

We live in a society:

Violence and radicalization in the Internet Manosphere

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On March 10, 2018, a confused Reddit user posted to the forum r/OutOfTheLoop seeking answers about a meme called “We live in a society” that had been taking comedy pages and forums by storm. User ButchyBanana responded, “its (*sic*) an ironic meme which is an edit of an actual meme. the meme is a photo of joker from the batman series, and in impact font above him you can see ‘we live in a society where...’ and then a long rant/observation [...] some guy edited the picture and left just the ‘we live in a society’ part, giving an ironic take on the ‘woke’ message, and the original meme in general.”<sup>1</sup> Often incorporating the Joker and making tongue-in-cheek commentary about the state of the aforementioned “society,” this meme critiques the shallowness found in many internet analyses of social problems, wrapped in the aesthetics of the Joker as a character and his association with angry young men on the internet. Inevitably its reference in an academic setting will mean its downfall, but thus far it has remained a parody of baseline, lukewarm takes on societal ills, particularly those coming from teenage boys who found a sense of community in anti-feminist movements like GamerGate and, alternatively, been used both by and against men’s rights activists (MRAs) online.

In the Internet age, MRAs largely congregate through a number of highly-specialized websites, forums, and groups known colloquially as the Manosphere. Rather than picturing the Manosphere as a bullet-point list of known affiliates, it can more effectively be perceived as a subjective label for both adherents and detractors of men’s rights activism. The trajectory of the men’s rights movement in the 2010s has been one of exponential growth. Even in just the past year or so, mainstream social acknowledgement of groups like the incels or Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) has exploded. While true understanding of these alt-right men has for the

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<sup>1</sup> ButchyBanana, “What’s up with all this ‘we live in a society’ memes?” Reddit, accessed 20 February 2020.

most part remained elusive even to sociologists and academics, awareness of their existence has increased dramatically, particularly given the number of mass shooters citing the fruits of the Manosphere as inspiration or motive. At the very least the archetype of an incel or MRA is something more widely understood, even if some cannot yet name this archetype. While the words incel, MGTOW, or Pickup Artist (PUA) certainly cannot be classified as household terms in any sense, there is less of a feeling of mystery surrounding them than had been the case just a few years ago. More significant, the concept of a “nice guy” has been invoked to the point of parody. Many of these men feel neglected by modern liberalism and have turned to the right wing as neoliberal feminism fails to address their grievances. As sociologist Michael Schwalbe writes, gender studies in academia fails to see what gender “has to do with larger social arrangements” like “authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, imperialism, capitalism, or the ravaging of the planet.”<sup>2</sup> Using a Marxist framework, we can contextualize white male anger as a kind of gender-rooted alienation. From a Marxist feminist standpoint, however, this exercise can give off a suspicious air of the Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) philosophy. Describing the vast array of Manospherical content as one core philosophy, too, is somewhat problematic, but even pointing out this fallacy can be all too reminiscent of dog-whistle MRA techniques to dismiss close scrutiny. Thus in addressing this topic I am required to tread carefully, not disregarding ethical quandaries entirely but neither fully moralizing the analysis. The loose philosophy of men’s rights activists can be categorized as essentially an active response to perceived oppression, one that has been exacerbated by mainstream neoliberalism. By examining the origin

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Schwalbe, *Manhood Acts: Gender and the Practices of Domination* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 15.

of male discontent along with its result, gains can be made toward classifying MRA ideology and diagnosing its source.

### **Section I: The origin of the men's rights movement**

I would argue that acknowledgement of more far-right community gathering would not reach any level of whom we might call “normies” until at least 2014, when Eliot Rodger murdered six people at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and declared himself “the supreme gentleman.” Yet as early as 2012 the Southern Poverty Law Center was releasing intelligence reports<sup>3</sup> on wider men's rights activity, classifying various MRA communities as hate groups. By 2012 it had not yet reached a level of universal notoriety in any sense of the term, but was at the very least on the radar of those tracking hate and terrorist groups. Even accounting for this early reference, however, MRA techniques and ideology have undergone extensive changes in the 2010s, ones which have come to represent a vaguer archetype of the MRA than perhaps is valid. Furthermore, the rapid development of the Internet Manosphere and its corollaries has been an incalculable help to MRAs seeking to organize and dispense their principles. In order to come to a better understanding of what MRAs want to do and what motivates them, it is first important that men's studies – and general gender studies – scholarship extend beyond its limited reach in order to define the subsets of this broad category and diagnose from where this male discontent originates. While the Manosphere specifically has yet to reach the level of mainstream associated with modern feminist movements, many of its talking points can be heard from the mouths of those who might not label themselves as belonging to such.

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Goldwag, “Leader's Suicide Brings Attention to Men's Rights Movement” *Intelligence Report*, vol. 145 (2012).

Similar to leftist groups of a similar size that congregate online, it is difficult to condense the ideological framework of the Manosphere into a singular, cogent philosophy. Naturally each pocket of this community lends itself to a certain amount of transformation, not to mention the disagreements among individual members. Nevertheless, in order to seek out some degree of understanding we must try to come to some realization of core values or common denominators and make an effort to analyze the history and development of what has today become the Manosphere.

