Comprehending Columbine

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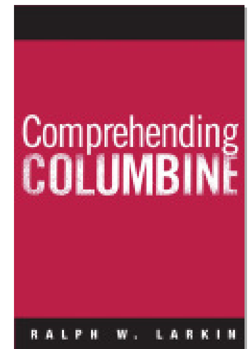

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DEAD CELEBRITIES

DYLAN KLEBOLD AND ERIC HARRIS engaged in their rampage in order to gain notoriety. Gibbs and Roche (1999) noted:

> Why, if their motive was rage at the athletes who taunted them, didn't they take their guns and bombs to the locker room? Because retaliation against specific people was not the point. Because this may have been about celebrity as much as cruelty. "They wanted to be famous," concludes FBI agent Mark Holstlaw. "And they are. They're infamous." It used to be said that living well is the best revenge; for these two, it was to kill and die in spectacular fashion (1).

Police investigators were in consensus with the FBI about the celebrity motive. Kate Battan, the lead investigator for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, fully concurred with the conclusion of the FBI. In the videotapes that Harris and Klebold made in the weeks leading up to the shootings, they revealed that they understood that the acts they were about to commit would simultaneously avenge their humiliations and elevate them to celebrity status. According to Gibbs and Roche (1999), two of the few members of the media who viewed the videotapes:

> Because they were steeped in violence and drained of mercy, they could accomplish everything at once: payback to those who hurt them, and glory, the creation of a cult, for all those who have suffered and been cast out. They wanted movies made of their story, which they had carefully laced with "a lot of foreshadowing and dramatic irony," as Harris put it. There was that poem he wrote, imagining himself as a bullet. "Directors will be fighting over this story," Klebold said–and the boys chewed over which could be trusted with the script: Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino. "You have two individuals who wanted to immortalize themselves," says Holstlaw. "They wanted to be martyrs and to document everything they were doing (2).

This raises the question of why two teenage boys would choose to engage in mass murder in order to become celebrities even though they knew ahead of time that they would not be alive to enjoy it. What is it in American culture that would lead two adolescents to believe that by creating an atrocity, they would become cultural heroes to an underclass of young people and anathema to their social superiors? It also raises the question, To what extent were they successful?

In Chapter 3, I described the political and cultural conservatism of Southern Jefferson County and delineated the role of the evangelical community in defining the meaning of the Columbine shootings. Columbine became a battleground in the American culture wars as the religious and cultural right defined the massacre as the outcome of a liberal, crime-tolerating, secular, anti-Christian society that fails to teach children right from wrong, prevents children from praying in school, and refuses to display the Ten Commandments in public schools (Epperhart 2002; Porter 1999; Scott and Rabey 2001; Zoba 2000). Neither the crime nor the public reaction to it can be understood without an explication of the recent cultural history of the country.

Therefore, much of the rest of this chapter will be devoted to outlining the emergence of postmodern culture from the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which set into motion a concerted reaction against those changes that split the polity several ways. Some people on the left viewed the cultural revolution of the 1960s as a new chapter in the developing freedom of humanity and fought to extend newly gained rights and privileges;[1] others, especially those in the corporate sector, initially horrified by the changes, especially such radical changes as gender equality, communal living, sexual openness, the use of consciousness-expanding drugs, and acceptance of alternative cultures, realized that countercultural artifacts and sensibilities could be packaged and sold to middle-class consumers, be used in advertising copy as motivators, or constitute new forms of

entertainment. Still others who were perhaps indifferent to the social moments of the 1960s found their lives changed despite their indifference because the world around them had changed (Faludi 1999). Finally, there were the resistors. Even though there was no returning to the *status quo ante*, they have done everything they can to return America to the halcyon days of the 1950s where men were men, women stayed home taking care of domestic chores, homosexuals were in the closet, teenage sex was deviant, the Cold War provided social discipline and an excuse to persecute Communists, the capitalist economy would lift all boats, and Americans could live in hypocrisy without others questioning them.

Southern Jefferson County is home to a significant fraction of the resistors. As noted in Chapter 2, if it were not for the high-tech trappings of the area and, of course, the newness of the community, Columbine is culturally pre-1964. It has a lower divorce rate, more stay-at-home moms, and is politically very conservative, with the main community influences being local religious institutions. The most visible indication it was the 1990s was the presence of goth students in the high school. Such students were reviled and were regarded as a blot on the purity and reputation of the school and community.

One consequence of the social movements of the 1960s was to reinvigorate the hard right, especially over cultural issues. The political right, always having more power than their numbers, fought the expansion of new cultural sensibilities through political activism. Although they have not made many inroads into the new cultural sensibilities, they have created an impressive political machine that wields an incredible amount of power. The emergence of the new right has changed the face of American politics. Ironically, the cultural changes initiated by the 1960s and the struggle against them created a climate where two boys from Colorado who were mercilessly bullied by members of the football and wrestling teams came to the conclusion that, in one fell swoop, they could wreak revenge on the bullies and all those who tacitly accepted that bullying, spectacularly blow up their school, and enter the pantheon of celebrityhood.

POSTMODERN CULTURE AND THE CULT OF CELEBRITY

The movements of the 1960s, in one way or another, all undermined the emotional constraints of bourgeois culture. The Great Depression era was a distant memory of the older generation. The baby boom generation lived in a time of an expanding economy and rising material wealth for the vast majority. The subjectivism of the 1960s (“If it feels good, do it.”) that used feeling upon which to

base decisions tended to subvert rational calculation that was the hallmark of bourgeois culture.

