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# Incel (E)motives: Resentment, Shame and Revenge

## ABSTRACT

This article provides a framework for thinking about incels and incel-inspired terrorism. Incels are part of a fringe online subculture that trades in misogyny, victimhood and fatalism. The aim of the article is to describe these aforementioned orientations and the emotions associated with them. Only a tiny minority of incels commit acts of incel-inspired terrorism. Research on shame and revenge provides a useful starting-point for understanding these acts.

Why is it the assholes get all the beautiful young chicks?

Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*  
(London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 44.

On April 23 2018 25-year-old Alek Minassian rammed a rented van into a crowd of pedestrians on a sidewalk in Toronto, killing 10 and injuring 16. Eight of the murdered victims were women.<sup>1</sup> The incident was the deadliest vehicle-ramming attack in Canadian history.<sup>2</sup> Minassian, just before carrying out his atrocity, wrote a post on Facebook in which he proclaimed the arrival of an “incel rebellion.” “I was thinking that I would inspire future masses to join me in my uprising,” he later told his interrogators.<sup>3</sup>

Although Minassian acted alone, he was an active participant in a fringe online subculture that gave him an identity and facilitated his turn to violence – what incels call “going ER”. This is a reference to Elliot Rodger, who in 2014 killed six people and himself in California, and who Minassian lionized as the “founding forefather” of the “incel movement”. Minassian also claimed during his interrogation that he had communicated online with Rodger, although this seems highly dubious.

The aim of this article is to describe the incel subculture and the constellation of beliefs, values and emotions that animate it. It is divided into five sections: the first addresses some definitional issues and summarizes the incel worldview; the second provides an account of the “life-situation” of incels, focusing on argot and performativity; the third describes three core orientations of the incel subculture; the fourth explores the possible overlaps between incels and other extremists; and the fifth and final section focuses on the centrality of shame and revenge in incel-inspired terrorism.

Research on incels is still in its infancy, although notable contributions include a recent paper by Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro<sup>4</sup> and a qualitative study of the self-understandings of incels.<sup>5</sup> This article draws on this emergent body of research, as well on more established work on deviancy and subcultures;<sup>6</sup> stigma and performativity;<sup>7</sup> language and hermeneutics;<sup>8</sup> the “manosphere”;<sup>9</sup> and the criminology of shame, humiliation and violence.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, the article is based on a close reading of 50 discussion threads from the incel online forum “INCELS.CO”.<sup>11</sup>

## **Incels and Terrorism**

An incel is someone who identifies as “involuntary celibate” and invokes this as a master-status.<sup>12</sup> “Inceldom” refers to the state of *being* an incel. Incels thus define themselves in reference to a deficit, and that deficit is a sexual relationship with a woman. Incels interpret and experience this deficit not just as a private source of sexual frustration, but as a shame-inducing moral wrong inflicted on them by women and genetics. This perceived wrong forms the basis of the incel worldview, which serves to rationalize the sexual deficit of incels and justify hostility against women and sexually active men.

It is well-meaning but mistaken to suggest that “incel” is a gender-neutral term.<sup>13</sup> It is not. Incels are exclusively male and the incel ideology is by definition anti-women. While violent incels have targeted men in their attacks,<sup>14</sup> their primary target is women, who are the main source of their resentment and frustration. (The reason that violent incels have targeted men is not because they are men, but rather because of their perceived proximity to women – because they have been “feminized” or because they are coupled with and thus “contaminated” by women.)

There are no female incels: women who invoke a master status based on the claim that men deprive them of sex and are inherently demonic. This is not, of course, to say that women cannot, or do not, suffer from the pains of sexual frustration.<sup>15</sup> In his 1979 study of single parents in America, Robert S. Weiss found that although the female divorcees he interviewed seemed more diffident in reporting sexual need, some were surprisingly emphatic on the matter, describing it as a visceral emotion over which they had no control. One interviewee told him, “Oh, God, I’ve felt sexual frustration. I was, like, climbing the walls...The feeling was through my – well, say my stomach – just a yearning, but very bad.”<sup>16</sup> Another relayed: “I can feel me getting frustrated. I can feel my stomach getting tight. I can feel it building up. I get short-tempered with my kids. And I say to myself, ‘You just need a good screw. Right now you don’t have a good screw’.”<sup>17</sup> These women may have been lonely and sexually frustrated, but they were not the forerunners of a female inceldom, since they did not seek to politicize their sexual frustration into a master status rooted in misandry (hatred of men). And while there is no shortage of women today who report feelings of sexual frustration and loneliness, and who even self-identify as “femcells”,<sup>18</sup> none of these women have sought to mobilize politically against men nor subjected them to gender-based harassment or violence.<sup>19</sup>