The greater concept of a men's rights movement has existed for decades in some form, online or IRL (in real life), essentially a response or even rebuttal to mainstream feminist movements. In its earliest days, however, it was often portrayed as the "men's liberation"<sup>4</sup> movement, working in conjunction with the more mainstream women's liberation movement. Certainly, the idea of exploring the rights of men or the study of men need not necessarily be a bad thing; in fact, one could argue that the tendency of second-wave feminist theory to "[result] in the equation of gender analysis with studies of men,"<sup>5</sup> with men likewise perceived as normative or genderless, is destructive. Men's studies, rather than being contrary, can and should exist in concert with gender studies or, more radically, as one aspect of that spectrum. This lends a grain of truth to the ideology of MRAs – the effect of societal norms on the well-being of men specifically is indeed neglected, although that effect is a result not of "the Feminazis [infiltrating] institutions,"<sup>6</sup> but instead the patriarchal structure which gender and women's studies seeks to

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<sup>4</sup> Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere" *Men and Masculinities* (2017), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Fidelma Ashe and Ken Harland, "Troubling Masculinities: Changing Patterns of Violent Masculinities in a Society Emerging from Political Conflict" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* vol. 37, no. 9 (2014), p. 747.

<sup>6</sup> Bethany M. Coston and Michael Kimmel, "White Men as the New Victims: Reverse Discrimination Cases and the Men's Rights Movement" *Nevada Law Journal* vol. 13, no. 2 (2013), p. 368.

deconstruct. Since the 1980s, the field of men's studies has exploded in proliferation and seems to be growing more relevant all the time. Sociologist Michael Messner argued that, despite the attempts of the men's studies field to get ahead of the train, so to speak, the initially supportive men's movements steered toward an antagonistic position. Chiefly, Messner attributes this shift to "the institutionalization and professionalization of feminism, the emergence of a widespread postfeminist cultural sensibility, and the development of a neoliberal economy."<sup>7</sup> The increasing presence of women in the workplace and all other "outside" aspects of life in combination with a normalization of feminist ideals in the mainstream rubbed salt in the wounds of those who affiliated themselves with men's liberation, and the more reactionary adherents began to engage in what Messner calls "a liberal language of symmetrical sex roles,"<sup>8</sup> linguistically undermining the efforts of women's movements and driving a wedge between the two groups which we have not yet been able to remove. Far from being an inevitable consequence of the binary, it took time and social change for the men's movement to place itself in opposition to feminism.

Zachary Buchholz and Samantha Boyce chart the development of neo-masculinity and the greater men's movements as taking place in five distinct stages:

1. "movement pro-feminist or anti-sexist," arising in conjunction with the women's movement of the 60s and 70s, and a clear ally;
2. "mythopoetic movement," an American, Reagan-era discontent with "the lack of professional success for which [heterosexual white men] were socialized"<sup>9</sup>;

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<sup>7</sup> Ging, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Messner, "Forks in the Road of Men's Gender Politics: Men's Rights vs Feminist Allies" *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* vol. 5, no. 2 (2016), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Zachary D. Buchholz and Samantha K. Boyce, *Masculinity: Gender Roles, Characteristics and Coping* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), p. 143.

3. “the movement of the therapies of the masculinity,” also a product of the 1980s, concerned about a crisis of the masculine ideal explicitly hurt by feminism;
4. “the movement for men’s ‘rights,’” an extension of the prior, seeking to liberate men and the masculine archetype from the influences of feminist thought; and
5. “masculine fundamentalism,” a traditionalistic philosophy promoting conservative values that partners itself with the American and European far right and, as Buchholz and Boyce argue, “[rejects] the feminism of the equality, and [accepts] with reserves to the feminism of the difference.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the earliest traces of a men’s movement were clearly intended to work in concert with that of women, it seems that as the women’s movement gathered steam and established a dominance in the field of gender studies, the reaction of the men’s movement was to oppose its newfound enemy. In the modern era, it seems the men’s movement has thoroughly grounded itself in that perspective and, more importantly, grown beyond a fringe group unknown to the general populace. In the earliest days of this shift, however, there was not inconsiderable opposition in the form of growing attention paid to men’s studies. As men’s liberation was establishing itself as a fierce adversary to women’s liberation, the concept of men’s studies as a field in and of itself seemed to have been growing in appeal to academics. Ashe and Harland cite the 1980s shift in gender studies, and in the reaction of many men to such, as derived from “social changes that weakened traditional models of gender identities [fueling] interrogations of masculinities in other geopolitical contexts and in Western Europe and North America especially.”<sup>11</sup> The select gains made by feminist movements in concert with growing

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<sup>10</sup> Buchholz, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Ashe and Harland, p. 748.

conservatism worldwide brewed a perfect storm for the development of a virulently anti-feminist agenda. In their text, Ashe and Harland use this dynamic shift to underline the presence of men – particularly young men – in the activism of political movements like in Troubles-era Northern Ireland. They choose to examine the relationship between normative masculine performativity and violence, not in the more typically examined domestic sphere, but rather “working in the areas of nationalism and international relations.”<sup>12</sup> The Troubles provides a unique model of discontent that one might at first perceive to be gender-neutral; the issue, after all, was one of nationality and union, not gender. Ashe and Harland point out, however, that although both men and women participated in all areas of the conflict, “men’s involvement in violence was viewed as normative, women’s [...] non-normative.”<sup>13</sup> Men’s liberation has evolved past its nebulous origins to encompass a vast empire of men’s rights movements across not only national boundaries, but also boundaries of physical space. Debbie Ging, in particular, criticizes established sociologists like Messner for focusing on men’s liberation as a formless presence and “[overlooking] the pervasiveness and the distinctiveness”<sup>14</sup> of men’s liberation in its virtual form: the boundless, murky Manosphere.