In the early part of the twentieth century, marketing visionaries understood that bourgeois culture with its emphasis on thrift, sobriety, rationality, impulse repression, the intrinsic value of work, and frugality constituted a brake on consumption and had negative consequences for expanding the economy. The demand for higher wages and shorter hours, while vehemently opposed by industrial corporations, was viewed by capitalist visionaries as a potential boon because it would free workers to spend more money as consumers and provide more time to buy the commodities they fabricated. Ewen (1976) noted that, "Shorter hours and higher wages were seen as a first step in a broader offensive against notions of thrift and an attempt to habituate a national population to the exigencies of mass production" (29).

In other words, if the capitalist economy was to expand, workers had to have sufficient income and time to purchase the products they made on the job. After all, capitalism suffers from periodic crises of overproduction, the most dramatic of which was the "The Great Depression" following the stock market crash of 1929, which lasted for more than a decade. The post-World War II period witnessed a dramatic increase in consumer culture. The "American way of life" was exemplified by an expanding economy, increasing leisure time, and upward mobility. Commentators of the time, David Riesman (1961) and C. Wright Mills (1951), both noted the emergence of "idols of leisure" over "idols of work." Baseball players and movie stars replaced industrial magnates and politicians as the subjects of magazine biographies. Even when the latter were featured, the focus was on their tastes in consumption.

The cultural contradiction of capitalism between the values of production and consumption was brought to its head in the 1960s and was resolved, inevitably, in favor of consumption (Bell 1976). With the constraints of bourgeois culture buried, the marketing industry danced on its grave. Sexual hedonism of the 1960s and early 1970s was yoked to volatile consumption. Although pretty women and mesomorphic men had always been used to sell commodities, sex itself was now being used to sell products, including products such as cigarettes and alcohol, which actually impair sexuality. Sexual imagery was so rampant in advertising that Wilson Bryan Key (1973; 1976) advanced the notion that sexual imagery was being implanted in advertisements subliminally.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s, divested of its social conflict, was divided into its constituent parts—sex, hipness, human potential, mysticism, Nature and the organic produce thereof, drugs, music—and turned into competitive struggles or new product fads. Meanwhile, the traditional competitive struggle for

occupations raged more fiercely because of the declining availability of good jobs that compensated well. The price of labor declined throughout the labor force and the means of obtaining good jobs through higher education became increasingly expensive.

The reimposition of the competitive struggle in the post-1960s era led to intensified interpersonal competition. Within the land of plenty, success has been redefined such that material wealth is necessary but not sufficient. The subjectivism that defined movement mentality in opposition to bureaucratic rationalism was transformed into a commodity that was sold to upper-middle-class consumers in the human potential psychology movement, the spiritual supermarket, and therapy cults such as Werner Erhard's est, Dianetics (Scientology), and any number of localized organizations, such as Jim Kweskin's Family in Boston, the Sullivanians on the Upper West Side of New York City, Victor Barranco's Institute of Human Abilities in California, and Jim Jones's People's Temple in the San Francisco Bay Area (Felton 1972).

In the counterculture of the 1960s, beauty extended from Twiggy on one extreme to Mama Cass on the other. Today, somatic norm images have been redrawn to exclude most of the population for the purposes of selling diets, gym memberships and equipment, and new clothing lines. The trend has also been extended from an emphasis exclusively on women to include both genders. Sophisticated urban hipness is the mode of the day. Increasingly, brand-name images have emerged as talismans of appropriate buying habits. Today, it is absolutely necessary for adolescents to be dressed in clothes that have appropriate name brands: North Face, Nike (Just do it!), Reebok, Adidas, Polo, and Abercrombie and Fitch (these are subject to rapid change). Only in postmodern society would young people kill to steal a piece of clothing for its brand name.

The realienation of the liberated sensibilities of the 1960s gave rise to postmodern culture, which emphasizes multiculturalism, feminism, tolerance of cultural differences, subjectivist notions of reality, and contingent identity. Postmodern culture is urbane, hip, permissive, and sophisticated. Not surprisingly, postmodern culture has generated a backlash among large segments of the American population who are defined in postmodern culture as rural, unhip, and unsophisticated, or worse, as losers. From the American hinterlands has emerged a militant Christian fundamentalism, reassertion of patriarchal norms, cultural monism, and advocacy of puritanical sexual behaviors (Dyer 1998; Stern 1997). Advocates of these positions view postmodern culture as the playground of the devil.

Yet, as they decry postmodern culture, they are highly influenced by it. The Christian right, an amalgam of fundamentalist, evangelical, and traditionally

conservative churches such as Mormons and Baptists, has built a parallel society replete with its own publishers, television networks, televangelists, megachurches, consumer products, and rock stars (Talbot 2000). The rise of a Christian counterculture is itself a postmodern phenomenon and is part of the multiculturalism of American society. Many deep Christians, evangelicals, and fundamentalists have taken the subjectivism of the 1960 counterculture one step further to irrationalism. They believe that they have the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth, which is contained in a literal reading of the Bible, even though there is no such thing as a literal interpretation of anything, because we all choose what to emphasize and what to ignore. They believe that all knowledge is revealed by God in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. They are anti-science and have no use for facts when they conflict with ideology. Faith trumps knowledge.

The subjectivism of the 1960s, although subversive of rational calculation, was not necessarily antirational. In many ways, it took a rationality to a new level as suggested by William Irwin Thompson (1971). Value free rationalism was called into question over the issue of ends. Functional rationalism, the use of rational means, could be devoted completely to irrational ends. These irrational endeavors included the Nazi use of technology and bureaucratic organization to exterminate millions of people with great efficiency and the American military's use of agent orange to wipe out an entire ecosystem in the Mekong Delta so that the Vietcong had no place to hide. Subjectivism was used by dissidents to raise questions about ends and value choices. The antirationalism of the Christian right is not subversive of conventional reality, but uncompromisingly stands in opposition to it; abortion is murder, a priori.

