

Armed Mexican Villagers in *The Magnificent Seven*: American Gun Culture and Democracy

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Abstract

Though largely forgotten today, the 1960 American Western film titled *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges and set in the 19th century, is a remake of an epic samurai action film *Seven Samurai* directed by Akira Kurosawa set in 1586 in Japanese history. Its radial displacement of time and space invites a series of questions about the roles of weapons. In the original film peasants have no access to weapons for self-defense and seven samurais with swords guard villagers. Kurosawa deliberately depicts peasants as helpless and unable to fight, though in historical actuality, at the point of 1586, Japanese peasants could arm themselves with swords. The 1960 adaption *The Magnificent Seven*, based on a faithful reproduction of the original, added a layer of complexity to the narrative by turning helpless Japanese peasants into Mexican villagers who bear arms to fight with seven American gunmen. Critics such as J. L. Anderson, who contrast and compare American gunfighters with Japanese samurais, somewhat downplay the agency of the anonymous Mexican people fighting with guns. However, I would argue that a different reading is possible by placing their relationship with weapons within American gun culture that changed and reinforced the images of guns as weapons for equality and democracy. I discuss the ways in which American gun culture functions as an informing context for self-defense of Mexican villagers by bringing an analysis to bear on the reading of *The Magnificent Seven* and weapons.

Keywords: gun culture, United States, Akira Kurosawa, Western film, democracy

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Introduction

Though largely forgotten today, the 1960 American Western film titled *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges and set in the 19th century, is a remake of an epic samurai action film *Seven Samurai* directed by Akira Kurosawa set in sixteenth-century Japan. Its radial displacement of time and space invites a series of questions about the corollary changes in weapons used, swords and guns, and the role that the weapons play in each film. This transformation also raises broader questions about how national ideologies are embedded in cinematic depictions of violence, justice, and the right to self-defense. In comparing these films, we are not simply focusing on genres but also contrasting cultural narratives about who has the right to wield weapons, and by extension, wield power, and under what circumstances.

In the original film, peasants have no access to weapons to defend themselves and Kurosawa deliberately depicts peasants as helpless and unable to fight, though in historical actuality, at the point of the year 1586 in which the film is set, Japanese peasants could arm themselves with swords. The 1960 adaption *The Magnificent Seven*, based on a faithful reproduction of the original, added a layer of complexity to the narrative by turning helpless Japanese peasants into Mexican villagers who bear arms to fight side by side with seven American gunmen against the enemy.

Critics such as J. L. Anderson, who contrast and compare American gunfighters with Japanese samurais, somewhat downplay the agency of the anonymous Mexican people fighting with guns. However, I would argue that a different reading is possible by placing their relationship with weapons within American gun culture that evolved and eventually reinforced the images of guns as weapons for equality and democracy after World War II. This essay discusses the ways in which American gun culture functions as an informing context for the self-defense of Mexican villagers by bringing an analysis of historical background of guns and American society to bear on the reading of *The Magnificent Seven* and weapons.

The Sword: A Symbol of Japanese Samurai Power

Seven Samurai features the emergent close association between the swords and the class called samurai. Japan changed from a feudal society into a centralized nation-state modeled after European societies in the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and shortly thereafter the Japanese government banned civilians to wear swords in 1876, aiming to disarm the samurai warriors and to concentrate power in the hands of the government, bureaucracy, and the police. Historian Hisashi Fujiki observes that this legislation against swords was driven by the Japanese government to deprive the samurai warriors of the right to wear swords, as the samurai class represented the highest social status in the feudal Japanese society for a long time; instead, the Japanese government sought to monopolize the swords as a public and privileged symbol of status exclusively for the military, police, and bureaucrats (Fujiki, 2005). This symbolic control paralleled efforts to reshape the national identity, emphasizing state authority over individual agency. By limiting access to the sword, the state reinforced a hierarchy in which power was not distributed evenly but rather given selectively upon those in service of the government or its military aims. For instance, during World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy produced military swords, but only servicemen of high rank, such as officers and senior officers, as well as those in specific roles like cavalry and military police, were permitted to wear swords. This means that the Japanese government

reinforced the authoritative symbolism of the sword by placing its use in the hands of the upper classes, thereby making legible this power dynamic across Japanese society. Military swords were not actually the most modernized weapons but rather were an artifact associated with the social status.