Incels are also exclusively heterosexual: there are no gay and lesbian incels. This is not to say, to make a similar point to the one above, that there are no sex-starved gays and lesbians, but they do not construct a militant, rejectionist identity around their sexual miseries. Relatedly, incels are part of the “manosphere”, an online milieu which includes such groups as “Pick Up Artists (PUAs), Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs), and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW).”<sup>20</sup> While there are notable differences between these groups, they all express an embittered hostility toward women, especially feminists.

Knowledge about the demographic profiles of incels remains partial. But the little we do know is suggestive. According to a March 2020 survey of “INCELS.CO” forum users, the vast majority are young middle-class white males who live with their parents and have never had sex or true intimacy with a woman. Over 80 percent are from North America and Europe. Almost 70 percent claimed to suffer from depression, while over a quarter self-identified as autistic.<sup>21</sup>

We know as yet very little about characterological propensity toward incelhood. Are there character-types or habits or convictions that are more likely than others to open a pathway to incelhood? Are incels prone to depression because of their incelhood or is incelhood a consequence of their depression? Can any male, regardless of his physical appearance or personality, become an incel or are some more liable to embrace the identity than others? Robert S. Weiss remarks that “most individuals, regardless of their personalities, are likely to be lonely when separated from those they love”. “Yet it does seem the case,” he adds, “that some individuals have almost a vocation for loneliness.”<sup>22</sup> Is this also true of incelhood?

Similarly, we know little about the long-term effects of incelhood. How does sustained immersion in the online incel life-world affect the mental and physical well-being of incels? And what impact does this have on their relationships with non-incels, such as co-workers,

friends and kin? Finally, what explains the turn to violence among a small number of incels? This last question will be explored in the final section of the article.

### *The Incel Worldview*

The first thing to notice about the incel worldview is how profoundly moralistic and Manichean it is: there are good people and there are bad people. The good people are incels, of which there are two main kinds: those who recognize that the world is hostile to them, but who are not yet reconciled to their sorry fate (the “redpilled”), and those who not merely recognize that the world is hostile to them, but who accept this and the inevitability of their sorry fate (the “blackpilled”<sup>23</sup>). The latter form an elite-status group among incels: a sort of vanguard that proclaims to see the world as it is, without illusions or the distortions of wishful thinking. The bad people are women and sexually successful men: the “Stacys” and the “Chads”. The former are resented because they are desired yet unobtainable, while the latter are envied because they possess what the incels are sorely lacking (i.e. male sexual charisma and sexual partners). This combination of resentment and envy fuels an intense hatred of both “Stacys”, who are castigated as shallow and fundamentally untrustworthy, and “Chads”, who are derided as stupid and obnoxious.

To the “Stacy-Chad” dyad, we must add another: the “Cuck”-“Faggot”. Neither a Chad nor an incel, a “Cuck” is a male who is subordinate to a female, while a “Faggot” is a [heterosexual] male who actively embraces his position of subordination and who sees women in a positive light and as equal to men. “Cucks” are denounced as unmanly and weak, whereas “Faggots” are condemned as traitors to their sex.<sup>24</sup>

For incels, “Chads” form the top tier of the status hierarchy, while “Cucks”, “Faggots” and “Stacys” languish at the bottom. Incels place themselves in the middle. Self-

loathing and self-pitying as they may be, incels nevertheless see themselves as morally superior to the unholy trinity of “Cucks”, “Faggots” and all women.<sup>25</sup>

What is the intellectual and political content of the incel worldview? Intellectually, it is rooted in a kind of incel lore – a stock of inherited clichés, wisdoms and cautionary tales - about the natural order of things. The central plank in this lore is the “80/20 rule”, according to which 80% of women select from just 20% of the male dating pool, focusing on the most attractive and/or wealthiest. Many incels adhere to the “just be white” theory, which suggests that Caucasians face the fewest obstacles when dating women; Indian incels, by popular consensus, face the greatest obstacles. Most incels believe that while men frequently “date down”, women rarely if ever do so.

