts to control guns is precisely that the people making the loudest case for reform are people like Mr Bloomberg and me.

My evidence for this is this advert, put together by the NRA, in which the viewer is warned that Mr Bloomberg, guarded by armed men (a hypocrite as well as a snob!), wants to take away your safety. The NRA is an extremely nasty organisation. Supported by the money of gun manufacturers, it has created a machine whereby politicians must take stances on gun control that are more extreme than most of their voters believe, because otherwise they will be punished with attack adverts.

But the NRA is not the voice of most gun owners. Poll after poll shows that solid majorities of gun owners would prefer stricter background checks. The NRA, however, gets its support by convincing gun owners that their hobby is under threat from metropolitan liberal elitists.

But keeping guns out of the hands of criminals 10 and the mentally ill is not incompatible with widespread gun ownership. And bringing about the changes that will make America safer means convincing people who routinely use guns safely that they are not the enemy. Perhaps what gun control needs is a few advocates who are a little more visibly familiar with the sheer fun of holding a pistol and pulling the trigger.

metropolitan: referring to urban areas.