Postmodern culture is also characterized by the penetration of capitalist social relations into the production of cultural artifacts. Although such industries as motion pictures, publishing, and tourism predated postmodernism, not until the early 1970s was the majority of American workers employed in the creation, recording, and transmission of information. Moreover, as Gamson (1994) has noted, cultural reproduction has been penetrated by capitalist social relations. What was once left to institutions outside the marketplace, such as communities, subcultures, and educational and religious institutions, has been taken over by corporate-dominated media organizations directed at making a profit.[2]

One of the hallmarks of contemporary postmodern culture is the rise of an intensely competitive struggle within the cultural realm that can be distinguished from economic and political competition. Sitting at the top of this competitive struggle is the celebrity. Celebrity status is a modern phenomenon to be distinguished from fame in the following ways (Gamson 1994; Giles 2000; Marshall 1998): It is more ephemeral and fleeting, with some personages rising from

nobodies to celebrities and falling to has-been status in a matter of months; it has little to do with character or with extraordinary feats, skills, or talents; and it is merely the phenomenon of being known (Boorstein 1962).

One of the major cultural emphases of postmodernism is the cult of celebrity. Modern society obviously had its sports figures, movie stars, and radio and TV celebrities, but they were not as important as celebrity in postmodern culture. Celebrities are the royalty of the postmodern era. They are the ones people fawn over, read about, and want to touch for magical reasons (Marshall 1998). They are not allowed private lives because the eyes of the media are always upon them. They are the staple of talk shows, TV insider-reports, and gossip columns. As a marketing device, their names are associated with numerous products, either through endorsements or the establishment of their own product lines, such as Jacklyn Smith's K-Mart clothing line, Michael Jordan's Air-Jordan Nike shoe line, and Britney Spears's Elizabeth Arden cosmetics line. Super-celebrities must be protected from the public; their houses must have sophisticated security systems, and they must appear in public with bodyguards (Gamson 1994). They are afforded special privileges in society, from exemptions from obeying laws to access to unearned wealth.

Faludi (1999), referring to postmodernism as "ornamental culture," described it as "constructed around celebrity and image, glamour and entertainment, marketing and consumerism, it is a ceremonial gateway to nowhere. Its essence is not just the selling act but the act of selling the self…"(35). In contemporary postmodern culture, the new class system can be categorized as celebrities, has-beens, and nobodies. The culture of the modern high school reflects that same sort of stratification in the microcosm. The jocks, the soches, and the school celebrities are the privileged minority. Within the culture of the school and the peer group, everybody else is a nobody. Those who have been jettisoned from the in-group are the adolescent equivalent of has-beens.

YOUTH IN A COLD NEW WORLD

For young people, the 1980s were dismal. In my study of suburban youth in the mid-1970s, I characterized them as struggling to get by in a world that ostensibly made little sense to them; they had to convince themselves that going to school and getting a degree would give meaning to their lives. Most students thought that the worst thing that could happen to them would be to live lives like their parents. Yet all indicators suggested that this was exactly what was going to happen to them (Larkin 1979). If one looks at the cultural products of

adolescent subcultures in the 1980s and 1990s, one would have to conclude that the generation of the 1970s was relatively well-off. If adolescents of the 1970s were confused and uncertain about their futures, those of the 1980s and 1990s were frightened and dispirited (Hersch 1998). This was especially true for students who were outcasts (Wooden and Blazak 2001).

In 1976, a group of kids from Forest Hills, Queens—Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee, and Tommy Ramone—formed a rock band. The Ramones hung around and played at CBGBs (Country Bluegrass Blues), a rock-and-roll club in a rundown section on the lower east side of New York City. It was there that they invented punk rock. Other notable punk bands that came out of this club were Richard Hell and the Voidoids and Blondie (Larkin 1988). Although rock- and-roll always had a critical edge, punk quite literally sharpened that edge, glorifying violence and self-destructive behaviors including suicide, sex without love (especially S&M), and alienation. In addition, they flirted with extreme politics of the left (anarchy) and the right (Nazism).

The major premise of punk rock was a response to the boredom, competitiveness, and the alienation of contemporary suburban living (Larkin 1988). Rock-and-roll was supposed to be for everyone. To be an authentic punk band, the members had to endorse the punk ethos of "do it yourself," or DIY. The ethic of DIY was that all you needed to do was buy or steal a guitar and learn three chords and you could be a punk rock musician. Many punk rock bands were self-consciously technically bad, emphasizing the accessibility of punk rock to anybody who wanted to play.

Punk rock also reduced the disparity between the band and the audience. It was not unusual for audience members to spit on the band or throw bottles at them, which in turn would be thrown back. The audience could also fight with band members and destroy their instruments. Punk rockers invented stage diving, crowd surfing, pogo dancing, and slam dancing, which were the forerunners to the less violent mosh pit. Stage divers would jump off the stage, trusting that the dancers would catch them before they hit the ground. Crowd surfing occurred when members of the band or fans floated through the mosh pit as they were passed around over the heads of dancers. Pogo dancing was literally jumping up and down as if one was on a pogo stick. Slam dancing was similar to pogo dancing, except that dancers pushed each other, slammed others into the ground or up against walls, or otherwise engaged in violence to the beat of the band.

Strangely, rather than spreading to the hinterlands of America, punk rock took root in Britain, where in addition to the critique of everyday life found in American punk rock, it adopted an overt political tone, attacking Margret Thatcher's neoliberal project of shrinking the welfare state. In 1978, the premier

British punk rock band, The Sex Pistols, toured the United States. Although the band split apart, seeds of its effects on punk rock bands and punk culture sprouted up all over the United States. It was renamed "hardcore," a double entendre referring to graphic pornography and extreme disaffection from American culture, as in "hardcore criminal."

