

# The *making known* of the motives of students who have used weapons in school. Elements to reflect on extreme school violence

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## Abstract

This paper starts with a historical account of school attacks by armed students, which are one form of the current international phenomenon of extreme school violence. Based on information from academic texts, news articles and electronic data bases, this account led to the location and construction of 65 cases that took place between August 1966 and March 2018. The paper then presents a significant statistic of the phenomenon based on data from the whole set of cases and analyzes what these cases have revealed about the motives, purposes and meanings of the attacks in order to find common features among them. Finally, based on this analysis about the *knowledge of an act*<sup>1</sup> – an act whose violence and radical nature challenge the essential mission of the school as a creator and enabler of civilization and, at the same time, pose a threat to the society and the culture in which it took place – some links are established with the theoretical approaches of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Michel Foucault, which open a path to reflect on the issue at hand.

**Key words:** violence – school – students – knowledge – modernity.

All I want is killing, hurting and scaring as much people as possible! Sometimes I write shit in English because I want everybody to understand what the hell I'm talking about!<sup>2</sup>

Bastian Bosse, school shooter.  
Emsdetten, Germany, 2006.

From the point of view of the State, the originality of the man of war, his eccentricity, appears necessarily under a negative form: stupidity, deformity, insanity, illegitimacy, usurpation, sin...

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari  
*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia.*

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1 Knowledge that can only be produced *a posteriori* after the act has been committed, given the heterogeneous –albeit related– orders to which knowledge and act belong.

2 Anonymous source (November 22 2016).

Politics is the possibility of a plural environment in which those who participate in it are revealed as people and give durability to the world.

Hannah Arendt  
*What Is Politics?*

## Introduction

This article originated in research work being conducted as part of the broader project “Contemporary childhoods, adolescences and school experiences: New trends in education and bio-politics” by the author. My interest in raising and addressing some questions about the experiences of “the new ones”<sup>3</sup> in their passage through school in the context of the present times responds to the generative value that such experiences have in the production of forms of subjectivization, which ideally establish conditions for the students to situate themselves in and contribute to the construction of a world that is inhabitable for every human being.<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt’s (2016) assumption about the value that these experiences have led her to believe that education had a pre-political character.

Guided by the concern mentioned above, certain current events in Mexico and abroad led me to a question about a sociocultural phenomenon typical of modernity:<sup>5</sup> the occurrence –not infrequent nowadays– of actions of extreme violence in schools, particularly those carried out by students.<sup>6</sup> Such attacks, shootings, and even massacres, might constitute –each one of them and as a whole– extreme manifestations or testimonies of a certain range of experiences of the passage of the students through the school which it is important to study given the subject of my general research project: contemporary school experiences in childhood and adolescence. What do these attacks reveal about the school experiences of their perpetrators, and more specifically, about the motives and the meaning of planning them and carrying them out? This is the main question that this text seeks to address.

## General methodological trajectory

Trying to answer this question required, first, outlining an exploratory route through history and the status of the phenomenon internationally.<sup>7</sup> To that end, we searched on the internet for scholarly texts, journalistic articles and reliable data bases. Relying on these sources allowed us to learn about the ways in which

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3 Term used by ancient Greeks and adopted by Arendt to refer to children and youths in their condition of potential of history.

4 Faced with the progress and development of technology, deployed through capitalism and the great wars of the twentieth century, the category of “human” has been widely analyzed, especially by philosophers and critics of modernity such as Heidegger, Arendt, and Foucault, but I retain it in this text as a very important reference to consider what is at stake in the problem with violence that I have chosen to address.

5 Modernity is understood here as the period still in progress that followed the Second World War.

6 The importance of the study of this worldwide phenomenon could be seen when Mexico was also affected by it, particularly after the shooting perpetrated by a secondary school student at the Colegio Americano del Noroeste in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico on January 18 2017. The framework and destructive potential of this attack had until then been unheard of in this country, and this associated it precisely with that phenomenon: the number of armed school assaults carried out by students that have been taking place in many countries, and especially in the United States, for several decades now.

7 I am thankful to Dr. Ana Luisa González for having suggested this in our workshop about elementary education at the DEEDUC Research Colloquium in August 2017.

extreme violence acts are recorded and studies, and how society is informed about them. This also enabled us to see that, thanks to the internet and social networks, information about these acts is disseminated in such a way that it is now within reach of a very numerous population of students around the world.

In the research project mentioned above we established age limits for the school population to be studied to include only children and adolescents, but the research results about the characteristics of the large number of school assaults perpetrated by students led us to include also young people between the ages of 18 and 29.

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia includes an article entitled “Anexo: Ataques perpetrados en centros educativos” (“List of school-related attacks”, in English)<sup>8</sup>, which features the most extensive record on the internet on school attacks, from the earliest to the most recent cases, which is periodically updated. This article was used only to find out the names of the attackers and the schools where the attacks took place, in order to then search for information about them in reliable sources, such as the aforementioned journalistic articles, scholarly texts and entries on data bases which follow scientific standards. Thus, a registry was made of all the cases that seemed to be relevant to this research: we collected the *files* or most salient data from a total of 116 attacks to schools which took place in different parts of the world between July 1764 and March 31 2018, when the sample was completed.

Our next step was to determine which of those 116 attacks actually constitute the kind of acts which this research is concerned with. Based on the criterion that we will explain below, only 65 were selected.<sup>9</sup> From the *skeleton* of data provided by the files, the *cases* were constructed, each one corresponding to an attack,<sup>10</sup> enhancing it with the information consulted and paired in multiple reliable sources of information.<sup>11</sup>

After explaining this, we present the first steps of the methodological research process.

### ***First elements of differentiation and definition in the configuration of the group of cases***

Our examination of the 116 files created allowed us to find some differences among the multiple cases, which will be explained by means of a typology of the attacks created for this research:

Type 1: sociopolitical rebellions in educational institutions. These include acts that are generally believed to be linked to insurrections and sociopolitical struggle, regardless of assessments about their

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8 Cf. [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Ataques\\_perpetrados\\_en\\_centros\\_educativos](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Ataques_perpetrados_en_centros_educativos) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_school-related\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_school-related_attacks))

9 Some clues point towards the existence of a possible international policy of filtering or selecting which ones get news coverage, based on their severity or political implications. Indeed, as we will see in this paper, each act of school violence perpetrated becomes a precursor and model for later attacks. This is a delicate issue, especially in an environment where the phenomenon of extreme school violence by students is increasing at an alarming rate.

10 I wrote the term in italics to emphasize that I am not using it in its medical-judicial sense but in the sense of an entity of knowledge that does not exist prior to the research but is upheld by its historical reconstruction.

11 It must be pointed out that, given the differences in severity and importance of each one of the attacks registered on the internet, the types of information presented on each one of them are not homogeneous. Thus, the format and contents of each one of the 65 cases described is unique.

legitimacy. They involve groups in conflict that are identifiable in society before their attacks take place; e.g., openly terroristic attacks or student uprisings suppressed by the State or the police.