But there is more to this story of swords. According to information from the Nagoya Sword Museum, those military swords served as a spiritual icon representing the soul of Japan and the Japanese race despite its fragility and impracticalness, and tellingly, the Japanese Imperial Army produced specific swords that were unsuitable for actual combats but were adorned with elaborate decorations for high-ranking officers to demonstrate their authority (Gunto).

This all changed when Japan lost World War II. After the war, Japan was occupied by the Allied powers and General Douglas MacArthur carried out the sword confiscation. According to Fujiki, though the Japanese government claimed that traditional swords were the legacy of Japanese history and the soul of the Japanese race, MacArthur deemed swords as a symbol of Japanese militarism and seized all swords in Japan, and he reports that the number of confiscated swords amounted to approximately 1.1 million (Fujiki, 2005). For instance, Fumio Tsuchiko, a journalist of swords, reveals that American soldiers invaded a house of private citizen and robbed about 150 Japanese swords and other equipment in December 1945 and it is known as *Habu Jiken* (Habu Incident); however, interestingly, some of those swords were spared from destruction by the U.S. occupying forces because swords considered to have aesthetic or artistic merit were not subject to confiscations (Tsuchiko, 2023). They are known as Akabane swords, currently displayed in museums across the country.

In *Seven Samurai*, a film made during the American military occupation of Japan, swords are depicted as exclusively accessible to or possessed by the samurai warriors throughout the story. Given the symbolic association of the sword with wartime Japanese militarism and a relic of Japan's feudal past, it is plausible that representations of common citizens bearing swords were deliberately avoided in Japan where occupation policies were aimed at demilitarization and democratization.

The Role of Guns in the American Gun Culture

One of the most notable differences between *The Magnificent Seven* and *Seven Samurai* lies in whether the villagers are portrayed as capable of taking responsibility for the safety and security of their own families, homes, and property. In Kurosawa's original film, the peasants hire seven samurai in exchange for food because they lack knowledge and resources for combat and self-defense. During the battle, the peasants assist the samurai only with non-lethal tools such as bamboo spears, and they never wield swords—even though they have multiple opportunities to take them from the enemy bandits.

By contrast, in *The Magnificent Seven*, the plot begins with Mexican bandits threatening to attack villagers if they refuse to provide food. After the gunmen are hired and arrive in the village, two of them discover a scouting party from the bandit group, kill them, and distribute their guns to the village's male members. Through their participation in the defense of the village, the Mexican peasants acquire a level of power seemingly equivalent to that of the gunmen and the bandits. This narrative shift is not incidental. Rather, I would suggest it reflects America's gun culture at a time when the film was being made in 1960. American gun culture significantly promoted the armed citizens as a democratic ideal, that is, as

individuals who assert their rights to life and property by resorting to violence when necessary. The villagers' self-defense is thus not just a plot development but a symbolic articulation of American political values.

In the previous section, I examined how the sword in Japanese history was deeply tied to social status and class. By contrast, guns in the United States were and still are understood in an entirely different cultural and ideological framework. That is, guns function not merely as weapons, but as signifiers of belief and identity. Mark Joslyn, for instance, argues that in the contemporary United States, oftener than not, "guns signify American core values of freedom, individual self-sufficiency, virtue, and citizenship" (Joslyn, 2017, p. 382). Similarly, Paul Froese describes the gun as "a type of sacred worldview and identity," and claims that "America's national passion for guns is a form of magical thinking, wherein the gun has taken on talisman-like powers to ward off evil and secure social respectability for a sub-set of Americans" (Froese, 2025, pp. 22–23). The historical process through which the gun came to carry such symbolic meanings warrants our critical attention. In his 1970 essay, historian Richard Hofstadter traced the beginning of America's gun culture back to the era of frontier and he suggests that, from the very beginning of the nation's founding, gun ownership signified a core American political principle (Hofstadter, 1970).