While the majority of Americans either celebrated or acquiesced to the neoliberal project of the Reagan Administration, punk rockers rebelled against it in perhaps the only way they could. Punk culture held up a mirror to American society and celebrated its ugliness. If their upper-middle-class peers were going to wear prep clothes, they wore T-shirts and jeans that were cut and ripped, often held together with safety pins, or black leather sadomasochism (S&M) outfits studded with spikes. Doc Marten boots and spiked Mohawk haircuts were sported by both males and females. Already designated as losers by their peers, they celebrated their failure by flaunting it as loudly and as brashly as they could. They were "in your face." They publicly engaged in self-destructive behavior. They smoked cigarettes and took drugs that destroyed consciousness; they sniffed glue ("Sniffin' Glue" was a popular song of the Ramones). They ditched school, purposely failed classes, engaged in senseless violence (a punk rock concert tended to take the form of a riot), and engaged in senseless and anonymous sex (message to the jocks—we can get laid too). To the extent that they had a political consciousness, they tended toward anarchy.

Punk rockers carved out social spaces where kids who were losers and did not fit in with the dominant and conservative jock/rah-rah crowds could find like-minded peers and surcease from the harassment they experienced because they were different (Gaines 1994). Since the 1980s, punk culture has continued to exist, changing several times, and, in the 1990s, becoming incorporated under the generic term "Goth."

If punk rock appealed to upper-middle-class kids and had a leftist political identity, skinhead subcultures appealed to working-class white kids, especially those who were downwardly mobile and had a right-wing political identity. Skinhead culture was detailed in the previous chapter in terms of the normative structure and its association with neo-Nazi and racist organizations (Ridgeway 1995). As punk celebrated their failure with self-destructive behavior, skinheads projected their violence outwards toward ethnic minorities whom they perceived as threatening their white-skin privileges.

The "indicative minorities" (Foss 1972) of youth subcultures of the 1980s and 1990s had despair as their central theme. In a culture where interpersonal competition had been intensified, they quit. Punks were losers, and they knew it. Their form of resistance was to celebrate a culture of failure in opposition to the

sexual, hip, and status struggles. As an indicative minority, their products, cultural styles, and clothing were picked up by hip urban merchandisers and sold to the middle class, ironically projecting them as cultural innovators. Malcolm McLaren, the manager of The Sex Pistols, ran clothing stores that sold punk outfits and was one of the developers of the grunge look that was later popularized by Seattle garage bands, such as Nirvana. Skinheads also celebrated a culture of failure. However, their form of resistance was random and hate-filled violence. Their style, however, was not nearly as inventive as punk. Nor were there styles commercially viable. They tended to wear military fatigue pants, braces (suspenders), and T-shirts and to shave their heads. The one thing they had in common with the punks was the wearing of Doc Marten or combat boots.

The cultural studies of youth in the 1980s and 1990s revealed a profound malaise. William Finnegan (1998) in his aptly named book, *Cold New World*, chronicled the struggles of black and Hispanic, poor and working-class adolescents in cold, heartless, uncaring environments, where parents were relatively powerless to help them, even though some tried. It was a period of declining opportunity and increasing poverty, especially for children. Family incomes stagnated while the cost of higher education increased dramatically, pricing economically marginal students out of the educational marketplace (Males 1996). Patricia Hersch (1998) intensively studied the lives of six upper-middle-class adolescents. She found them isolated and alone, living in a world unknown to their parents, learning to play a game in which false appearances substituted for a known reality. They all attended the same suburban high school which, given the cultural trends, was hardened in anticipation of violence that had not yet occurred. She wrote:

> This year the administrators in the school are trying to toughen up all around. Expulsion policy is more exacting, rules are implemented more rigorously. School security is tighter, enforced by a full-time police officer in the school (304).

Students complained about the arbitrariness of the enforcement of behavior codes that meted out punishment to the innocent and guilty alike for fear of a student getting away with something (Hersch 1998). In a reversal of the American system of jurisprudence, students were assumed to be guilty until proven otherwise. Students perceived the sanctioning system of the school as unjust and absurd. They had great difficulty making sense of their lives, but they heroically tried to make some sense despite it all. The sense of arbitrariness—of sanctions being applied equally to perpetrator and victim—and the lack of distributive justice that Hersh reported were voiced by numerous Columbine students. All

of Hersch's subjects, at one time or another, were depressed. One of her brightest, most dedicated subjects who appeared to work the hardest on himself to be a good and competent human being committed suicide shortly after she concluded her study.

In 1987, four high school students in suburban Bergenfield, New Jersey, suffocated themselves to death in a garaged car as part of a suicide pact (Gaines 1993). The students were described by locals as "losers," "burnouts," "druggies," and "dropouts." Gaines wrote:

> Throughout the 1980s, teenage suicide clusters appeared across the country—six or seven deaths, sometimes more, in a short period of time in a single community. In the Boomtown of Plano, Texas. The fading factory town of Leominster, Massachusetts. At Bryan High School in a white, working-class suburb of Omaha, Nebraska. A series of domino suicides among Arapahoe Indian youths at the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Six youth suicides in the county of Westchester, New York, in 1984; five in 1985 and seven in 1986 (8).

As a consequence of the Bergenfield suicide pact, Gaines (1993) conducted a participant observation study of a group of outcast students, known as "burnouts" or "dirt bags," in northern New Jersey. Their lives were aimless, boring, and depressing. They were shunned by their higher status peers; they were shipped off from their neighborhood school to the local vocational-technical high school. Among the powerless, they had even less power. Gaines described powerlessness of 1980s youth:

> Over the last 20 years kids kept losing ground as an autonomous power block. By the 1980s, they had virtually no voice. And without an effective national policy for youth, kids fell through the cracks in droves. It took awhile for adults to figure out that each new youth atrocity added up to a somewhat larger picture of societal neglect. …
>
> America's young people did their best to survive in a climate that was openly punitive toward the vulnerable. Yet they were consistently viewed as a generation of barbarians and losers, stupid, apathetic (239).