Type 2: *random* acts of extreme school violence. This type of cases are violent attacks that by chance reach the educational institution but are the result of struggle or conflict that are in principle not connected to it, and whose perpetrators are not *agents of education* (administrators, teachers, students or parents) although their victims are. An example would be the case of Bay Ningyang, an 18 year-old in Henan, China, who in 2006 reacted to being rejected by the elementary school teacher he was in love with by setting fire to the classroom where he had locked in both the teacher and her students.

Type 3: acts of school violence proper. These include attacks carried out unexpectedly in schools, usually by an agent of education, and more rarely by two of them. The *forces in conflict* in this kind of attacks had not been instituted before the attack, nor recognized collectively as such; quite the opposite, all evidence shows that it is through the attack itself that they become manifest and force their way into public awareness through the subversive nature and destructive power of the attack. Following one of this paper's main theses, the *political dimension*<sup>12</sup> is not excluded from the causes of this kind of violence, an issue that will be further discussed below.

## Students have been taking arms to school for the last 60 years

According to this typology, the 116 attacks mentioned in the article can be classified as follows:

Type 1 attacks 1: 13

Type 2 attacks: 28

Type 3 attacks: 75

Since this research project aims to trace and address contemporary experiences of children and adolescents in school, the type of events that were of particular interest for this research were Type 3 attacks, and more specifically those in which it was the students who perpetrated the attacks, which constitute 65 of the cases mentioned. Thus, from the Type 3 group we left out ten (13.33%) of the attacks: two attacks committed by two male administrators, six committed by male teachers, one committed by a female teacher, and one committed by a parent.

There are two very important things to note in the chronological listing of school attacks. The first six Type 3 attacks recorded – between 1764 and 1959, a period of almost 200 years – were carried out by three teachers, two administrators and one parent, and none of them by students. But after 1966 there is a radical shift in two directions: on the one hand, from 1966 on the frequency of the events recorded increased at a rapid rate, and on the other hand the predominant perpetrators ceased to be the adults and started to be the students, who were overwhelmingly the protagonists of the attacks.

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12 In the meaning given by Guattari & Rolnik (2006) to the term, associated with the possibilities of action and agency of minors before their life circumstances.

Finding these indications encouraged our search, especially after the evidence of a traceable emergence of a specific phenomenon in history. Since extremely violent school attacks are a particularly problematic issue for any civilization, it is interesting to reflect on the implications of this shift that took place worldwide in just six decades.

## First level of approach: the journey and other findings in the total of school attacks

What follows is a graph showing our first approach and quantitative analysis of the information found relative to the main topic of this text.

The first chart summarizes the 65 school attacks carried out by students and shows their most relevant data: the country and the year in which each one of them happened, age and last name of the perpetrator(s), number of fatal victims and injured people, and whether the attack ended with the perpetrator's suicide.

Chart 1. Student attacks. Summary of the 65 cases recorded<sup>13</sup>

No.	Year	Country	Age of perp.	Last name of perp.	Fatal victims	Injured	Suicide
1	1966	U.S.A.	25	Whitman	16	32	No
2	1974	U.S.A.	17	Barbaro <sup>14</sup>	3	9	No
3	1975	Canada	16	Slobodian	2	13	Yes
4	1975	Canada	18	Poulin	2	6	Yes
5	1979	U.S.A.	16	Spencer	2	9	No
6	1989	U.S.A.	24	Purdy	5	31	Yes
7	1989	Canada	25	Lépine	14	14	Yes
8	1991	U.S.A.	28	Lu	5	1	Yes
9	1992	U.S.A.	20	Houston	4	10	No
10	1996	U.S.A.	14	Loukaitis	3	1	No
11	1997	U.S.A.	16	Ramsey	2	2	No
12	1997	U.S.A.	16	Woodham	3	7	No
13	1997	U.S.A.	17	Carneal	3	5	No
14	1998	U.S.A.	11, 13	Golden and Johnson	5	10	No
15	1998	U.S.A.	15	Kinkel	4	25	No
16	1999	U.S.A.	18, 17	Harris and Klebold	15	24	Yes, both
17	2000	U.S.A.	6	Owens <sup>15</sup>	1	0	No
18	2000	Argentina	19	Romero <sup>16</sup>	1	1	No

<sup>13</sup> The information for cases 1, 4-16, 20, 25-27, 29, 30, 33, 35, 36, 42 and 44 was taken from Langman (2015). The information for cases 3, 19, 28, 31, 38, 39, 45, 51, 55, 58 and 64 was taken from the online database School Shooters.info, which collects its data from multiple academic and journalistic articles. The sources for the information of the remaining cases are shown in the footnotes below.

19	2001	U.S.A.	15	Williams	2	13	No
20	2002	Germany	19	Steinhäuser	16	7	Yes
21	2003	U.S.A.	17	McLaughlin <sup>17</sup>	1	1	No
22	2004	China	24	Jiajue <sup>18</sup>	4	0	No
23	2004	Japan	11	Tsuji <sup>19</sup>	1	0	No
24	2004	Argentina	15	Solich <sup>20</sup>	3	5	No
25	2005	U.S.A.	16	Weise	9	7	Yes
26	2006	Canada	25	Gill	1	19	Yes
27	2006	U.S.A.	15	Hainstock	1	0	No
28	2006	Germany	18	Bosse	0	37	Yes
29	2007	U.S.A.	23	Cho	32	17	Yes
30	2007	Finland	18	Auvinen	8	12	Yes
31	2008	U.S.A.	23	Williams	2	0	Yes
32	2008	U.S.A.	14	McInerney <sup>21</sup>	1	0	No
33	2008	U.S.A.	27	Kazmierczac	5	17	Yes
34	2008	South Africa	18	Harmse <sup>22</sup>	1	3	No
35	2008	Finland	22	Saari	10	1	Yes
36	2009	Germany	17	Kretchmer	15	9	Yes
37	2009	Greece	19	Patmanidis <sup>23</sup>	1	3	Yes
38	2011	U.S.A.	17	Butler	1	2	Yes
39	2011	Brazil	23	Menezes de Oliveira	12	12	Yes
40	2011	Brazil	10	Mota <sup>24</sup>	1	1	Yes
41	2011	U.S.A.	22	Ashley <sup>25</sup>	2	0	Yes
42	2012	U.S.A.	17	Lane	3	3	No
43	2012	U.S.A.	25	Krumm <sup>26</sup>	3	0	Yes
44	2012	EE.UU	20	Lanza <sup>27</sup>	27	2	Yes
45	2013	EE.UU	23	Zawahri	9	4	No
46	2013	EE.UU	17	Alfaro <sup>28</sup>	1	3	No
47	2014	EE.UU	23	Cousins <sup>29</sup>	1	0	No
48	2014	Russia	15	Gordeyev <sup>30</sup>	2	1	No
49	2014	U.K.	15	Cornick <sup>31</sup>	1	0	No
50	2014	Mexico	15	Yoevani <sup>32</sup>	1	0	No
51	2014	U.S.A.	15	Fryberg	4	1	Yes
52	2014	Russia	Various	Group of students <sup>33</sup>	1	0	No
53	2015	Spain	13	Anonymous <sup>34</sup>	1	4	No
54	2015	Guatemala	19	Lemus <sup>35</sup>	0	3	No
55	2015	U.S.A.	26	Harper-Mercer	9	7	No
56	2015	Sweden	21	Pettersson <sup>36</sup>	3	2	No

57	2017	Mexico	15	Guevara <sup>37</sup>	2	3	Yes
58	2017	France	16	Barbey	0	4	No
59	2017	U.S.A.	?	Anonymous <sup>38</sup>	2	4	Yes
60	2017	Mexico	17	Piña	2	4	Yes
61	2017	Argentina	15	Tolosa <sup>39</sup>	1	0	Yes
62	2018	Russia	15	Anonymous <sup>40</sup>	0	6	No
63	2018	U.S.A.	15	Anonymous <sup>41</sup>	2	19	No
64	2018	U.S.A.	19	Cruz	17	17	No
65	2018	U.S.A.	17	Rollins <sup>42</sup>	1	2	Yes ¿?