Yet this is not that simple, because the meaning of bearing arms completely changed after World War II as historian Andrew C. McKeivitt recently revealed in his important book *Gun Country*. He observes that "The Second World War and the Cold War provided the immediate inspiration for the growth and expansion of gun ownership and the justification for it"; hence, "the new gun capitalists built a mass gun market to feed a growing armed mass movement" (McKeivitt, 2023, p. 11). After World War II, a massive influx of firearms entered the U.S. domestic market, thereby transforming American gun culture from recreational tools to instruments of personal protection in the words of David Yamane (Yamane, 2022). He characterizes this historical shift in American gun culture focusing on personal protection as "Gun Culture 2.0," and he defines this new phase as being "centered on armed self-defense, or what I call the culture of armed citizenship," emphasizing the role of firearms in constructing a civic identity grounded in the right and duty to bear arms (Yamane, 2017, p. 1). Guns no longer stood for sport alone; but instead, they came to represent survival and freedom. The aforementioned historian Hofstadter also famously remarked that American people often tended to regard the right to bear arms as "the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy" (Hofstadter, 1970, p. 58). By the 1960s, guns in America had increasingly become symbols of equality and civil rights, reflecting a broader ideological shift in terms of racial and gender politics. As Laura Browder writes, "the embrace of armed self-defense...began as a direct response to the violence, both governmental and extra-governmental" (Browder, 2006, 143). The right to bear arms—once conventionally reserved for white men—began to expand to include African Americans and women. As a result, a new American gun culture emerged, redefining who could claim the right to self-defense.

It is true that Firearms have been deeply embedded in American life since the nation's founding. But over time, guns also evolved from practical necessities to objects of leisure and recreation, eventually coming to symbolize self-defense, democracy, and individual freedom. This transformation in the cultural and emotional significance of firearms are reflected in the portrayal of Mexican villagers in the Hollywood adaptation of *Seven Samurai*. Unlike their Japanese counterparts, whose fate is tied to hierarchical power structures and traditional codes of honor, the Mexican villagers become co-defenders of their community. This

difference highlights not only the shift in weaponry but also the contrasting visions of collective resistance: one rooted in deference to class-based authority, and the other in the egalitarian ideal of the armed citizen.

Conclusion

More than a stylistic or narrative adaptation, the comparison between *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* reveals a cultural translation of political values through the representation of weapons and those who wield them. While Kurosawa's peasants remain subordinated within a rigid social hierarchy, unable to claim the sword or the power it symbolizes, Sturges' Mexican villagers arm themselves and, in doing so, transform into democratic actors. Their agency is not solely granted by the hired gunmen but emerges from an American ideology that frames self-defense as a civic virtue and firearms as tools of liberation.

This ideological shift reveals how *The Magnificent Seven* articulates a distinctly American vision of justice and empowerment, one that celebrates the armed individual as a protector of freedom and community. By focusing on the nameless villagers, the film reframes their role not as passive recipients of salvation, but as active participants in their own emancipation. The gun, in this context, becomes more than a weapon—it is a symbol of equality, resistance, and democratic participation.

However, this empowerment through arms is not without its own contradictions. While the film accepts armed resistance as a means of justice, it also reinforces the American myth that violence is necessary to achieve liberty. This raises enduring questions about how democracy, violence, and identity are interwoven in the American imagination. Ultimately, the transformation of weaponless peasants into armed citizens in *The Magnificent Seven* reflects not only a cinematic reinterpretation but a cultural assertion: that democracy is forged not just through laws and votes, but through the right to bear arms and the willingness to use them in defense of one's own life and liberty.

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