## **Section II: Defining the Manosphere**

Because of the deep and complex lore surrounding the terminology of men’s rights groups, it is first important to provide definitions for some of the most recognizable words and phrases. Acronyms and portmanteaus are commonplace, with words like incel (involuntary celibate), MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), PUA (Pickup Artists), and Feminazi (feminist

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<sup>12</sup> Ashe and Harland, p. 750.

<sup>13</sup> Ashe and Harland, p. 752.

<sup>14</sup> Ging, p. 2.



Nazis, coined by Rush Limbaugh) being part of everyday parlance, not to mention countless others. We can best categorize the MRA vocabulary as primarily identitarian, concerned with displaying archetypes of behavior beholden to the MRA worldview. Despite the negative connotation these words may come to hold in opposing political circles, for the most part these terms are self-ascribed, though they run the gamut from self-deprecating to points of pride (i.e. the psychological significance of labeling oneself a pitiful incel as opposed to a renegade PUA or MGTOW). Pejoratives are even more common with regards to perceived outsiders; while bickering within MRA borders themselves is already an issue, the invisible yet ever-present knowledge of feminists and mockers in the forums weighs heavily on those who use them. In my own research, I mostly played an observatory, rather than a participatory role. Men's Rights Activists can be deeply mistrustful of those who come to gawk, and this mistrust is understandable given how closely-knit and fringe MRA gatherings online can be. Outsiders like myself do, in fact, come to be entertained much of the time. Thus, it is important that if my research seeks to better understand MRAs and their kin, it must first effectively categorize them and explain their subcultures. The Manosphere can best be defined as the "loose confederacy of interest groups"<sup>15</sup> focused on men's liberation, specifically in conflict with mainstream feminism. Although the concept is referenced by important figures in the men's rights movement, it should be understood less as a quantifiable list of sites than a metaphysical collection of permeable communities online. In terms of activity I believe we can divide the young MRA community into three primary groups: the PUAs, the MGTOWs, and the incels. There is significant overlap between these demographics, but for the sake of streamlining a

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<sup>15</sup> Ging, p. 2.

conversation on internet MRAs this distinction will help us to parse each as an individual entity, part of a greater whole but each with its own distinct characteristics.

“Pickup artist,” unlike many other terms frequently used within the bounds of the Manosphere, is a term with which most Americans are probably loosely familiar. In 2007, VH1 even aired a show titled *The Pickup Artist*, where a group of men were mentored by a master in the art of seduction. Similar to other Manospherical groups, however, the pickup artist often subscribes to the less mainstream idea that modern American society is overrun with hypergamy on the part of women – women “marrying above,” or the majority of women of average or poor looks seek the minority of men with good looks, also called the 80-20 rule.<sup>16</sup> The pickup artist then takes this information and uses it to his advantage, using subtle manipulation tactics and even altering his appearance (“looksmaxxing”) in order to convince women to sleep with him. His tactics are referred to as “game,” a term popularized by Neil Strauss’s 2005 foray into the world of pickup artists, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*. The most successful of these men, so-called “gurus,”<sup>17</sup> may even market their tactics to practitioners and amateurs alike on pickup artist forums. By definition, pickup artists seek not to reject the system, but rather to take advantage and by virtue of doing so ascend to become alphas (superior men) themselves, though with a proven superior intellect as compared to the at once revered and resented Chad. One particular PUA figure of note is Daryush Valizadeh, or Roosh V, author and owner of the popular Manosphere forum Return of Kings. Although the website stepped into a hiatus in October of 2018 from which it has yet to emerge as of April 25, 2020, its ripples can

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<sup>16</sup> ContraPoints, “Incels | ContraPoints” YouTube video, 35:05, Natalie Wynn, August 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD2briZ6fB0>.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Bratich & Sarah Banet-Weiser, “From Pick-Up Artists to Incels: Con(fidence) Games, Networked Misogyny, and the Failures of Neoliberalism” *International Journal of Communication* vol. 13 (2019), p. 5004.

still be felt throughout the Manosphere. Valizadeh himself fell into hot water in 2015 after penning the column “How to Stop Rape,” wherein he argued, “Make rape legal if done on private property. I propose that we make the violent taking of a woman not punishable by law when done off public grounds [...] If rape becomes legal under my proposal, a girl will protect her body in the same manner that she protects her purse and smartphone [...] After several months of advertising this law throughout the land, rape would be virtually eliminated on the first day it is applied.”<sup>18</sup> Roosh also appeared in the BBC Three documentary *Extreme UK: Men at War* at one of his website’s designated meet-ups, where PUAs and aspiring PUAs alike can trade tips, network, and learn from the man himself. Reporter Reggie Yates talks with multiple figures in the movement – not just pickup artists, but also other alt-right figures like Milo Yiannopolous as well. Yates listens to what they have to say, but is visibly incredulous. As he says, “It’s not about making young men feel that they have value; it’s about making young women feel like they have none.”<sup>19</sup> Although Yates is happy to let his interviewees speak their minds and even expresses sympathy for some individuals, like a young man who speaks about men’s issues on YouTube, he struggles to reconcile this with the often hateful language he uncovers.