14 McFadden (December 31 1974).

15 Finley (2014).

16 Dos Santos Coelho (August 4 2015).

17 Anonymous (September 25 2015).

18 Zhi & Yiming (March 17 2004).

19 Anonymous (June 2 2004).

20 Anonymous (Febrero 15 2018).

21 Corbett (December 6 2017).

22 Ajam (August 23 2008).

23 Anonymous (April 11 2009).

24 Anonymous (September 23 2011).

25 Anonymous (December 10 2011).

26 Hughes (December 2 2013).

27 The case of Adam Lanza might seem similar to the case mentioned before of Bay Ningyang, since he attacked students and administrators in his mother's elementary school (Sandy Hook Elementary School) with a firearm after murdering her. However, Lanza's case was included among the cases considered relevant for this research for two reasons: first, that Lanza had been a student in that school, and second, the fact that the day before the attack he had had a serious argument with some of the school's administrators, two of whom were murdered in the attack; it is believed that this argument was one of the precipitant factors in Lanza's attack. Both facts suggest that, unlike Ningyang's attack, Lanza's was related to school issues.

28 Donaghue (September 5 2015).

29 Dodge (October 29 2014).

30 Stewart (February 3 2014).

31 Pidd (November 3 2014).

32 Anonymous (June 20 2014).

33 Anonymous (December 30 2014).

34 Blanchar and Congostrina (April 20 2015).

35 Paxtor (April 21 2015).

36 Bryant (October 23 2015).

37 Campos Garza (January 18 2017).

38 Solomon (May 3 2017).

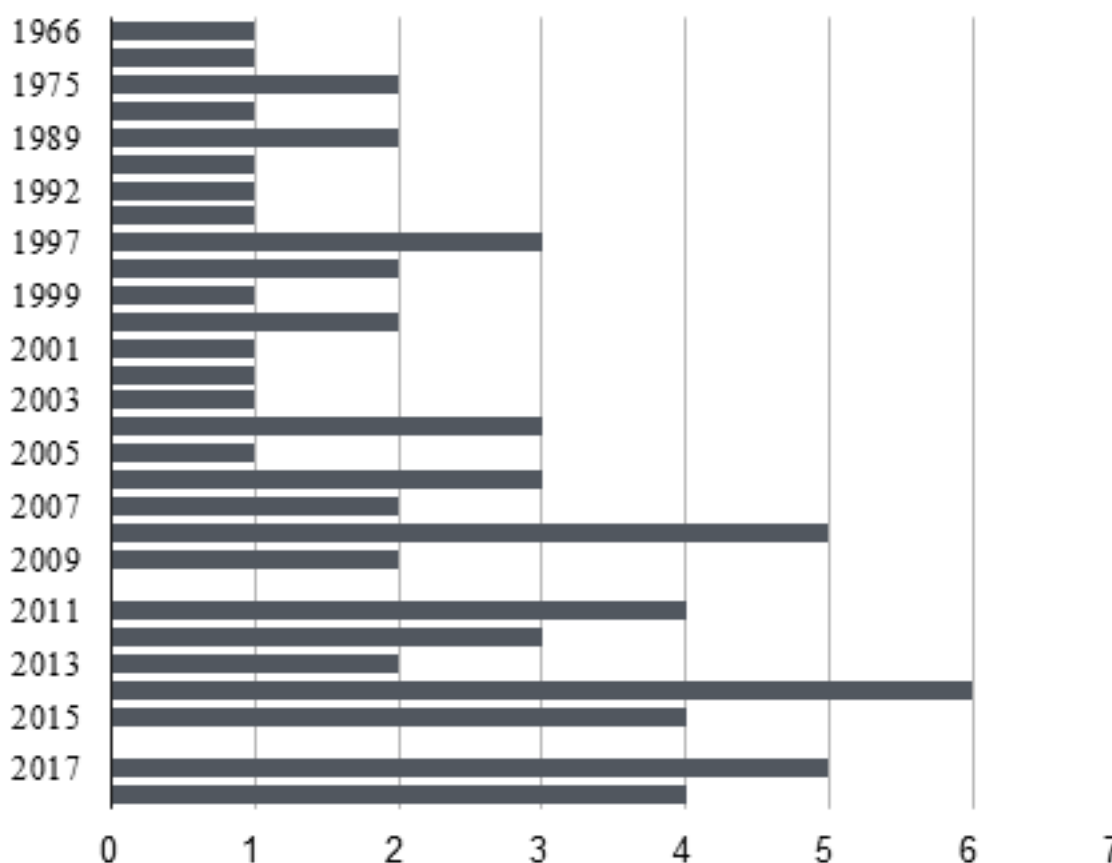
39 Anonymous (August 8 2017).

40 Anonymous (January 19 2018).

41 Gostaninan, Johnson & Siemaszko (January 23 2018).

42 Anonymous (March 20 2018).

Chart 2. Frequency of the attacks



It is important to make a number of observations about this chart and the one preceding it. The first school attack by a student on the record took place in 1966, and until now these cases have increased at a faster rate every year. Indeed, as can be seen, at the beginning of this period there were intervals of up to 8 years between one event and the next, but after 1996 these attacks take place every year – except for 2010 and 2016<sup>43</sup> – and even several times a year: in 2014 alone there were six cases, five in 2017, and four just in the first quarter of 2018.<sup>44</sup> These three years were the ones with the most incidents. Furthermore, the average number of attacks seems to be increasing every year. The following chart shows the number of cases in each country and the corresponding percentage of the total number of cases recorded so far.

43 There were two cases recorded in 2016, but neither of them provides the data required to include them with a degree of certainty in the group of school attacks perpetrated by students.