The disaffected students at Columbine High School were similarly viewed. They were perceived as trash, as potential threats of violence, as lacking in school spirit, and were blamed for their own outcast status. Even though many of them were bright and high achievers, they were perceived as a management problem

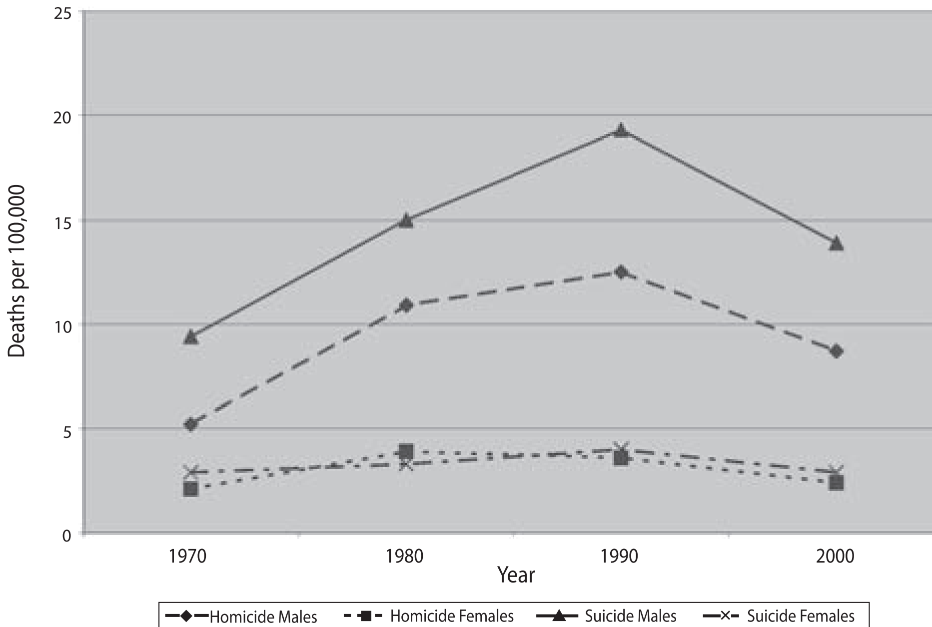

FIGURE 8.1: *Homicide and suicide rates for whites, age 15–19, 1970–2000*

for the school. Those who were victimized by the athletes were perceived by many other students and parents as deserving of the treatment they received.

Government statistics on homicide and suicide bore out the subjective and anecdotal observations of Gaines (1993), Finnegan (1998), and Hersch (1998). American adolescents, including white teenagers, were living in an increasingly violent world. Figure 8.1 contains the homicide and suicide rates for whites between the ages of fifteen and nineteen from 1970 to 2000 (Child DataBank 2005).

Between 1970 and 1980, homicide rate for white males between the ages of fifteen and nineteen doubled from 5.2 to 10.9 per 100,000 in 1980, rising to 12.5 in 1990, and peaking at 14.7 in 1995, and then declining to 8.7 in 2000. Suicide rates for white males jumped from 9.4 to 15.0 per 100,000 between 1970 and 1980, increasing to 19.3 in 1990, and then dropping to 13.9 in 2000. Rates for female adolescents were dramatically lower than males, but essentially followed the same trend, with homicides nearly doubling between 1970 and 1980 from 2.1 to 3.9 per 100, 000, declining slightly to 3.6 in 1990, and then declining to 2.1 in 2000. Female suicide rates showed a similar trend from 2.9 per 100,000 in 1970, increasing to 3.3 in 1980 and 4.0 in 1990, and dropping back down to the same rate of 2.9 that existed in 1970.

The spectacular rise in suicide and homicide rates among white males between 1970 and 1980 was stimulated, in part, by the end of the middle-class youth movement, resulting in a collective malaise among young people that has been explained in detail elsewhere (Foss and Larkin 1976; Larkin 1979). Briefly, many young movement participants burned their bridges to conventional society. When the movement came to an end, they were caught between lives that they had rejected and a vision that had been rendered impossible, resulting in a life construction crisis. Many joined post-movement groups that exercised discipline over their lives and provided bridges back to conventional society (Foss and Larkin 1976, 1986; Tipton 1982). Others lapsed into hedonism, excessive drug use, and otherwise dissolute lives. As noted above, a small minority joined terrorist organizations. Many who could not make the transition killed themselves. In 1973, two close friends of mine who were social movement activists committed suicide within six months of each other.

One would expect that such violence would subside as the time from the end of the movement increased and young people reconciled themselves to the reestablishment of the quotidian; however, suicides and homicides increased throughout the 1980s as the level of desperation among young people, especially those who were outcasts, also increased. Yet something else was going on. If the lives of marginal and outcast students were being degraded, as were the lives of all vulnerable Americans, the celebratory, triumphalist, and aggressive behaviors of the American upper class were being transmitted to adolescent leading crowds. After all, if capital could shove it to labor, and if the American superpower could beat up on weak Third World regimes in Grenada, Nicaragua, and Panama, why could student elites not do whatever they wanted without fear of retribution?

Because the increased aggressiveness of elites was hegemonic, it was invisible and grossly understudied. Gaines (1993), whose study focused on outcast students, noted, almost in passing, "The social order of Bergenfield High School was pretty normal except for one thing: the place was unusually polarized between jocks and the burnouts. There was not one conversation among the outcast that did not include de rigueur dissin' the jocks. … So the vendetta between the jocks and the burnout was very serious in Bergenfield" (91).