Also in *Men at War*, Yates stumbles across another group of note, the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs). As described on their own website, MGTOW.com, Men Going Their Own Way “is a statement of self-ownership [...] the manifestation of one word: ‘No.’”<sup>20</sup> MGTOWs are essentially a separatist group, seeking to live their lives apart from those of women and a larger feminist society that marginalizes them. On the opposite end of the spectrum

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<sup>18</sup> Daryush Valizadeh, “How to Stop Rape,” *Return of Kings*, February 16, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Reggie Yates, “Extreme UK: Men at War,” *Vimeo* video, 55:15, January 7, 2016. <https://vimeo.com/151003209>.

<sup>20</sup> “MGTOW | Men Going Their Own Way” <http://mgtow.com>.

from pickup artists, MGTOWs have no interest in engaging with a society which refuses to treat them fairly. Although some of the same core ideals are the same – women being devious, feminism being a cause of many of society’s ills, men being treated poorly by the system – pickup artists choose to embrace and then manipulate the world and women around them, while MGTOWs want no part of it. More specifically, they express a desire for economic sovereignty, a liberation from the crushing ordeal of life as a husband and father. Sociologist Debbie Ging quotes a post from the r/mgtow subreddit entitled “Men ARE the primary victims of female nature,” wherein the poster defines the biological nature of women as “procreation oriented because it is their bodies that carry the wombs to gestate and deliver the next generation... In this paradigm of things, there is no incentive for the woman to actually give a damn about the well-being of the man/men providing for her; in fact, it is in her best interest to not be attached to a single man in particular, but keep monkey branching to a stronger, better provider.”<sup>21</sup> Like incels, pickup artists, and other MRAs, MGTOWs have acknowledged the very nature of woman as duplicitous, but unlike their neighbors, choose to fully sever themselves from the society that enables such behavior. Where pickup artists might represent proactivity, MGTOWs are a complete departure from the sexual marketplace, the closest thing the men’s rights movement has to a Third Way.

Incels, perhaps the most ubiquitous of Manospherical groups, are young men who, not for lack of trying, are unable to have sex or romantic relationships with women. There is some debate as to whether incels must be virgins or merely in a current stage of celibacy, but regardless, involuntary celibates express a deep despair at their situation, sometimes leading to

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<sup>21</sup> Ging, p. 12.

outpourings of anger or sadness on incel forums. Using the common parlance of incels, one might divide society into incels, normies, Chads, and femoids, with sub-distinctions in between. Within this framework, the incels are the most conscious of the profeminist societal breakdown, and yet also the most tragic. These involuntary celibates express emotions ranging from grief to rage at the state of their sexual lives. Although the incel ideology is multifaceted, in essence incels are denied their sexual due by femoids (female + *oid* suffix, “resembling,” an intentionally dehumanizing term designating the women in question as lesser-than) in favor of Chads or alphas, or normatively masculine, outgoing men with personalities abhorrent to the incel. The normies (normals), sometimes also referred to as betas, meanwhile, are men not up to the standard of the Chads, but contrary to the incels, still choose to accept the worldview that persecutes them and favors said Chads. These normies may find female partners in youth, but will inevitably be abandoned by these women in favor of Chad and bled dry by alimony, the process glibly referred to as “alpha fux beta bux.”<sup>22</sup> Although the Chad may represent the antithesis to the incel in terms of appearance and persona, the normie opposes the incel in terms of worldview - or, rather, blindness to the world as it is. This system of archetypal sexual and romantic rationing, the incels argue, is something that has been at the very least enabled, if not caused by, mainstream feminism. By encouraging women to step outside of traditional roles of femininity, feminism has sowed the sexual marketplace that rewards female promiscuity and punishes male genetic undesirability, with traits like weak chins, delicate wrists, and short stature. Encouraged by mainstream feminism, femoids have no interest in a personality of any kind, but instead in the sexual desirability of Chads. As one forum poster at Sluthate.com put it,

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<sup>22</sup> Ging, p. 13.

“They want the bad boy thugs who make their pussy tingle.”<sup>23</sup> Thus the many incel forums serve as a refuge from an alienating society.

Upon preliminary research one might conclude that the insular nature of the incel-driven Manosphere leads to a strong sense of community and brotherhood, but despite praise of a particular archetype of manhood there still exists a kind of self-hatred that reverberates throughout this group, often targeted at their fellow men. There is some truth to the idea of these men forming tightly-knit communities, as evidenced by the reaction of men on forums like r/Celouts (replacing the previously banned r/Braincels, and before that, r/Incels) to outsiders intruding upon their space. As mentioned before, these groups share a deep suspicion of “lurkers,” those who come not to post, but to observe in silence, from forums like r/IncelTears, an obvious mockery page. Some of the dislike is vitriolic, but other critiques do at least appear to come from some place of moral superiority – one poster decries how “these subs [subReddit forums] are all about looking down on the ‘lowlifes.’”<sup>24</sup> r/IncelTears indeed is a place where incels are ridiculed, and this backlash further isolates the most popular internet places of gathering for incels and other Manosphere groups. Upon experiencing this social shaming at the hands of more mainstream internet forums, these young men retreat inward to their own, gender-segregated communities, where they feel free to speak without reproach. Simultaneously, however, this homogenous environment appears almost claustrophobic, with members on occasion turning against their fellow men, in an oddly socially-sanctioned roasting. Perhaps the best examples can be found on incel selfie threads, where boys share their pictures knowing full well that mockery will follow, vindicating the poster in his own self-hatred. While from an