44 According to some news programs, in 2018 there have been 18 armed attacks in the U.S. alone, although not all of them have reported fatalities. C.f. <https://www.univision.com/noticias/tiroteos/>



Chart 3. Number and percentage of attacks recorded by country

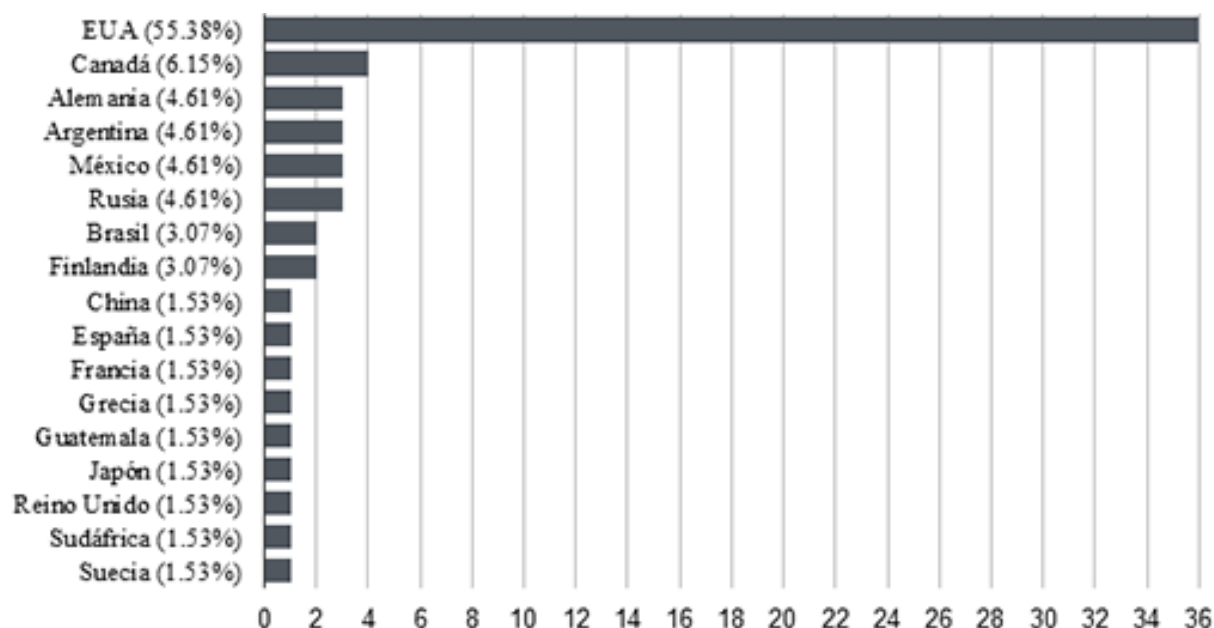
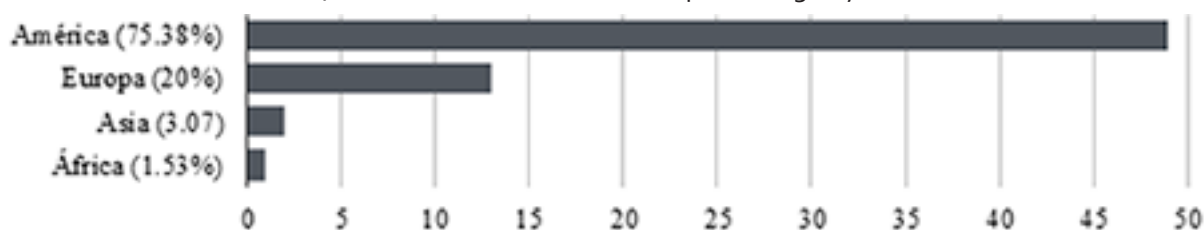


Chart 4. Total number of attacks and percentage by continent

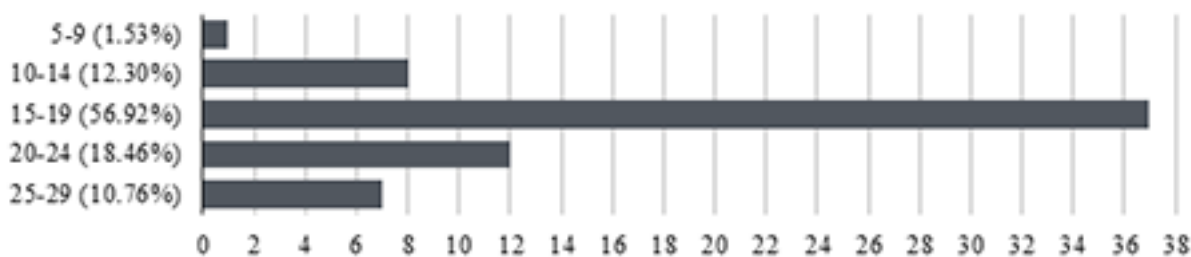


These charts make three facts clear: 1) that the attacks in the United States have taken place continuously since the first attack of this type was recorded, 2) that those are the most common worldwide, and 3) that they have happened with increasing frequency. Everything indicates that this statistical trend makes America the continent at the top of these numbers, followed far behind by the others, an issue that could be the subject of future study.

### *Age of the attackers and incidence of the attacks*

Another significant piece of data is the age of the perpetrators. When analyzing this information we must take into account that attacks 14 and 16 were carried out by two young men, attack 52 by an unspecified number of pre-college students whose ages were not recorded, and attack 63 was committed by a young man whose age is unknown. For this reason, the number of attackers is greater than the number of attacks. The following chart records the ages of 65 attackers because the cases in which two of them participated make up for the ones in which their age is unknown.

Chart 5. Correlation between ages and incidence



From the 37 subjects of the group of attackers between the ages of 15 and 19, 27 were minors<sup>45</sup> at the time of the attack, and the other ten were legally adults.

It can be clearly observed that attackers who were minors constitute the largest group, 36 adolescents, boys and girls, and 55.38% of the total subjects in this sample. It is important to notice that the youngest attacker was just six years old. The youths who were legally adults, on the other hand, were 29, accounting for 44.61%.

These figures also reveal that the age group to which more subjects belonged at the time they carried out the attack was the one between the ages of 15 and 19, precisely those that correspond to the transitional stage between adolescence and young adulthood. Following it is the next age group, between the ages of 20 and 24.

Explaining the predominance of minors in this statistic, as well as the way in which they obtained the firearms that the laws forbid them to use, are issues that require further research, since it is important to investigate what these facts let us know, and what they point to in the future. These questions, however, will be the subject of further study.

### *The differential dimension of gender between the attackers*

From the 65 cases of attacks recorded and studied, only four were perpetrated by female students, that is, 6.15%. These four students were 16, 23, 11 and 15 years old respectively, according to the chronological order of their attacks. 93.85% of all the attackers were male.

As for the four attacks carried out by girls, what stands out regarding their motivation and modus operandi was that only one of them, Brenda Ann Spencer (1979, U.S.A., Case 5), acted in a way similar to some of the males who had carried out massive attacks years before: she shot as a sniper against a school with children. Two other cases were perpetrated as a direct vengeance against friends: Latina Williams (2001, U.S.A., Case 19) used a firearm, and Natsumi Tsuji (2004, Japan, Case 23), a sharp weapon, specifically a cutter. The last of these cases was the one of Lara Tolosa (2017, Argentina, Case 61) who, af-

<sup>45</sup> The age of 18 is considered here as the start of legal adulthood. Not all countries follow this parameter, but all the countries to which our subjects belong do, except for four states and territories in the United States where the legal age is 21. However, this other criterion does not affect the status of minors of the 27 subjects regarded as such in the group of attackers between the ages of 15 and 19, since none of them lived in these states or territories.

ter threatening several students in her classroom who routinely bullied her, shot them and killed herself with the same gun.

