

**Its not all red and blue: suicide, homicide and us presidential elections: Book Review: Why Some Politicians are More Dangerous Than Others**

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Book reviews

## Its not all red and blue - suicide, homicide and us presidential elections

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**Why some politicians are more dangerous than others**, by James Gilligan, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011, 180 pp., €20.40 (hardback), ISBN 9780745649818

The global financial crisis has generated a renewed interest in the issue of inequality, its impact on the economy and on the social consequences for society more generally. There has been a spate of recent publications on the topic, for example, Stiglitz's *The price of inequality* (2012) and Galbraith's *Inequality and instability* (2011). More specifically, there have been a number of interdisciplinary books in epidemiology and social science which focus on identifying statistical relationships between economic inequality, usually using some summary measure of income distribution as its proxy, and a host of social indicators such as crime, health, education, drug abuse and social mobility. *The spirit level* (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) is a prime example of this literature, and James Gilligan's book, *Why some politicians are more dangerous than others*, fits into that genre in so far as it plots a relationship between the political affiliation of the US president, as a proxy for unemployment and inequality, and the rate of lethal violence in the USA over the past 100 years.

*Why some politicians are more dangerous than others* describes itself as a murder mystery with two separate 'facts' to be solved, namely, why do homicide and suicide rates tend to increase and decrease together, and, why do these rates of murder and suicide fluctuate so enormously? As a first step, Gilligan combines homicide and suicide rates into a single 'violent death rate' and employs this as the principal variable for his analysis. Tracking this 'violent death rate' from 1900 to 2007, Gilligan detects what he calls a pattern of 'peaks and valleys'. Specifically, he identifies three 'large, sudden and prolonged increases and decreases' which he then classifies as epidemics of lethal violence which are interspersed with periods of more normal rates of lethal violence. Investigating this mystery, Gilligan finds a relationship between what he calls total lethal violence rates, that is, the homicide and suicide rates combined (and in particular these six data events), and the political party then in power. Gilligan claims that suicide and homicide rates increase when a Republican President is in office and decrease under Democratic Administrations. So the mystery now to be solved is the correlation between the president of the USA and rates of lethal violence – that is, 'to

discover the casual mechanisms by which a change in the party of the president can lead more people to kill themselves or others?’ Gilligan identifies a chain of evidence and his clear, unambiguous, answer goes as follows: economic and social distress in the form of unemployment, poverty, social status, etc. stimulate feelings of shame and humiliation, which in turn lead to an increase in the rate of both suicide and homicide; Republican administrations, it is claimed, increase levels of socio-economic distress whilst Democratic ones reduce them; therefore, suicide and homicide rates can be expected to rise under the Republicans and decrease under the Democrats. The implications of solving this mystery are, he says,

rather stark: the Republican party functions as a risk factor for lethal violence and the Democratic party functions as a protective factor ... the choice between electing Republicans and Democrats to the White House is a choice between life and death.

Gilligan is clearly passionate about his subject and offers some interesting observations on the culture of mass incarceration, the workings of the prison system in the USA, and on the psychological links between shame, humiliation and violence. In terms of its central premise, however, the book has what might be called a ‘Michael Moore’ quality – a grand narrative, obfuscation of detail and utter conviction in its worldview. Ultimately, the central thesis of this book is neither credible nor persuasive in its line of argument.

The first fundamental difficulty stems from combining suicide and homicide rates into a single combined rate of lethal violence. Homicide and suicide, in and of themselves, and in comparison to each other, depend on several demographic characteristics. They vary enormously by race, age, gender and location. For example, according to the US National Centre for Health Statistics, the most recent figures reveal about 35,000 suicides and about 18,000 homicides a year in the USA, with men accounting for about 80% of both.

Furthermore, white males commit suicide at much higher rates than black males or black or white females; indeed 73% of all suicides are committed by white males. Age, which Gilligan does adjust for, is a crucial factor in suicide both in the USA and around the world with older persons having the highest suicide rates. Psychiatric illness is the primary driver with about 90% of all suicides committed by someone with a diagnosable mental or substance abuse, disorder. Homicide in the USA has been decreasing continuously since 2000 (from 9.8 per 100,000 persons in 2000 to 4.8 in 2010) but the USA is still an outlier compared to most other industrialised countries who have rates below the 2.5 mark (e.g. neighbouring Canada, and European countries such as Ireland, the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands).