Gaines (1993) also noted that because the Bergenfield High School football team was highly successful, they had provided the community considerable visibility and prestige. She described the jocks as "high-and-mighty," "the golden boys, the cream of the crop in a high school not known for producing many great scholars" (91).

At about the same time that Gaines was studying burnouts in Bergenfield, a news story broke about several members of the Glen Ridge High School football

team raping a mentally retarded girl. The town of Glen Ridge, about twenty-five miles southeast of Bergenfield, is smaller and more upper-middle-class. Although news reports focused on the facts of the case and the police investigation, which was shocking enough, another story was being played out about the cover-up of the crime (Lefkowitz 1997).

The rape took place in the basement of two members of the football team who were neighbors and grew up with the victim. They were fully aware of her cognitive disabilities. Nevertheless, they lured her to their basement, where in the presence of thirteen members of the football, wrestling, basketball, and baseball teams, they had her perform oral sex on some of them, and they stuck a broom and a fungo bat up her vagina. The victim participated in the events because she idolized the athletes and thought that by doing what they wanted she would be included in their group (Lefkowitz 1997).

After hearing about the rape, Lefkowitz, a journalism professor at Columbia University, began investigating the crime. The investigation turned into a community study of Glen Ridge. What he found was a sports-crazed community that idolized its football team: “For the Saturday faithful, Glen Ridge was football. Without it, Glen Ridge was just another suburban town. Kids who didn’t play football—and worse still, showed no enthusiasm for those who did—were treated as ‘nobodies.’ Adults who didn’t find football and the hoopla surrounding it exciting were judged lacking in civic spirit. They would never be accepted as real Ridgers” (Lefkowitz 1997, 72).

In keeping with that normative environment, the jocks were privileged. Lefkowitz reported that parents alleged that the local police enforced underage alcohol regulations differentially, arresting nonathletes while being lenient in their treatment of athletes. Not surprisingly, those kids who were not interested in sports were stigmatized as losers and nobodies. Similarly to the Trenchcoat Mafia at Columbine High School, the outcasts banded together to form their own subculture, identifying themselves as, not surprisingly, “The Outcasts.”

What Lefkowitz found in Glen Ridge was a normative pattern of nearly complete indulgence of the student athletes. Although a minority of parents and teachers were upset about the tolerance of immoral and illegal behaviors among the jocks, the rest of the community looked away. In Columbine, the jocks ruled the halls. Unlike Columbine, the aggression at Glen Ridge was specifically directed toward girls rather than anybody who got in their way. Numerous incidents were told of jocks pushing girls up against lockers and grinding their bodies against them, simulating sexual activity. Teachers were intimidated and afraid to sanction jocks because of their status.

Glen Ridge High School was essentially run by coaches. The principal was a former assistant football coach, the vice principal was a basketball coach, and the athletic director was a legendary former football coach. The coaches ran the school, and the jocks controlled the hallways. The school was effectively a "jock-ocracy." Although Glen Ridge High School was an upper-middle-class community and many of its graduates attended selective colleges and universities, the school looked more like a sports program with an academic track than an academic institution with sports programs. This is apparently a rather common phenomenon in the United States where coaches and former coaches dominate the school administration and teachers of academic disciplines are chosen not on the basis of academic and pedagogical skills, but on their abilities to coach sports teams.

In Glen Ridge and in Columbine, the school climate reflected the values of the community. The community wanted, in addition to a decent academic program, winning sports teams, especially winning football teams. Because these communities obtain their identity through the exploits of their high school football teams, football players received special dispensation. This meant that their high status provided them with access to girls and sex, adulation by peers and adults alike, lenient treatment for their misdemeanors, and a freedom to behave in a manner about which others of their age could hardly dream.

This particular group of Glen Ridge seniors, although their performance on the gridiron was less than spectacular with Glen Ridge High School achieving only three wins in eighteen games during their junior and senior years, tended to be more outrageous in their behaviors than their predecessors (Lefkowitz 1997). They seemed to be meaner, more aggressive, and more felonious than preceding classes. Under-aged jocks were caught buying alcohol, engaging in vandalism, instigating fights, and shooting BB guns at people in the township. At the winter prom, several jocks rifled through girls' purses and boys' wallets in jackets hanging over chairs as their victims danced. They stole several hundred dollars in cash. In nearly all of these escapades, when it was discovered that members of the football team were involved, restitution was made without punishment.

One of the most notorious and celebrated acts of the jocks, prior to the rape, was the complete trashing of a house in nearby East Orange. Just prior to the Valentine's Day weekend, a student who was trying to impress the in-crowd announced in the cafeteria that her parents would be away for the weekend and that she was going to have a party. Members of the Glen Ridge football team came to the party and began trashing the place, destroying everything they could,

including all the furniture in the house, spray-painting graffiti on the walls, killing the fish in the fish tank, torching the pet cat, and ransacking dressers. Eleven juveniles from Glen Ridge were held by the police, including four former or present members of the football team, one of whom was later involved in the rape case. Lefkowitz (1997) indicated that they were questioned briefly and released to their parents without being charged with a crime. The high school administration acted as if nothing had happened.

One of the legacies of the 1960s middle-class youth movement was the creation of permanent dissident adolescent subcultures in predominantly white, suburban, middle-class high schools. Although they never challenged the jocks' domination of the school, they provided an important and valued space for outcast students. Although outcast subcultures were always at or near the bottom of the school status structure (Eckert 1989; Larkin 1979; Wooden and Blazak 2001), they provided a basis of cohesion for students who were rejected by the vast majority of their peers. They occupied their own space in the school, usually near a place where they could smoke, because one major source of differentiation was that outcast students smoked cigarettes whereas the vast majority of the other students did not. They listened to their own music (punk, heavy metal, industrial, ska, rap, hardcore), which separated them from the others. They also adopted their own clothing styles, especially dressing in black, which was an indicator of goth.