This Sharp gender difference in the statistics of school attacks points to a new line of research.

### *Types of weapons used in the attacks*

The following chart shows the types of weapons used by the students in the attacks:

Among the firearms used were pistols, rifles and machine guns of different kinds of power and lethality; among the sharp weapons were knives, a sword and an ax. The two ballistic weapons used were a bow and arrow and a crossbow. In the last category I included a case in which a student died after a bullying episode in which he was subjected to torture, which got out of control and led to his death.

What is it that these adolescents and children proffer through their attacks and the use of weapons in their schools? This is a question we will address in depth next.

### *Incidence of suicide*

The number of students who actually committed suicide at the end of their attack is considerable: it is between 29 and 30,<sup>46</sup> equivalent to 46.15% of the total attackers.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, in the rest of the cases we find 15 in which the link between suicide and attack was present due to at least one of the following motives:

- a) The attacker's suicide took place later in prison.
- b) The attacker's behavior made it very likely for him to be shot down by the police. Some attackers even wrote farewell notes or posted texts, videos or photographs prior to the attack in which they insinuated, announced or rehearsed a possible suicide.
- c) After their attack, some asked people around them to kill them.

This high correlation between attack and suicide shows a sort of mutual implication in the thinking behind the attack itself, which will be addressed next.

## **Second level of approach: locating what was made known in the cases about their motives. Origins and affiliations of the case work in this research**

For the purposes of this text, the term case –used to refer to each one of the school attacks under study– is not used in its medical-juridical sense but in the particular meaning that a case is an entity of knowledge –dear to Lacanian psychoanalysis– that does not exist prior to its study but is upheld by its own historical construction/reconstruction. Developing such a case involves a search for data by all means

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46 This imprecision is due to the fact that in the case of Rollins (2018, U.S.A., Case 65) there is some uncertainty as to whether his death during the school attack was due to his having shot himself or because he was shot by one of the school's security guards.

47 These figures include the double suicide of Harris and Klebold in Columbine (1999, U.S.A., Case 16).

available and a compilation –as wide, complete and documented as possible, though not aspiring to be exhaustive– of the elements believed to make up the case.

One of the main characteristics of the psychoanalytical tradition of case work<sup>48</sup> is that it deals with public cases; i.e., not cases taken from an analyst's couch but from a specific action carried out by an individual and whose particular nature –usually violent, disturbing, scandalous, extravagant, or insane– made it become noticed by the society within which it took place, making its way to the realm of the public.<sup>49</sup> The case is then a privileged road of access to the knowledge of the social and cultural fabric in which the act, in its uniqueness, was inscribed and took place. It is important to note that developing a case does not involve tracing a psychogenesis of the act itself.

All of the above also implies working on at least two fundamental assumptions: the first, that every act –especially of the nature described above– is gestated and carried out not only as the result of a subject's individuality, but also stemming from a given set of his or her social relationships. The second assumption is that, in this sense, such an act is a way of making something known to the others who belong to the same social grid as that of the individual who carries it out.

Thus, the study of a case understood as such aims to follow the traces of knowledge left behind by the commission of an act. Whoever does research under these principles –based on clinical practice and the psychoanalytical theories to which it is linked– is in a position akin to that of a secretary, the Renaissance clerk who listened to and took notes of the words of a prince searching for the knowledge contained in them, waiting for the right moment to bring it up to contribute to the wealth of knowledge, and revealing it in its true dimension (Accetto, 2001).

It is not our aim then to interpret the act under study by applying to it a theory or body of knowledge previous and alien to its own rationale, but to search for the knowledge it conveys by following the traces and clues<sup>50</sup> that this act –enigmatic and irreducible– left behind.

One last point to be made in this section is that, although this form of case study constitutes a practice of the unique, it also means to establish conditions to make comparisons and find familiar features between cases, as examples of an issue being studied. The latter does not point towards the direct possibility of generalizing, but towards laying the foundations for theoretical and clinical discussion, and testing the articulations between experience and theory.<sup>51</sup>

### *The 65 cases in our research*

After this necessary detour to explain the methodological foundations and the aims that guide this line of research, we will now specify the effective *modus operandi* for the study of the issue at hand, after having found not just one case or a few but 65 of them. As much as possible, all of them must be taken into account. Thus, we searched on the internet for all audio, visual and written materials that would doc-

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48 A tradition also known as the “case factory”, to allude to the collective nature of its work. Regarding this cf. Allouch (1995b) and (1995c).

49 Two such examples: Allouch (1995a) and Vindras (2002).

50 These are the affiliations of this method with the so-called clue paradigm. Cf. Ginzburg (2008: 185-239).

51 Cf. Vindras (2002: 17-32).

ument parts of each one of these cases, in the shape of newscasts, articles of opinion and analysis, and even testimony –written or on video– from the attackers themselves. As was to be expected, the results were different for the creation and organization of each dossier, since the quantity and the depth of the materials related to each case were very variable and depended usually on the nature, the magnitude, the severity, and the social and political impact that each attack had at the time it happened.

How to proceed, methodologically speaking, faced with the multitude and heterogeneity of the cases of school attacks carried out by students, taking as a reference the case study in psychoanalysis? The answer we found was to find in the analysis of each one of the 65 cases the common coordinates that ran through their conformation and the process through which they came to happen, in order to extract their implications vis-à-vis the phenomenon under study, and reflect on them.

The findings made in the research work, which have already been discussed, led to several questions that have been raised throughout this text. From now on, the text will focus on its main aim: finding out what the student attackers have made known about the motives and purposes of the planning and execution of their attacks.

### *The making known of the motives of the cases of school attacks by students. Is there really something they “want to make known”?*

This section begins by specifying some important points. Our study does not intend to make a psychopathological diagnosis of the individual attackers –which in several cases has been divulged on the web– as a cause or explanation of their initiative to carry out a school attack and of its execution. Farther still from our intentions would be to prioritize this diagnosis over the exploration of what was determining in each case for the act –that is, the attack– to be carried out, because doing so would jeopardize the possibility of finding what was intended to be made known in each one of them.<sup>52</sup>

According to the information provided by the sources consulted, in 25 of the cases there are diagnostic labels –some established before the attacks, others afterwards– such as attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity (ADDH), Asperger syndrome, autism, dyslexia, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, personality disorders, psychotic outbreaks, etc., but in this research we believe that these psychopathological categories, regardless of their validity or accuracy, cannot explain why the acts were perpetrated, nor can they, therefore, aspire to reduce to them whatever led those individuals to carry out a transgression of such dimensions as the attacks, nor the character that defines this action in its particular sense.

Trying to establish a direct correlation between diagnosis and the carrying out of the attack introduces surreptitiously a circular reasoning, closed upon itself, that does not allow for any rethinking or analyzing of the issue at hand.<sup>53</sup> Thus, despite the existence of these diagnoses, we have opted for

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52 About this, Foucault (1961: I-XI) says that “None of the concepts in psychopathology must play, not even and especially in the implicit game of hindsight, an organizing role”.