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<sup>23</sup> Ging, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Advance Publications, r/Celouts, *Reddit*, Accessed 10 October 2019, <https://reddit.com/r/Celouts>.

outsider's perspective this might appear to be a community, it still bears the toxicity that can be found in other corners of the internet, although turned inward as well as outward.

The incels are arguably the most notorious of the Manosphere – although they themselves might disagree with this characterization, they have gained a reputation for violence associated with young men committing acts of violence while speaking very similar rhetoric, such as Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, and Chris Harper-Mercer, with Minassian being particularly inspired by Rodger's pre-homicide vlog on explaining his violence in terms of revenge against women and feminism. Said Rodger, "It was time to take action and not just sit on the sidelines and just fester in my own sadness."<sup>25</sup> Thus Rodger and his ilk could be labeled incels and, indeed, they carry many of the ideological markers of the wider Manosphere, but it seems the incel forums are somewhat split on whether these men are tragic heroes or outliers completely misrepresenting the average incel. In general, the sphere of the incel is less philosophical and more circumstantial – the Incel Inside Wiki cites hard determinism as the only shared belief amongst all incels,<sup>26</sup> with the emphasis instead being placed on shared experience. Incels themselves, too, dislike the concept of being referred to as a unified community,<sup>27</sup> given what they have termed the "incelosphere rift" – the inevitable disagreements that arise amongst large internet gatherings of self-identified incels, often centering around the topics of race, age, height, violence, and even gender.<sup>28</sup> Far from being an ideological monolith, incels debate each other on key issues concerning men's rights, occasionally leading to vitriolic language, as internet debates

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<sup>25</sup> Tim Hume, "Toronto Van Attack Suspect Says He Used Reddit and 4Chan to Chat With Other Incel Killers" *Vice News* September 27, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> "Incel" Incel Inside, October 9, 2019, <https://incels.wiki/w/Incel>.

<sup>27</sup> "Incel community" Incel Inside, July 25, 2019, [https://incels.wiki/w/Incel\\_community](https://incels.wiki/w/Incel_community).

<sup>28</sup> "Incelosphere rifts" Incel Inside, July 22, 2019, [https://incels.wiki/w/Incelosphere\\_rifts](https://incels.wiki/w/Incelosphere_rifts).

often do. I would instead conclude that they are as diverse an online community as any other and should be treated as such, subject to the same degree of nuance.

### **Section III: Unity and ideology**

Despite their claims to the contrary, there are a number of underlying beliefs that run through the undercurrent of the Manosphere, at least as expressed by its members. Biological essentialism is something that is unavoidable in MRA spaces – as influenced by the perception of binary biological sex, “humans are sorted into the categories ‘male’ and ‘female,’ reflecting a belief that males and females are or should become different kinds of people.”<sup>29</sup> From the assertion that hypergamy is something innate to women to the focus on men as victims of a feminist hierarchy, certain points can be highlighted, even if those points are fuzzy at times. One notable claim of men’s rights activists asserts that the men in said community are “nice guys,” rejected for being a bit too nice, in fact. Despite the talking point coming up again and again, there is a flip side to this argument that derides the nice guy archetype. It is easy to point out that many of the young men in these communities are not, in fact, very nice. Debbie Ging references an article found on r/TheRedPill titled, “HumanSockPuppet’s Guide to Managing Your Bitches,” in which the poster argues that “women are children [who don’t] have the same deep sense of personal responsibility [as men].”<sup>30</sup> These kinds of examples are quite visible in the Manosphere and offer a rebuttal to the nice-guy thesis, but nevertheless, I would argue it is still necessary that the core ideologies of the Manosphere are not dismissed.

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe, “Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts” *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 35 (2009), p. 279.

<sup>30</sup> Ging, p. 12.



The black and red pills are perhaps the closest thing the Manosphere has, other than determinism, to a core unifying dogma, with other Manosphere derivatives often falling under the red-pill umbrella. Being black- or red-pill, contrary to being an incel, MGTOW, or PUA, is something you believe rather than something you are or do. Understanding the redpill is at the heart of the Manosphere and a requirement if one wishes to engage in their spaces. The name comes from the *Matrix* films, where a protagonist living in a world that is a lie may choose to take either the blue pill, in which case he wakes up in his own bed with no memory of the things he has seen and lives in blissful ignorance, or the red pill, and continues on having borne witness to the cruel reality of life. Becoming “redpilled,” thus, requires an individual accepting the cold truth of misandry in Western society; any man subscribing to this ideology may, from there, choose to act upon this knowledge by engaging with the Manosphere at large as an incel, MGTOW, PUA, or other MRA-affiliated group. The redpill is specifically defined in opposition to the bluepill, as a rejection of a societal norm. The IncelInside Wiki page “Redpill” lists a number of redpill-aligned beliefs as being, “not having your own place, your own car or your own money isn’t that much of a detriment as you think,” “even the most ‘non-primitive’ appearing females are slutty,” and “average men are judged negatively due to the halo effect [the concept that certain positive traits, such as attractiveness, increase the perception of an individual despite any coinciding negative traits, such as low intelligence].”<sup>31</sup> It is a belief system that, similar to men’s liberation from the 1980s onward, specifically exists in opposition to a perceived establishment. The redpill philosophy is particularly unique in its versatility; as Ging writes, “even the TradCon [traditionally conservative] site Masculine by Design features a