The political content of the incel worldview is much harder to capture. Incels are vocal and expansive on what they hate, but they are far more circumspect on what they want. They do not advance a clear or coherent political agenda. There is no incel position on economics, governance, crime and punishment or anything else of great political importance. While some incels express a nostalgic longing for a pre-1960s world in which women were subordinate to men and where men were all but guaranteed a female marital partner,<sup>26</sup> they do not specify what an incel state would look like or how it could realistically be achieved. Many incels identify as “alt-right”, but the relationship between this identity and their fringe brand of sexual politics remains unclear.

### ***Incel-Inspired Terrorism***

Terrorism is violence against civilians for political purposes.<sup>27</sup> Incel-inspired terrorism is violence against civilians carried out by self-avowed incels in the name of incelism or the incel cause. It is important to clarify that not all violence carried out by incels will or should

count as terrorism, since much of it will lack the necessary ideological motive or justification. For example, a self-avowed incel who uses violence to rob a liquor-store or to avenge a verbal insult on the street is obviously not a terrorist. It can further be stipulated that while much of what we would want to classify as incel-inspired terrorism would fall under the more capacious category of “gender-based violence against women”, not all of it can be so categorized since there are many instances where incel-inspired terrorists have deliberately targeted men in their attacks.<sup>28</sup> It is also important to distinguish between incel-inspired terrorism and acts of everyday violence against women that are carried out by men who do not identify as incels. These acts are neither motivated by the incel ideology, nor are they terrorism since they are not intended to make a wider political point.

It is perhaps necessary to meet a possible objection at this point. The objection can be stated as follows: what I am calling “incel-inspired terrorism” is so politically nebulous that it cannot meaningfully be classified as terrorism. Nor do incels belong to a social movement, organization or crusade whose purpose is to bring about political redress or a transformation of society.<sup>29</sup>

There is much to sympathize with in this objection. But, on balance, it is not convincing. The Russian anarchist-terrorists of the last century were notoriously reticent on what they wanted politically (other than to destroy capitalist imperialism), while the jihadi vision of a worldwide caliphate resembles more a fantasy than a concrete political aspiration.<sup>30</sup> Yet most scholars have had little difficulty in classifying these two groups as terrorists. This, in part, is because of the lethal and terrorizing nature of their violence against civilians. But, more centrally, it is to do with the ideological motivation and meaning behind the violence in question.<sup>31</sup> Given that incel-inspired violence is similarly ideological and potentially so lethal there is a strong case for classifying it as terrorism.<sup>32</sup>



The case for classifying the incel *worldview* as a form of violent extremism is much less persuasive. According to Stephane J. Baele *et al*, the incel worldview exhibits “clear traits of an extremist worldview whereby violence is not only seen as acceptable but also as the only possible way to solve the crisis endpoint in which society is supposedly stuck.”<sup>33</sup> This is a misconception. While hatred is indeed baked into incel worldview, it does not mandate violence against women as a necessary tactic of in-group self-defence. No doubt the incel ideology serves to excuse or whitewash violence against women, but this is not the same thing as mandating it as a necessary duty incumbent on all able-bodied incels. For many incels, the endpoint is not murderous violence, but fatalistic resignation. (I shall return to this last point in section 3.)