53 Likewise, President Donald Trump stated, after the mass shooting carried out by Nikolas Cruz in Florida on February 14 2018, that those had been the actions of a young man with psychiatric disorders, so his government would seek to reinforce mental health care in his country. In this line of thought, the young man did what he did because he “had psychiatric problems”. With the statement of this judgement that

following all the clues that the structuring of the cases offers. If what is intended is to study what the school violence attacks are based on what drives certain individuals to carry them out, rather than focusing on diagnoses, it is advisable to reconstruct the logical-strategic structure of the attacks and try to elucidate which experiences led the students to carry out such irreducible and baffling acts, and how they thought about such experiences.

Thus, what we suggest here is to open and follow alternative lines of research through which it becomes possible to try to address each one of the cases in and of themselves, and not through a conceptual framework that is external and foreign to them from the start.

A second clarification to be made here is that the aspect of the family complexes, although assumed and acknowledged in this research as a very important element in the makeup of each one of the cases, will not be given privileged attention.<sup>54</sup> Certainly, from the experience in the practice of psychoanalysis it may be surmised in a very general way that carrying out severe and transcendent acts, by children, adolescents and young adults, is somehow intended to challenge their parents or families.<sup>55</sup> However, for the particular aims and interests of our study, the fact that the attacks are carried out within the school and affect it in different and irreparable ways is an irreducible action that deserves to be looked at specifically as such.

We will now address the analytic coordinates that run through almost all of the cases, which are the subject of this research. The evidence found through the analysis of the information on 60<sup>56</sup> of the cases studied suggests that there are reasons involved or intertwined<sup>57</sup> in the attacks which give them a certain character or meaning. These reasons are generally found through the historical reconstruction of the facts and the statements and testimony of the perpetrators made before, during or after the attacks, in different contexts and through different means.<sup>58</sup>

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alluded only to a psychopathological diagnosis, any possible problematization ended; indeed, this was how Trump refused to consider this attack in regard to the urgent initiatives of Congress to adopt better gun control policies.

54 In seven of the cases, however, this aspect was particularly important because the school attack was preceded by severe attacks against relatives, such as arson in the family's home and the murder of one or both parents, their surrogate –a grandfather and a stepmother– or siblings (Cases 1, 12, 15, 25, 43, 44 and 45 in Chart 1).

55 Many times these acts actually challenge parents and relatives, although this may not be made manifest or known by the public. A salient example is Case 16, the attack on Columbine High School in Colorado (1999, U.S.A.). Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan Klebold, one of the young attackers, decided to break her silence after the attack and make public statements about her son's actions, recognizing that she had been careless and ignored the alarming signs that Dylan had shown for years. In fact, shortly after the attack she wrote a book on these issues whose royalties were donated to social causes.

56 In four of the remaining cases, precisely some of the most recent (Cases 52, 59, 62 and 63) not enough data was obtained to elucidate the possibility of motives, and Case 42 makes the strange impression of having been an apparently "unmotivated" attack. See Chart 1 in this article.

57 By this we mean the link between such "reasons" and the acts of armed violence perpetrated, with the aim of relativizing and problematizing any possibility of speaking of "cause and effect" explanatory relationships, which are such a great temptation for the juridical apparatus and the "psy" disciplines when they address this kind of issues.

58 Reference is made, for instance, to notes written by the perpetrators, video recordings uploaded by them on the internet, comments they made to others, their judiciary testimony, etc.

As has been mentioned, it is impossible to conduct in this space a case-by-case study, but the information provided by the versions studied on the 60 cases that have given us a glimpse of what led the attackers to act as they did suggests, broadly speaking, five different and interlinked dimensions. The description of these dimensions that follows aims to show how they are all present in different proportions in the structuring of each one of the cases, as different undertones given by the perpetrator –often unknowingly– to the meaning of his act-attack.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, due to the realm of subjective reality in which these dimensions are inscribed, such proportions are not measurable, but the information gathered about the preparation and execution of the attacks generally provides clues about it, so that a certain dimension seems to prevail upon the others.

### *First dimension: responding to the loss of fundamental components of oneself*

One dimension of the attacks is that they are planned and executed as an action of response to moral and material losses –or patent threats of them– suffered by the attackers; losses related to those elements and assets on which their own sense of worth rested and that were essential for the sustenance of the self. In the 60 cases studied in which traceable motives were found in the production of the armed attack, we found in variable measures this dimension that we will call the dimension of the unbearable losses, which of course include the loss of the prospect or hope of having a livable life. Such losses are linked to the effect of the fact that the perpetrators were continuously the object of multiple forms of exclusion: marginalization, intimidation, dishonor, humiliation, rejection, neglect, physical and subjective abuse, harassment, betrayal, etc. These forms of exclusion finally became unbearable for the perpetrators, who were under conditions such as these:

- Experiencing failure at school, and also in their erotic and romantic relationships, and even failure at work in the case of some high school and college adolescents and young adults.
- Believing that they are under unsurmountable disadvantages related to their physical, subjective, social or cultural makeup, such as a physical characteristic considered to be defective, having been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, belonging to a racial or ethnic group different from the majoritarian in their environment, or to social strata considered to be inferior from the others, etc.
- Suffering the breakup of important relationships with their loved ones, due to apparently unsurmountable conflicts such as breakups or moving to another town, and even the loss of a beloved one who has died.

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<sup>59</sup> Due to this, it will be difficult to weigh quantitatively the exact proportion of value of each one of these dimensions, as well as to establish the boundaries between them.



One of the paradigmatic cases of this first dimension is the attack by Charles Andrew Williams (15 years old, Case 19) to the Santana High School in California, U.S.A., on March 5 2001. He shot a firearm in several areas of the school, killing two students and wounding 13 more. In his statement to the police he said that he was tired of being bullied by his classmates. He had tried to speak about the problem with a school counsellor, who could not see him “because he was busy”. He had also told his friends that his situation made him lose his wish to live. Shortly before the attack, a teacher had humiliated<sup>60</sup> in front of the class. His parents had separated recently and he had moved with his father in Santana, and he was a new student in the school. Before the shooting, he wrote his father a note saying “I tried really hard, and I made it so far, but in the end it doesn’t really matter”. At the end of his attack he was found trying to shoot himself, unsuccessfully.

This first and important analytic dimension in the study of the phenomenon of armed attacks in schools – aimed at seeing the attack as a response to unbearable losses – finds resonance and convergence with some findings made by other scholars and critics of the subject. One of them is Langman (2015), a Ph.D. in psychology, who in his work *School Shooters* discusses the driving role of some events experienced by the perpetrators that threaten part of their most fundamental subjective makeup, such as facts related with their physical and personal features, and attacks or challenges to their gender identities, especially the male identity.

From a socio-anthropological perspective, professor Leyton, an expert in the study of serial murders, mentions<sup>61</sup> that several school shootings have been carried out by immigrants or children of immigrants, pointing to the possible role played in some attacks by the exclusion and marginalization that immigrants have been subjected to for generations due to racist ideologies. Consequently, Leyton highlights the importance of taking a non-individualistic or psychological approach to the phenomenon of the attacks, which encourages countries to examine the governmental or social attitudes that might be at the root of the problem.