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<sup>31</sup> “Redpill,” IncelInside, 22 January 2020, <https://incels.wiki/w/Redpill>.

redpill tab, along with Bible studies, Christianity, game, sex, and never marry a woman over thirty (NMAWOT).”<sup>32</sup> The basis of the redpill involves an acknowledgment of a social truth, but as the incels, pickup artists, and MGTOWs have exhibited, this knowledge can be taken in very different directions.

As a subset of the redpill philosophy, the blackpill advocates for a kind of sado-masochistic fatalism. If the redpill tells you that you are experiencing discontent because of feminism, the blackpill tells you that this discontent is genetically determined and, more importantly, insurmountable. The Incel Wiki describes the blackpill as “more than just a belief in women being mostly lookist [primarily, if not solely, concerned with the appearances of male partners] in dating.”<sup>33</sup> The Wiki is also careful to point out that “not all incels are blackpillers, and not all blackpillers are incels.”<sup>34</sup> Even it expresses some skepticism at the blackpill, writing that blackpillers are often accused of exhibiting cult-like behavior and fostering defeatism. The Blackpill Wiki page specifically remarks that “thing is none of them vocally try to stop these practices if they recognize them.”<sup>35</sup> Oftentimes blackpillers, too, the Wiki reports, promote rape or a kind of state-mandated monogamy, where women are tied to individual men by law in order to ensure happiness for men. This does not mean, however, that all blackpillers exhibit this kind of idealism. Popular, too, is the LDAR (Lay Down and Rot) approach. The Wiki checklist defines the incel who LDARs as “incel,” “1-4/10 on the decile [scale of attractiveness],” “earn less than \$60,000 per year 2019 USD,” and “[has] no extraordinary traits, or abilities such as extremely hi IQ/creativity or exceptional strength.”<sup>36</sup> Not solely in the purview of blackpillers or

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<sup>32</sup> Ging, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> “Blackpill,” IncelInside, 22 January 2020, <https://incels.wiki/w/Blackpill>.

<sup>34</sup> “Blackpill.”

<sup>35</sup> “Blackpill.”

<sup>36</sup> “Lay down and rot,” IncelInside, 22 January 2020, [https://incels.wiki/w/Lay\\_down\\_and\\_rot](https://incels.wiki/w/Lay_down_and_rot).

incels, LDARing is the product of dogmatic hopelessness. If one combines the redpill with the hard determinism to which incels in particular and MRAs more generally often subscribe, the blackpill is merely the logical conclusion of that argument. It is an ideology that breeds despair, and, thus, perhaps the only solution one might find is to LDAR – or, failing that, seek retributionary violence.

And yet it seems that MRAs in general and incels in particular, at least those producing the kind of content found on the Incel Inside Wiki, consider themselves to be largely value-neutral. Although other groups within the greater Manosphere are mentioned throughout sites like incels.co, there is a visible effort to stress that these not be conflated. Certainly the groups, as seen previously, have different methods by which they engage with or subvert a feminist-dominated society, but the same idea of what masculinity is or should be can be found in every corner of the Manosphere. Nevertheless, this masculine ideal can be taken in a multitude of different directions and thus branch off into the more obscure subcultures of the men's rights movement. Sociologist Michael Kimmel described the growing group of *Angry White Men* disillusioned with the failed promise of the American Dream in an increasingly politically correct world. "What unites all these groups," he writes, "is not just the fact that they are men. [It is their] belief in a certain ideal of masculinity. It is not just their livelihoods that are threatened, but their sense of themselves as men. [... Men are] feeling emasculated – humiliated. The promise of economic freedom, of boundless opportunity, of unlimited upward mobility, was what they believed was the terra firma of American masculinity, the ground on which American

men have stood for generations.”<sup>37</sup> The movement of men’s rights activism, Kimmel argues, has been in response to oppression at the hands of progressivism.

Originally published in 2013, Kimmel’s text is preoccupied with the supposed inevitability of progressivism in American political and social life. In his prologue he glibly remarks that “we know what the future will look like twenty years from now: same-sex marriage will be a national policy (and neither heterosexual marriage nor the traditional nuclear family will have evaporated), at least one-quarter of all corporate board members will be women, universities and even the military will have figured out how to abjude sexual assault, formerly illegal immigrants will have a path to citizenship, and all racial and ethnic minorities (except perhaps Muslims, who will still, sadly, be subject to vitriolic hatred) will be more fully integrated.”<sup>38</sup> Six years on, his perspective is almost naïve in its assuredness. The kind of idealistic liberalism exhibited in this statement is reminiscent of Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History*, of a worldview that has not seemed relevant to many since the 1990s. Referencing the 2016 election has almost become a new Godwin’s law especially in leftist spaces, but Kimmel’s writing, while discussing who the “angry white men” are and what their goals are, fails to recognize their potential political power in a manner that appears glaringly obvious to a modern reader. Kimmel does not necessarily exude an optimism, but rather a progressive absolutism, wherein the Overton window exists on a perpetually sliding scale toward liberalism. To be sure, Kimmel allows for skips and jumps along that path – a path which he describes as “fitfully” executed<sup>39</sup> – but nonetheless it seems in 2013 he was far more confident in the ability of a

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Kimmel, p. xii.