Gilligan is asking us to reconsider how we might normally think of homicide and suicide as distinct categories of ‘bad’ and ‘mad or sad’, with their respective behaviours residing within the individuals rather than in the material context in which they live (I discuss this further below). However, even allowing that he makes a case for a combined category of violent death, it is still incumbent on him to show the two rates separately rather than only his single combined violent death rate. More generally, the book boasts of ‘the most complicated statistical analysis’, yet evidence of this is scant. References to complimentary academic journal articles or conference presentations where the reader could locate such analysis are lacking. More specifically, we are not given graphs or tables of homicide or suicide rates or the significance level of any correlation. Indeed, the only graph we are given, namely Figure 1 on page 12, shows the total lethal violence rate, yet from this we are unable to view the coordinates of what, for Gilligan, is the first mystery to be solved, that is, why do homicide and suicide rates increase or decrease together? Not only do we have to take it on faith that they do but there is not even a polite nod in the direction of the considerable literature which suggests that the two rates are not positively correlated, and further, that the homicide rate is actually inversely related to the suicide rate (e.g. Bills and Guohua [2005](#), Rezaeian [2011](#)).

Indeed, statistical analysis for 86 countries (UN [1998](#)) indicates there is no correlation between suicide and homicide rates ( $r = 0.08$ ).

The reality that countries with low suicide rates may have low (Greece) or high (Mexico) homicide rates while countries with high suicide rates may have low (Japan) or high (Russia) homicide rates also highlights the dangers of simply adding these two rates together.

Specifically, in relation to homicide and suicide rates in the USA over the period 1900–1998, analysis shows a weak correlation ( $r = 0.25$ ) with the only time in 99 years when increases in suicide and homicide coincided being the early 1930s (Stolinsky and Stolinsky [2000](#)).

A second fundamental flaw in this book is Gilligan's insistence that it is the party affiliation of the President that is the key determinant in relation to increases or decreases in the rates of violent death. He argues that Republican presidents, through their policies, cause the violent death rate to rise and thus 'it is clear that the Republican Party is as responsible, as say, the man who pulls the trigger of the gun'. Firstly, Gilligan's thesis does not hold true under either Eisenhower or Carter as there were neither increases nor decreases in the violent death that their political affiliation was meant to ensure. This messy disparity is catered for by Gilligan in his explanation that Eisenhower was 'only nominally a Republican' but really more of a Democrat, while Carter as a Southern Democrat was really a Republican as 'he talked about feeling more comfortable with the Republicans!'

The main problem, however, is the overriding assumption that the President is all powerful, that he operates in a vacuum devoid of the constraints of Congress or the Supreme Court (or of the individual States themselves) and that Democrats and Republicans are different species. The argument, however, is not as straightforward as the author would have us believe. The late Gore Vidal argued

there is only one party in the United States and that is the Property party ... and it has two right wings: Republican and Democrat. Republicans are a bit stupider, more rigid, more doctrinaire in their *laissez faire* capitalism than the Democrats, who are cuter, prettier, a bit more corrupt – until recently ... and more willing than the Republicans to make small adjustments when the poor, the black, the anti imperialists get out of hand. But essentially there is no difference between the two parties. (Vidal [1977](#))

Vidal, like Gilligan, tends to use a machete when a knife will do, but Vidal is correct to the extent that the differences between the two parties are not so large as commonly asserted, nor do the differences represent alternatives between neoliberal conservatism and a radical alternative. It is perhaps more accurate to say the right wing of the Republican Party is a party unto itself, albeit with the odd foray into the mainstream, and that there is no real left wing to the Democratic party. The majority of Democrats are centrists as are a lot of Republicans, while the President – regardless of party affiliation – is constrained by Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate) in what he can or cannot achieve during his term(s) of office. As Obama's Presidency clearly demonstrates, a Democratic president means a different thing depending on whether or not there is a 'Democratic' Congress. In addition, and even more recently, the issue of health insurance highlighted the policy importance of the Supreme Court. When both the White House and Congress are held by one party, the room for policy manoeuvre is greatly improved, and it would have been interesting to see if Gilligan's proposition held under those conditions – that is, if the Republicans had controlled all three positions of power during the three ups in violent deaths and the Democrats had controlled all three positions of power during the three downs.

A key period in Gilligan's analysis is the Great Depression of the 1930s which corresponds with one of the three epidemics of violent death and which entered its valley phase with Roosevelt's election and the onset of the New Deal. Gilligan, of course, attributes this valley phase to the fact that a Democrat was President and that 'from the time he first entered office he began taking radical emergency action that had the effect of reversing the contraction into

an expansion'. Discussions of the New Deal and its impact are very much in vogue, given the current economic state of the USA and many other countries, and the corollary contentious debate between the austerity route to reduce debt or a more Keynesian style intervention to stimulate growth. There is much debate and revision on whether the policies pursued by Roosevelt actually turned a recession into a depression; on the first new deal (1933–4) vs. the second new deal (1935–38); whether it was actually Hoover who introduced the policies in the first place; the role of the second world war in economic recovery; the issue of fiscal stimulus vs. monetary policy; and, the abandonment of the gold standard. For present purposes, however, the crucial point is that Roosevelt's new policies and programmes only passed Congress with bipartisan support. Moderate and Liberal Republicans played a role in supporting the New Deal while the Supreme Court played its role in ruling certain legislation constitutional or unconstitutional (e.g. the Agricultural Adjustment Act and the National Industrial Recovery Act).