Incel-inspired terrorism is, in fact, statically very rare. According to Hoffman *et al*, “To date, violence committed by males calling themselves incels or in sympathy with incel ideology has claimed the lives of nearly 50 victims”.<sup>34</sup> Most incels, despite their hateful talk and violent fantasies, do not act on them, and are not “radicalized” in the sense of believing that violence against innocents is a necessary and justified tactic that they must use. Indeed most incels are law-abiding and seek out other incels online not to coordinate acts of violence but to share their experiences and stave off feelings of loneliness.<sup>35</sup>

## **The Incel Subculture**

Incels commonly categorize inceldom – the state of being an incel - as a “life-situation”. For a group which prides itself on its no nonsense verbal pungency, it is ironic that its members have seized on such a euphemistic formulation, but it does usefully serve to broaden the explanatory framework for understanding incels.

What is the nature of the incel life-situation? As incels describe it, it is one of chronic existential misery, of total abjection and abasement, of relentless torment and never-ending trauma. Incels attribute their misery to two twin-evils: sexual frustration and loneliness.

The incel life-situation is further compounded by a public discourse that is unremittingly hostile to incels, demonizing them as toxic and dangerous. Indeed, it is a measure of just how “problematic” incels are that one team of academic researchers felt it necessary to warn that “we did not want to appear to endorse the sentiments of the [incel] commenters or give credence to their viewpoints on women”.<sup>36</sup> Incels are regarded as so toxic that even the act of reporting their speech, for some researchers, is fraught with danger and risk.

For all the intensity and rawness with which incels experience their hardships, the incel life-situation is inconceivable outside of the incel subculture that provides a language for naming and making sense of it. More specifically, the incel subculture transforms what are private and practical troubles into an overarching political grievance against women. If incels feel different, wronged or traumatized by women it is in large part because they have encountered and embraced a subculture that interprets and gives shape to their feelings in this way.<sup>37</sup> Incels of course in turn shape and participate in that subculture, further transforming its narrative understandings.

The term “involuntary celibacy” was first coined by a young female undergraduate at Canada’s Carleton University, who used it as the name of a website she created in 1997. She called it “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project”, and had envisioned it as a virtual self-help group for both men and women who could not find sexual partners. But the users of the website were not self-avowed “incels”, much less active participants in counter-culture in which their celibacy was a source of identity and male solidarity. This embracement did not happen until the early 2000s, when incels began to mobilize and form communities across multiple social media platforms, particularly Reddit and 4Chan.

## *Identity and Performativity*

According to Albert Cohen, culture refers to “beliefs, values, codes, tastes and prejudices that are traditional in social groups and that are acquired by participation in such groups,” whereas a “subculture” is a “culture within a culture,” and consists of “ways of thinking and doing that are in some respects peculiarly its own.”<sup>38</sup> This is true of the incel subculture, although “ways of doing” is not an especially apt description of a subculture that is lived almost exclusively online.

Although the incel subculture draws on a reservoir of misogyny that finds validation in the wider culture, anyone who has spent even a moment inside an incel online forum will be struck by its cultural specificities. And nowhere are these more sharply in evidence than in how incels communicate. Indeed, incels have evolved a way of communicating that is very much, to paraphrase Cohen, peculiarly their own and which self-consciously draws on a common stock of phrases, in-jokes, and memes.<sup>39</sup> The following expressions recur with particular frequency: “Looksmaxing” (the business of personal self-improvement and cosmetic surgery); “NEET” (“Not in education, employment, or training”); “LDAR” (“Lay Down and Rot”); “AWALT” (“All Women Are Like That”); “Roped” (to have committed suicide) “Statusmaxx” (to make more money); “Manlet” (a short incel); “Volcel” (voluntary celibate); “Marcel” (married incels); and “Fakecel” (those who falsely claim to be an incel). In using this argot incels are not just expressing their thoughts and feelings in novel ways. They are also communicating their identity *as incels* and confirming their status as members of the subculture; conversely, anyone who posts in an incel online forum and does not use the established incel argot is instantly recognized as an outsider. There is thus a strongly

performative aspect to incel linguistic communication, much of which is driven by what Erving Goffman calls “impression management”.<sup>40</sup>

To outsiders, the online language of incels is apt to be shocking. It is often full of expletives and words that offend liberal sensibilities and far exceed the bounds of good taste. In one recent research paper by self-avowed feminists, the authors confided that the “women researchers were often profoundly disturbed by the content of the transcripts” [incel forum comments], adding that “it was often hard for us to separate our personal views as women from the real voices of the commenters”.<sup>41</sup> Trawling around on incel forums is not, evidently, for the squeamish or the devoutly feminist.