<sup>39</sup> Kimmel, p. xi.

democratic society to upset any radical anti-feminist, white supremacist movement given the time and a firm belief that despite any potential hiccups, “the era of unquestioned and unchallenged male entitlement is over.”<sup>40</sup> The rise of the MRA represents an upset to this progressive ideal, a sometimes violent disruption of society’s inexorable march forward.

This is not to say that Kimmel makes no valid arguments on the subject of MRAs. On the contrary, *Angry White Men* is a useful text in dissecting the presence of gendered, racialized discontent in a supposedly “politically correct” era, but I think could do more to explore the motivations of young white men in particular in the global reactionary right. There is an acknowledgment of the economic issues related and Kimmel even names neoliberalism as a culprit, writing that the white supremacists “are delivering their mail to the wrong address [... the right one being] neoliberal economic policy.”<sup>41</sup> He correctly points out that the longed-for American dream has been proven unachievable for these men due to the excesses of neoliberal capitalism. Where I disagree with Kimmel, however, is in his assertion that the failures of neoliberalism apply to the white supremacists, but not the MRAs, whom Kimmel describes as “pretty hard to sympathize with.”<sup>42</sup> While sympathy with MRAs should not be taken to the point of excusing their most aggressive adherents, neoliberalism can just as easily be applied to feminism and social movements as to economic policy. There is a very real resentment felt by these young men both for women as a group and for the society they feel has failed them in denying not just their sexual due, but also their status as men. Moreover, there is a deep conviction that women did this to them and that by destroying the power of women one can relieve this odd brand of cisgender dysphoria.

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<sup>40</sup> Kimmel, p. xi-xii.

<sup>41</sup> Kimmel, p. 276.

<sup>42</sup> Kimmel, p. 276.

Sociologist Catherine Rottenberg, in breaking down two seminal texts of neoliberal feminism, Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* and Anne-Marie Slaughter's *Why Women Still Can't Have It All*, describes the method by which "neoliberal feminism is fast displacing liberal feminism"<sup>43</sup> in the progressive ethos. Liberal feminism, although containing blind spots of its own, arguably existed in order to critique the limited role of women in a liberal democracy. Neoliberal feminism, by contrast, exists to situate high-achieving women in positions of power within a neoliberal society. It seeks not to deconstruct, but rather to diversify existing power structures. Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser describe neoliberalism as situated at the intersection of "the entrepreneurial orientation (self-starting, individualized, self-managed) and the reliance on expertise (self-help discourses, training mechanisms, pedagogic figures)."<sup>44</sup> It has little concern for dismantling the systemic injustices that disenfranchise entire groups, instead choosing to focus its energy on empowering individual women to break down boundaries. There has been a push for greater criticism of neoliberal feminism in recent years, particularly with regards to its dissemination at the hands of individual, inspirational women, whether they be politicians (Hillary Clinton, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Elizabeth Warren come to mind), tech moguls (Elizabeth Holmes, before her downfall), or figures of pop culture (J.K. Rowling). But is this newfound critique not undermined by the reluctance to examine the effects of neoliberal feminism outside of individual women?

MRAs decry feminism as an institution of elites that has lost touch with the common people, and to a degree they have a point. This grievance, however, should be directed toward

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<sup>43</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, "The rise of neoliberal feminism," *Cultural Studies* (2013), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Bratich, p. 5006.

the specific kind of feminism that has been so influenced by capital – neoliberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism by definition seeks to *create* elites out of women under the guise of diversity, and in that lies its greatest disconnect. Returning to the IncelInside Wiki, neoliberalism’s enemies are by and large correctly described by the poster as “socialists, anti-austerity social democrats, environmentalists, and fascists.”<sup>45</sup> Incels and other MRAs, too, fit into this framework in opposition to neoliberalism. It seems at least incels acknowledge that neoliberalism is a worldview antithetical to their existence, although there is little acknowledgment that it is antithetical to the existence of most groups, including women. The “crisis of confidence”<sup>46</sup> that can be exhibited among the men of the Manosphere is but a microcosm of the greater loss of confidence in neoliberal capitalism as an institution. Members of the Manosphere oftentimes tread ever so closely to the edge of far left ideology when voicing their grievances. One example of how MRAs co-opt progressive or even borderline Marxist language can be seen in Den Hollander, a corporate attorney and self-described champion of the men’s rights movement. In his *Trilogy of Cases*, wherein he breaks down the lawsuits he has brought to court concerning the rights of men, Hollander describes these as “[making] clear that there are now two classes of people in America: one of princesses – females, and the other of servants – males. Governments, from local to state to federal, treat men as second-class citizens whose rights can be violated with impunity when it benefits females. Need I say the courts are prejudiced, need I say they are useless, need I say it’s time for men to take the law into their hands?”<sup>47</sup> To be sure, Hollander is an elite in this community not representative of the general populous and, more importantly, like many of his compatriots, is laying his grievances at the

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<sup>45</sup> “Neoliberalism,” IncelInside, 21 February 2020, <https://incels.wiki/w/Neoliberalism>.