From a different critical platform, Keith Rock, a young Native American, in an interesting analysis of the sociocultural context of the school attack perpetrated by Jeffrey Weise in Red Lake, U.S.A. in 2005 (Case 25), in a documentary on Weise directed by Rock,<sup>62</sup> suggests the concept of Legion to think about, group and even bring together the experience of individuals who, because of their race and other reasons, live in a state of utter social marginalization and neglect within their own country. The young school attackers, says Rock in his documentary, belong to this Legion, defined as a “mental underground of people of the darkness. You who know who you are, and the legion is your unknown family that no one else can see but you. It is a collective of loners”.

Considering that this concept opens a fruitful and important path of problematization of the subject of this paper, we might add to the definition that Rock gives of himself that the Legion congregates –

60 The circumstances in which the alleged humiliation happened are not known.

61 Cf. the following interview with professor Leyton for *CBC News*: <https://www.cbc.ca/news2/yourinterview/2007/04/anthropologist-and-author-elliott-leyton-on-the-virginia-tech-shootings.html>

62 Cf. [https://youtu.be/\\_TcULXeFA6E](https://youtu.be/_TcULXeFA6E)



arguably through their loss – the so-called “losers”, “outsiders”, “outcasts”, “weirdos”, and “loners”<sup>63</sup>. Legion generally refers to a large number of people in a specific place, but we must take into account that historically this term has designated specialized and elite military groups that had been coopted by colonizing states, and who actually constituted armies of individuals who originally belonged to subordinated or marginalized groups of foreign people.

So we would have to ask: Does Legion designate a group whose member oppose their segregation and their segregators, and fight against them? And in trying to follow the basic arguments in Rock’s approach, do the attacks respond to a rebellion against a configuration of power relationships in which the perpetrators were held captive?<sup>64</sup>

For the time being, recapitulating the elements presented so far on this first dimension, we can establish that the losses of the self – or the threat of them – of the characteristics described – such as being the object of oppression, exclusion and segregation – under certain circumstances may actually raise, for people like the young school attackers, the possibility of responding to those who have dispossessed them in these ways. Although the nature of such dispossessions or losses may in principle be considered symbolic, it is important to recognize that they have real effects in the lives (Butler, 2005) of those student perpetrators, and that they might move them to warlike behavior that, evidently, includes the actual use of weapons. Such ways to respond, as insinuated by Rock, are linked in different ways to similar attacks carried out before by other young people, as multiple and successive expansions in space and time of a guerrilla. This leads us to the second dimension.

### *Second dimension: start a rebellion*

This second dimension of the attacks consists of the fact that the attackers were driven by imperative impulse to rebel, as an act of settlement of forces to restore one’s subjective place in the conglomerate of power relationships in which they belonged after the dimension of the loss. It has to do with making oneself be taken into account and getting respect, with showing an overwhelming superiority before the rivals and enemies who have harmed them.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that in the different cases of school attacks studied this restoration is characterized clearly by the use of the weaponry, technological, strategic and rhetoric resources of their time. In particular, the appearance of internet and social networks in the 1990s as instruments of access to knowledge and information, as well as of expression and communication with others, has giv-

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63 Curiously, these English adjectives are often used – even in countries where English is not the predominant language – to identify these individuals or groups who are excluded. Has English become the language – even if only in a pretended way – of those who segregate others?

64 This warlike meaning in the term *Legion*, accompanied by a simultaneous condition of segregation, is not alien to some of the meanings given to it by, for instance, the Christian Bible: “army of demons”. On the other hand, curiously, Federico Guevara, the first Mexican adolescent who carried out a massive school shooting in Monterrey, Nuevo León, in 2017 (Case 57), followed a Facebook page called *Hail Legión Holk*, supposedly directed to preadolescents and adolescents interested in fomenting disorder and social chaos.

en previously unheard of performative possibilities to the plans of school attacks perpetrated by minors and young adults.<sup>65</sup>

One of the then paradigmatic cases of this second dimension is the so-called Massacre at Columbine, perpetrated in Colorado, U.S.A. in 1999. Two students of Columbine High School, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, 18 and 17 years old respectively and friends of each other, after having planned for a long time an attack on their school, which presumably intended to have massive destruction consequences similar to the terrorist attack in Oklahoma City in 1995, arrived to the high school heavily armed and set up several home-made bombs. Some of their artifacts, however, did not explode, and as their original plans were frustrated, the young men attacked the building with their weapons killing 12 students and a teacher, and wounding more than twenty students and several teachers. After learning that the police was on its way to the school, they knelt together in front of one of the school security cameras and shot themselves in the head. The information gathered shows that both of them had continuously been the object of intimidation, insults and rejection by students known as “jocks”, who said that Klebold and Harris “were weird, not normal kids”, dressed differently, were clumsy in sports and not popular among the rest of the Columbine High School students. They were, in fact, seen as outcasts.

On the internet there are still videos that the two young men uploaded to rehearse and divulge their plans, as performances in which they acted as “bad, avenging boys” who threatened and terrified their enemies in the Hollywoodesque style of the time.

### *Third dimension: seeking revenge*

This dimension is related especially with attacks in which the emphasis of the act itself seems to be on getting revenge or settling accounts, as a violent retribution for some harm done – actually or as a threat – upon those who did it.

An example of this shift on the meaning of the attack seems to be the so-called Massacre of Erfurt, perpetrated in Germany on April 26 2002 by the 19-year old student Robert Steinhäuser (Case 20), who had been expelled from his school, Gutenberg-gymnasium, without the right to obtain grades, for having missed school to go to a shooting club, and having submitted false medical notes on the days when he was supposed to take the exams he had failed the previous year. According to the strict norms of the State of Thuringia, young Steinhäuser had exhausted his opportunities to retake the classes required to finish high school, and therefore to have access later to college studies and to aspire to a good job. Humiliated and with no way out, he put on a sort of ninja black costume, took a gun to his former school and began to shoot, walking through the classrooms and killing 13 teachers, a policeman and two students, and wounding seven more people, after which he shot himself.

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<sup>65</sup> In the sense given to it by Butler (2005), where performativity is understood not as what is done through words but as the prescriptive or normative value raised by the iterability of discourse and the acts derived from it, i.e., by the sole effect of its repetition, concealing the historicity of which they are a product. In fact, this was pointed out in a different way by Sue Klebold, Dylan Klebold’s mother (Columbine, 1999): “Some (attackers) learn from others...”.

### ***Fourth dimension: making others and the authority acknowledge oneself by force, by throwing a capital problem at them***

This includes the cases in which the modus operandi of the attack shows a mostly rhetoric intention, although the other dimensions may also be present. For the young perpetrator, the idea is to throw the school a serious existential problem –related to the losses described in the first dimension– through the bullets or the display of weapons, in order to make the authorities and the collectivity involved acknowledge him through the planning and carrying out of the attack.