The book is strongest on Gilligan's home turf, namely, the emotion of shame. Gilligan is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at New York University and he draws convincingly on his previous academic research on the relationships between shame, guilt and violence and on his work as the Director of Mental Health Services for the Massachusetts prisons and prison mental hospital. In relation to prison systems, he provides interesting information and insights on the culture of prisons, on the various rehabilitative and therapeutic programmes available to prisoners and on the crucial role education prison programmes can play in preventing recidivism. In relation to shame, Gilligan's thesis is that the immediate psychological cause of violent behaviours in individuals is being subjected to high levels of humiliation and the attendant feelings of inferiority, disrespect and rejection. He argues that 'the more shamed they feel the more likely they are to conceal their shame behind a mask of bravado or violence' and that this violence can be towards others, as in homicide, or can be redirected onto the self, as in suicide. This sense of shame is greatly increased in times of economic stress, with high unemployment and loss of social status. There is no doubt that Gilligan is highlighting an important determinant of both homicide and suicide, but to argue that it is the driving force behind both statistics demands too great a leap of faith.

In focusing on the feelings of inferiority, there are echoes of Wilkinson and Pickett's book, among others, about the psychosocial effects of high inequality and the benefits of reducing social inequalities. While the psychological impact of the contextual effects of inequality on health and other social problems is both important and influential; there is no acknowledgement given to the other viewpoints in this well-established academic debate including the rival neo-materialist account (e.g. Smith and Pearce [2003](#)). Economic and social inequality and the material and structural conditions of poverty matter in and of themselves – not just in terms of psychological disadvantage. Thus, neomaterialists would argue that it is not necessary to feel socially inferior in order to face a higher risk of poor health. Within the vast literature on this topic there is growing agreement that the fundamental causes of health and social inequalities lie in material inequalities and that psychosocial issues (including health behaviours) may be among the pathways through which relative or material deprivation works. In this light, it is interesting to note the significant body of research on the relationship between socio-economic variables, particularly unemployment, and suicide and homicide rates. This literature suggests that unemployment is a significant and robustly positive determinant of suicide rates for both men and women (Koo and Cox [2007](#)). Results tend to be more inconclusive in relation to homicide rates which in turn underscore the point that these rates may not move together.

There is a lack of gender analysis both in the discussion of homicide and suicide rates, and in Gilligan's discussions of shame and humiliation, which undermine the claims of the author. The chapter devoted to the discussion of shame, guilt and violence is entitled 'what kind of

man are you?’ and turns on the notion of shame for men when they are no longer able to fulfil their role as breadwinner and provider for their families. Gilligan’s analysis extends to over a 100-year period, but there is no recognition of how both the actual role of women and the stereotype of women’s position in society have changed dramatically. In terms of poverty and socio-economic stress, women constitute the majority of the poor in the USA and they also constitute the majority of lone parents both in and outside of the paid labour market. And finally, for such a lengthy discussion of shame, humiliation and violence, it seems incongruous not to mention domestic violence – a crime largely perpetuated by men against women.

Despite all the limitations described above, Gilligan’s big picture – that politics matter and that more equality (be it of respect, recognition or resources) is beneficial at both an individual level and for society as a whole – is certainly valid. The difficulty, however, for all of us interested in issues of equality is that it is not always as straightforward a story as we would like it to be. Equality can be defined in terms of individuals and a wide variety of groups; it can relate to many different dimensions of people’s lives and it can refer to many different types of relationships, with all of these differences having some kind of basis in the idea of treating people as equals. Thus far from being a single idea, there are many conceptualisations, causes and historical, political and cultural contexts of equality. Each of these equality frameworks and objectives may have very different implications, and in particular, may conflict. Noble (2010) in his review of *The spirit level* argues that even the concept of a causal chain is too simplistic and that a causal web in which there is a complex interconnected network of cause, and effect is a more likely explanation for some of the correlations between inequality and various social ills. It thus does not seem likely that changing one factor, such as the party affiliation of the Presidency, will change the outcome in relation to homicide and suicide rates without a lot of factors changing and changing simultaneously. However, a constant revisiting of socio-economic inequality, which underscores the importance of politics and policy in influencing inequalities is crucial, as is the continued empirical critique of the erroneous assumption of a simple conflict between social equity and economic efficiency.

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