Even banding together in subcultures for protection and mutual support was insufficient for many outcast students. First, as indicated by the research of Gaines (1993) and Finnegan (1998), the peer group was incapable of providing for all the socioemotional needs of its participants. Adolescent peer groups are rife with rivalries, fights, and relationships that are labile and impermanent. Second, outcast student subcultures tend to be not only alienated from their peers but also from parent and adult authorities, including teachers and police. Aside from the occasional understanding parent or teacher, outcasts are pretty much left to their own devices, which are relatively few.

For adolescents more than for any other age group, the future looms as a source of anxiety. For outcast students, prospects seem particularly grim, to the point that thoughts of the future are to be avoided at all costs, and perhaps even suicide is considered (Gaines 1993). These are the kids in the community who evince a visceral dislike. They are the ones that "don't have school spirit," "give the community a black eye," on whom the police are supposed to keep an eye, even though they may be victims of predation by their higher status peers who play on the sports teams, wear clothing, including lettermen's jackets that have the school colors, and are vested with the reputation of the local community.

Meanwhile, bullying begins to emerge as a social problem in the early 1990s. The shootings at Columbine, because of the motivations of the shooters, brought bullying to center stage. Anecdotal, participant observational, and statistical data all indicate that in the post-1980s world, young people of all races and ethnicities were increasingly likely to experience violence. It is a colder, harder world that they faced compared to earlier generations. As noted in the previous chapter, working-class kids are no longer guaranteed a union job with a major corporation. For upper-middle-class kids, the taxpayer revolt resulted in the defunding of public higher education, which means that competition for selective universities intensifies and costs increase. The possibility of failure increases, raising anxiety levels.

Concomitant with the rise of public awareness about bullying, Americans began witnessing a new crime occurring not in overcrowded underfunded urban high schools but in rural and suburban middle and high schools: rampage shootings. According to Newman (2004), between 1974 and March 2001, twenty-five rampage shootings occurred. However, nearly eight years passed between the first shooting and the second. Between 1982 and 1988, five rampage shootings were documented, followed by a four year hiatus. Between 1992 and 1996, there were six rampage shootings, all in rural areas. Between 1997 and 2001, Newman documented thirteen rampage shootings, including the mass murders in Paducah, Kentucky, Jonesboro, Arkansas, Springfield, Oregon, and, of course, Columbine. All were committed by males. With the exception of one Asian and two blacks, the other twenty-four shooters were white. In nearly every case, the shooter had low peer status or was described as a loner. In every case where evidence existed, the shooter had been either teased or bullied. In every case where evidence existed, the shooter's masculinity had been challenged, and he felt marginalized in the peer group. In most cases, as in Columbine, the motive of the shooter was retaliation. One exception was Michael Carrneal in Paducah, Kentucky, who shot five fellow students in a prayer group in an attempt to impress members of the goth subculture in his high school.

The two decades leading up to the Columbine shootings were not particularly good ones for adolescents. Families had been under increasing stress, privatization mania and tax revolts by the propertied classes undermined national commitment to public education and required public universities to institute and increase tuition. As violence increased among teenagers, tough-on-crime legislators instituted increasingly draconian laws for juvenile offenders. The adolescent's world continued to grow harder, colder, and fraught with increasing probabilities of failure. Meanwhile, a minority of privileged students, especially those who played football, became adolescent culture's version of celebrities

who seemed to be exempt from the misery that many of their peers experienced, especially the outcast students, who, because they thought and acted differently than the majority of students, became targets for violence down the social system. All too often, the violence and the bullying were excused and ignored by adults. High school sports heroes were exempted from punishment or received reduced or altered punishments that do not affect their eligibility to play. We witnessed in Columbine and in Glen Ridge that coaches effectively ran the school, wayward athletes committed crimes unpunished. In some cases, coaches abetted such behaviors, such as in the case of a coach bailing out a state championship wrestler and taking him to a meet directly from jail after he had been arrested for driving while intoxicated and smashing up his car, or the administration of Glen Ridge High School attempting to protect and excuse the behaviors of rapists because they were on the football team (Lefkowitz 1997).

Differential treatment of students for rule infractions creates cynicism below and arrogance above. It sends a message, in George Orwell's terms, that "some are more equal than others." Participant observational research indicates that the kids know what is going on, even if the adults deny it. A goth being harassed by a member of the football team as a coach stands by and snickers learns a message about justice very quickly. He also learns a lesson about powerlessness, humiliation, and adult corruption. He learns that it is much better to be a somebody than a nobody. The rules operate differently for somebodies.

Wealth is shifted up the social structure as the proportion of income for the top 1 percent of the population increases dramatically and the greater majority of Americans experience stagnating or declining incomes in real terms. While this redistribution of wealth takes place, the corporate media increasingly focus on the lives of celebrities. The phenomenon of the Reagan presidency represented the merging of celebrity with political power. Ronald Reagan became president of the United States because he was a celebrity. The opposite occurred with Bill Clinton, former Governor of a third world state who became a celebrity because he achieved the presidency. Americans are increasingly fed tidbits on the lives of celebrities as hard news reports diminish. The distinction between fact and fiction blurs, and a new genre called "infotainment" supplants journalism. To an impressionable adolescent, the message of postmodern American culture is that if you are not a somebody, then you must be a nobody, which is worse than being a has-been. At least if you are a has-been, you can be recycled on a "whatever became of …" article or show. Gaines (1993) put it this way:

> Kids who go for the prize now understand there are only two choices—rise to the top or crash to the bottom. Many openly admit they would

> rather end it all now than end up losers. … The big easy or the bottomless pit, but never the everyday drone. As long as there are local heroes and stories, you can still believe you have a chance to emerge from the mass as something larger than life … kids try to play at being one in a million, some way of shining, even if it's just for a while (151).