A significant example of this dimension is the case of the so-called Massacre at Virginia Tech, in Virginia, U.S.A., perpetrated on April 16 2007 by 23 year-old South Korean student Seung-Hui Cho (Case 29). Everything seems to indicate that he had serious problems to master what is considered proper English, which made him the victim of mockery, rejection and marginalization by other students, especially the girls, who snubbed him when he tried to approach them. Moments before he carried out the attack, he wrote a sort of multimedia manifesto<sup>66</sup> that he sent to NBC News, in which he included a text explaining the meaning of his actions, photographs of himself carrying weapons in different positions –pointing to the viewer or to himself– and videos in which he explained why he would do what he did. Fragments of his manifesto are still in the web. This is part of what Cho explained in his videos:

When the time came, I did it. I had to do it. There were thousands of opportunities and ways to avoid this today. But you chose to shed my blood. You cornered me and gave me just one choice. The choice was yours. Now there is blood on your hands that will never wash off.

Cho murdered 27 students and five teachers, and wounded 29 more people with a gun. He ended it by killing himself. Witnesses to the massacre revealed that the young man ran in the aisles asking “Where is my girlfriend?” before shooting.

Another example of this dimension is the case of Luke Woodham, a school attacker in Mississippi, U.S.A. in 1997 (Case 12), from which I will only quote a note written by the attacker just before he began his attack on the Pearl River Central Secondary School, where he studied.

I am not crazy, I’m angry. I killed because people like me are abused every day. I did it to show society that it is pressuring us and we will pressure back. All my life I was ridiculed, always beaten, always hated. Can you, society, really blame me for what I’m doing? Yes, yes, you will... It was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a cry of sheer agony to tell you that you can’t open your eyes. If I can’t do it through peaceful means, if I can’t make them see through a display of intelligence, I will do it with a bullet.<sup>67</sup>

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66. As it was referred to by an *NBC* newscaster. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AQg03PSD-w> y Hauser (April 18 2007).

67 Anonymous (October 8 1997).

### ***Fifth dimension: trying to find a final solution<sup>68</sup> to the problem they suffer***

In this last dimension, the attack seemed to be for the perpetrator the only solution or way out left before a troublesome situation that he found it impossible to bear anymore.

A case that exemplifies this dimension is the attack carried out by 14 year-old Brandon David McInerney in his middle-high school in Oxnard, California, U.S.A. on February 12 2008 (Case 32). Once inside the school, the adolescent drew a gun and shot a 15 year-old classmate, which led to his victim's brain death and eventually to his death two days later. At first it was believed that the attack had been motivated by homophobia, since the victim was openly gay and wore girl's clothes to school, but later it was found that the victim used to provoke McInerney, taunting and trying to seduce him in front of other classmates, who had started to make fun of him in school.

### **Discussion and final thoughts. Thinking of those bullets that missed their targets. The problema of new lives that became unlivable**

Faced with the problem that this article sought to address, what is the heuristic value of finding these five dimensions in what the students of the cases studied made known about their motives? Does any of them have the potential that enables us to organize the others and make them revolve around it?

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2002: 359-432) have introduced an important philosophical-political approach to think about the different forms of extreme violence through their concept of a war machine, which designates the action that one individual or group carries out to defend, recover or gain an existential territory<sup>69</sup> that has been threatened or invaded. The war machine is a form of rebellion whose legality stems from the affirmation of life in its radical uniqueness, as well as from an inherent struggle to uphold both –life and uniqueness– although, paradoxically and necessarily, rebelling implies putting them at risk.

This concept refers therefore to a way of finding how to continue inhabiting a place on Earth, in spite of the obstacles posed by other adversaries who play a dominant and oppressive role. Consequently, the war machine struggles to prevent its annulment, and to make it possible to appear before the others, who are the oppressors. Evidently, this entails the invention, deployment and use of instruments, weapons and strategies of attack.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the origin of this form of radical action in the history of humankind can be found specifically in nomadic tribes and societies. And it is precisely to face and in relation to these origins of the war machine that we erected the ancient social order of the State, whose armies have appropriated that original force device of the oppressed. However, the war machine has been a mode of action and rebellion that continues even today, among individuals, groups or peoples who have been excluded and subjected to the power of dominating societies, institutions and cultures. In fact, a key element in this study is the passage where Deleuze & Guattari point out that the enactment

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68 An allusion to a rebranding of the "solution" found by the Nazis to the so-called "Jewish question".

69 A territory that is always shifting, according to the authors.

of this machine responds to and is oriented by the appearance and addressing of problems. Indeed, we know that over time, for some excluded peoples and groups that have been subjected to the domination and even annihilation by other peoples, states or empires, the problem of exclusion and oppression has been one of the main impulses behind wars and revolutions. As Deleuze & Guattari mention, the Greek etymology of the term problem holds within it the silent traces of that “history”: pro means “ahead” and ballein “to throw forcefully”.

Are we approaching thus the kind of problems inhabited by those who constitute the so-called Legion, as Keith Rock referred to that “dark mental underground of the collective of loners”, that gathers young people such as some “school shooters”? Are their attacks then throwing at society a kind of problems that have not been formulated or addressed politically – in the sense given to the word by Hannah Arendt<sup>70</sup> –but only through the enactment of a war machine? How should we think about it, when this began to happen barely six decades ago, precisely within the educational institution supposed to prepare and educate new generations to contribute to the construction of a common world– for all?

Next to this series of open questions about the theorization around the war machine there’s also the fourth of the dimensions located in the making known of the motives of the students, the one related to making themselves acknowledged by the others and the authority by force, by throwing at them a capital problem, as the dimension that best organizes and represents the complex motions of these acts of extreme violence. Indeed, according to the 60 cases catalogued as motivated, there is no doubt that, for each one of the perpetrators, the school attack was about carrying out a crucial issue: throwing at society a problem of huge dimensions –such as not knowing how to live in this world and have a livable life– through the force of arms.

Does this go hand in hand with the finding of a high percentage of suicide –direct or indirect, as has been mentioned– in the mechanics of these attacks?

Are the reasons of the State with which these attacks are usually dealt with, and its punitive and preventive measures –such as the renewed gun control regulations and the “backpack operations”, implemented while the gun markets smile– in the name of precisely the laws and the system that the perpetrators question with their act, up to the challenge of this complex issue of our time, which is also the time of the children, adolescents and young school attackers?

In an article written in 1979 and entitled “Is it pointless to rebel?” Michel Foucault pointed to a minimal and important direction on this issue:

Rebellions belong to history, but somehow escape it. The movement through which a single man, a group, a minority or an entire people say “I will obey no more” and throw at the face of a power that they consider unfair the risk of their life [sic] –such a movement seems to me irreducible, because no power can make it absolutely impossible [...] And also because the man who rises up cannot in the end be

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70 The sense alluded to in the third epigraph of this paper: “Politics is the possibility of a plural environment in which those who participate in it are revealed as people and give durability to the world”. Cf. Arendt (1998).

explained; there has to be a breakup that interrupts the thread of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to “really” prefer to risk death to the certainty of having to obey (Foucault, 2013: 861).

That is, the least we can do about it is learn to take note of the enigmas of that violence, as an essential condition to begin to address the problems that are thus being thrown at us...

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