Oftentimes, incel talk takes the form of “venting”, a style of communication that is raw and unstrained in its emotionality. While it would be naïve and unwise to doubt the sincerity of what incels say, it would be no less naïve and unwise to simply take it at face value, since much of what incels say is deliberately tinged with irony, exaggeration and provocation. Understanding communication among incels thus requires an account not just of what incels say or what words they use, but of what incels *mean* in saying what they say (in terms of their intentions.<sup>42</sup>) Consider, for example, the following statement quoted in Sylvia Jaki *et al*: “I want them [women] all to die”.<sup>43</sup> Jaki *et al* interpret this under the rubric of “incitement to kill women”, observing that “some users want to see all women dead”. But it is far from clear that this is what the above statement means. Indeed, it is possible that in issuing the statement “I want them [women] all to die” what the issuer meant was something along the lines of, “I am immensely frustrated right now” or “I cannot stand women”. That is to say, it is possible that the issuer was performing the speech act of venting his frustration at women and that he did not intend others to interpret his statement as a command kill all women.

Terrorism researchers should thus proceed with caution in mining online incel communication for signs of “hateful extremism” or “radicalization”, since a lot of what incels say is a form of venting or commentary deliberately engineered to provoke, shock, entertain or ridicule.<sup>44</sup> As Hoffman *et al* remark, this “often makes it difficult to tell which posts may constitute a threat, and which are just cathartic satire or false bravado”.<sup>45</sup>

Some researchers worry that incel online forums serve to act as an “echo-chamber” that intensifies incels’ hatred of women and might push them toward violence.<sup>46</sup> This is a justified concern. But there is no solid empirical evidence to back it up. While there is clearly a danger that incels may become more hardened in their antipathy toward women as a result of exposing themselves to other like-minded incels, it is not clear that this exposure serves as a pathway toward violence, let alone terrorism, since so few of those who participate in incel online spaces go on to commit violence. Indeed, it may even be the case that the reverse holds, whereby incel online communities serve as a bulwark against violence by providing a place where incels can go to cathartically let off steam. Akil Awan has made a similar point about the jihadi online ecosystem and how it serves “an important function in subsuming diverse strains of political activism, unrest, and dissent, and so providing a conduit and framework for its non-violent expression”.<sup>47</sup> This does not mean that one should be indifferent about incel online hate speech, particularly speech-acts that incite violence against others, but we should be on our guard against thinking that there is a simple or direct relationship between online hate and real life violence.

## **Incel Subcultural Values**

What are the core values or approved ways of life at the heart of the incel subculture? I suggest there are three: (1) misogyny; (2) victimhood and (3) fatalism.

## *Misogyny*

Misogyny is both a form of male hostility toward women and a way of acting that ensures male dominance over women. As an emotion, it is the animating focal point of the incel subculture, whereby hatred of women is not merely deeply felt and expressed among incels, but elevated into the status of an identity. Some incels explicitly deny that they hate women, but the tone and substance of incel online communication would suggest that misogyny is rife in the incel subculture.

Among incels the roots of misogyny lie in resentment. According to Thomas Cushman, “Resentment is a particular kind of emotion, in which the object toward which resentment is directed, though specified as something that is undesirable is, in fact, perhaps desired, yet unobtainable”.<sup>48</sup> This is a useful way of thinking about incels, whose hatred toward women is best understood as a form of resentment, since for incels women are the desired but unobtainable object. The patriarchal belief that they are entitled to women<sup>49</sup> and the perception that women are having sex with everyone but *them*<sup>50</sup> only serves to heighten the resentment of incels toward women. Resentment is further intensified by the conviction shared by incels that they are intellectually and morally superior to the women they crave and the men they envy.