WHO IS GOING TO MAKE MY MOVIE? THE KILLERS AND CELEBRITY STATUS

One can be a celebrity because of talent, beauty, athleticism, or personal achievements. Sports figures, movie stars, models, and assorted luminaries in various fields fit into this category. One can also become a celebrity by being in the right place at the right time (Gamson 1994). All one has to do is be in the eye of the camera at a critical moment. However, there is a third way to become a celebrity—and that is to do something so outrageous that one becomes notorious. For nobodies, this is the one sure route to celebrity; this is the road that Harris and Klebold took.

If their intent was to become celebrities, they were hugely successful. They commandeered the attention of all Americans, including the president of the United States, every high school principal in the land, researchers such as this writer, pundits, the clergy, and every kid in America capable of watching the news.

Harris and Klebold speculated that their act would generate a revolution. Harris said in one of the videotapes, "We're going to kick-start a revolution" among the dispossessed and despised students of the world. Although they did not engender a revolution, their acts resonated among those students who had been bullied and humiliated by their peers. In the weeks following the Columbine High School shootings, schools across the country experienced thousands of bomb scares, scores of attempted bombings, and several attempted copycat killings (Emergency Net 1999), partially achieving Harris and Klebold's apocalyptical vision of a nationwide revolt. The most serious incident occurred the day after Columbine in rural Alberta, Canada, where a high school student killed a peer and wounded another. Since then, numerous actual school shootings have occurred and potential attempts have been thwarted (Butterfield 2001). Several planned or actual attacks were inspired by Columbine: In 2001, Joseph DeGuzman, who was obsessed with the Columbine shootings, accumulated an arsenal of guns, bombs, Molotov cocktails, and 2000 rounds of ammunition. Two boys in Fort Collins, Colorado, a mere sixty miles from Columbine High School, planned a reenactment of the Columbine shootings. In a small town in Kansas,

three boys collected white supremacy paraphernalia, guns, ammunition, and a book on how to make bombs, in what the press described as a "Columbine-like" planned assault that was foiled by a student tipping off authorities (Cable News Network 2001). An attempt uncovered in New Bedford, Massachusetts, was conspicuously modeled after Columbine. Three freshmen at the local high school planned an assault that they hoped would have a higher death toll than Columbine (Butterfield and McFadden 2001). In the summer of 2003, three outcast boys in southern New Jersey were arrested with a large arsenal that they planned to use in a mobile assault on their community (Campbell 2003). In March 2005, on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, Jeffrey Wiese killed his grandparents, five fellow students, a teacher and a security guard, in a rampage modeled after Columbine. With the protagonist claiming he was a goth and wearing a black duster, he asked one of his victims if he believed in God before killing him (Wilgoren, Pates, and Reuthling 2005).

The Columbine shootings were and continue to be media-driven. Harris and Klebold, especially Harris, had especially strong media savvy and awareness. The boys videotaped themselves prior to the shootings; Harris set up the "Trenchcoat Mafia" web page on AOL. The boys were quite facile in the use of video games. When they made their videotapes prior to the massacre, Eric Harris sat in a chair swigging a bottle of Jack Daniels and holding in his lap a sawed-off shotgun named "Arlene," after a favorite character in the Doom video game (Gibbs and Roche 1999).

Klebold was caught up in the pleasure of creating pain in those who had made his life so agonizing. He was also enamored by the social consequences of their actions. He seemed to be enthralled by the notoriety that they would receive. This appeared to be his major concern when talking with a journalist in a chat room about the Oklahoma City bombings. In the basement tapes, Klebold noted that people would take notice at the time and date of the videotapes they were making. He also considered what movie director could best be trusted with the script of their story; Quentin Tarantino topped their list (Gibbs and Roche 1999). They also wanted the story to have a lot of "dramatic irony." Instead, they got Gus Van Zandt's film, "Elephant," loosely based on the Columbine shootings, which was dramatically flat. However, the play, *Columbinus*, by P. J. Paparelli, which focused on precipitating events that led up to the shootings, toured the country and played off-Broadway in New York to rave reviews.

In November 2000, a year and a half after the Columbine shootings, my wife, Debra Larkin, conducted an investigation of Columbine-oriented chat rooms. She found memorial web sites dedicated to the victims, especially Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall. In addition, countless web sites had sprung up as open

forums for expressing opinions about issues related to the shootings: They included debates over gun control policies, bullying, guilt of the parents, proper actions of the police and school administration, the psychology of the shooters, and drug use. One of the most common themes on the web sites was whether or not Klebold and Harris should be forgiven for their deeds. Many students admitted that they felt sympathy and even empathy toward the boys. Several sites have been maintained as information clearinghouses on the shootings themselves. I have used these in my own research and have contacted, on occasion, the webmaster to provide information or correct misinformation.

Over five years after the shooting, there still exists the "Eric Harris Worship Site" ("Trench" 2005) on which the above-mentioned issues are still being debated. Dylan Klebold has a site devoted to his personage (www.DylanKlebold.com). The personages of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold maintain an underground existence. For many young people who find themselves in positions similar to those of Harris and Klebold at Columbine High School, the boys strike a resonating chord. Some people in chat rooms regard them as heroes; most regard them as villains. In rare cases, they are exemplars. Since April 19, 1999, numerous rampage shootings have occurred in middle and high schools and colleges across North America; for every shooting that has been carried out, several have been discovered and thwarted before their execution. In most cases, the Columbine shootings were used as a template, an inspiration, or a record to be surpassed.

Although Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did not jump-start a revolution, they provided outcast students with the possibility of an alternative to passive acceptance of abuse from their higher-status peers. Perhaps by now, most of America has forgotten their names. However, their memory lives on in the consciousness of what Brooks Brown aptly referred to as "loser students."