<sup>46</sup> Bratich, p. 5010.

<sup>47</sup> Coston, p. 369.

wrong door. Furthermore, the idea that the men of the Manosphere are second-class citizens specifically on the basis of gender, in relation to women, is an alt-right viewpoint dressed in the aesthetics of progressivism and using its language.

#### **Section IV: Conclusions**

Returning to *Angry White Men*, Kimmel makes an interesting remark that “the Angry Class has sided *with* those financial institutions in opposing the sorts of meaningful regulations that would actually help us.”<sup>48</sup> He concludes that white male anger is real, but not true – that is, that it comes from a place of sincerity, but is not the true expression or representation of the state of their lives. The grievances of the men of the Manosphere are very real, but the methods by which they express these grievances – denouncing the feminist cabal or cultural Marxism – are deeply flawed. The flaws in Kimmel’s argument begin when he defines the root of their anxieties as masculine in nature. He writes that, “white men are the beneficiaries of the single greatest affirmative action program in world history [...] world history.”<sup>49</sup> While there is truth to the idea that maleness and whiteness are arbiters of opportunity, there is a failure to acknowledge the role capital plays in distilling issues of identity into issues of class. It would be difficult, for example, to make the case that a black lesbian billionaire faces far greater obstacles than an impoverished straight white man, although it can be said she would experience greater hardship than a straight white man of equal wealth to her own. Neoliberalism, although it has managed to adapt to identitarianism in the 21st century, is still fundamentally at odds with issues of class. Neoliberal feminism specifically and neoliberalism in general is without a doubt hostile to the existence of

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<sup>48</sup> Kimmel, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Kimmel, p. 8.



many of the young men found within the Manosphere, but the blame for this can be laid not with a Jewish conspiracy or teenagers with blue hair, but instead at the door of capital. In her essay on “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” philosopher Nancy Fraser writes, “the effect [of neoliberal feminism] was to subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition.”<sup>50</sup> Neoliberalism is a philosophy that at its core is individualistic, not communal, and attributes not to injustice what it can to a lack of confidence.

The changes we have witnessed undertaking the Manosphere in even the past five years have fundamentally shifted how we talk about men’s rights activists, as well as how they talk about themselves. It should not be assumed, however, that this sort of discontented upheaval is entirely without precedent. Kimmel cites the Jacksonian election and following era as illustrative of a gendered class discontent, “[combining] virulent hypermasculinity with vengeful, punitive political maneuvers.”<sup>51</sup> The election of Andrew Jackson was, in many ways, indicative of a larger resentment bubbling amongst lower-class men; there was a definite desire to topple the presupposed elites, although history tells us much of this rage was targeted tangentially rather than upward, with Jackson’s following policies toward women and, most notably, indigenous Americans. Although a deep rage toward injustices bubbled beneath the surface, the efforts of these men were implemented using the same tools that had caged them in their economic state, striking other, more disenfranchised groups rather than the true elites. The Jacksonian technique of redirection is perfectly replicated in the modern men’s rights movement. These young men have identified a societal ill, but have been prescribed the ideological equivalent of snake oil.

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<sup>50</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, (London: Verso Books, 2013), p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p. 32.

Returning to the very beginning of this thesis, we can examine the “We live in a society meme” as an expression of the themes contained within our analysis. “We live in a society” is so popular because it is a mockery of ineffective social commentary. The meme is so versatile, used by internet denizens spread across the political spectrum, because it exemplifies a flaccid attempt to contextualize inequality without sufficient examination of its causes. It is a legitimate grievance, dressed in the guise of alt-right or libertarian aesthetics, but much like the nuggets of truth that can be found within alt-right ideology, that does not mean it cannot be rehabilitated or reforged for use by the left. In a similar vein, trying to extrapolate a direct causal relationship in an empirical sense between the discontent that young white men are feeling and something like school shootings is by nature a somewhat fraught argument, like trying to attribute intimate partner violence to Grand Theft Auto. As Chip Berlet writes, “right-wing hate groups do not cause prejudice in the United States – they exploit it.”<sup>52</sup> Attributing this kind of ideologically motivated violence solely to one group or community lessens both the role individual men play in these stories and the larger societal influences that might have as much sway in the matter, if not more so, but interpreting these influences instead as parts of a whole can allow for a more nuanced examination of their role. If we as academics seek to slow the spread of this brand of MRA radicalization, it is imperative that we examine exactly why neoliberal feminism is so odious to so many young men, beyond a blanket statement placing the onus solely on masculinity. And if there is a desire to reach out to the young men who have not yet been lost to right-wing violence, it must start with the destruction of neoliberalism.

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<sup>52</sup> Chip Berlet, “Mapping the Political Right: Gender and Race Oppression in Right-Wing Movements” in Abby L. Ferber, *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 18.

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