The following is emblematic of how women are framed in the incel subculture:

I concluded that women are flawed. There is something mentally wrong with the way their brains are wired, as if they haven't evolved from animal-like thinking. They are incapable of reason or thinking rationally. They are like animals, completely controlled by their primal, depraved emotions and impulses. That is why they are

attracted to barbaric, wild, beast-like men. They are beasts themselves. Beasts should not be able to have any rights in a civilized society.<sup>51</sup>

This is from Elliot Rodger's memoir, titled "My Twisted World", which he wrote in defence of his murderous rampage in 2014. (I shall discuss this case in greater detail in the final section of the article.) While most incels are not violent and do not advocate for women to be stripped of their rights, few would dissent from Rodger's misogynistic portrayal of women as shallow, stupid, callous and untrustworthy, skilled only in the art of humiliating decent, gentlemanly men. Among incels women are frequently reviled in dehumanizing terminology as "femoids", "cunts", "holes", "roasties", "tramps", "cum dumpsters", "hogs", and "bitches". Some incels fantasize over the thought of inflicting a terrible punishment on women for their perceived sins. Nearly all agree that a fate worse than not being able to have sex with women is being subject to their control. Indeed, "Cucks" are viewed in a wholly negative light.

### ***Victimhood***

The incel subculture is a brotherhood of the shipwrecked and the defeated. Incels portray themselves as accursed victims who are triply wronged: first, by genetics (they lament that they are not tall enough, that they are not good looking enough,<sup>52</sup> that they are not fit enough etc.); second, by women, who they blame for rejecting them; and third, by society at large, for the contempt and indifference it exhibits toward incels.

These wrongs are described by incels in catastrophic language as deep wounds and traumas to the self. Indeed, the incel subculture is first and foremost a wound culture that thrives, indeed engorges, on the psychological suffering of its members. Mark Seltzer

suggests that wound culture is “the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound.”<sup>53</sup> Incel forums are assuredly an unmistakable product of this culture, where lonely and desperate men gather to expose their personal traumas to other lonely and desperate men, sharing their “sad tales,”<sup>54</sup> about how they got into their sorry state and how bad it is. This seems to serve a cathartic function, helping incels unburden their frustrations to others who are in the same situation and to appreciate that they are “not the only one”.

It is easy to dismiss incel sad tales as the mawkish emoting of entitled and attention-seeking adolescent men, but this would be unfair. While many such tales take this form, many more express deeply considered feelings of social and psychological inadequacy and pain. Let us recall that nearly 70 percent of incels in the “INCELS.CO” 2020 survey claimed to suffer from depression. Not a few incels have committed suicide as a result of their depression. This is a prominent point of discussion on incel online forums, where some incels ponder, in the words of one topic-post, “the quickest and easiest way to commit suicide” and invite reflection on, in the words of another topic-post, whether “It’s selfish to talk an incel out of suicide”.

It is ironic that while the incel subculture is so intolerant toward the victimhood culture of other groups,<sup>55</sup> particularly minorities, it is more than a little vocal in making its own claims to victimhood.

### ***Fatalism***

The Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl once observed that if one is seeking to console a mother grieving for the death of a child, it helps to believe in the Devil: the blows of fate are somewhat easier to bear if one sees them as beyond one’s control.<sup>56</sup> For incels, there is a



Devil, and he is manifest in two forms: bad genes and bad women. “The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist,” says Roger “Verbal” Kint in *The Usual Suspects*. Incels know better: they know not only that the Devil exists, but that he cannot be defeated - that “lookism” is systemic and cannot be breached, and that women are a lost cause. But the Devil *can* be resisted in acts of symbolic defiance and withdrawal. This is the “delinquent solution” of the incel subculture.

According to Albert Cohen, since our really hard problems do not permit perfect solutions, it follows that “an effective, really satisfying solution *must entail some change in the frame of reference itself.*”<sup>57</sup> A person may give up pursuit of some unattainable goal, “but it is not a ‘solution’ unless he can first persuade himself that the goal is, after all, not worth pursuing; in short, his values must change.”<sup>58</sup> For incels, this means rejecting the goal of sexual intimacy with women. It means recognizing that, however hard he tries, the incel will never be able to have sex with a woman (outside of prostitution). And for the incel there is a sort of pride to be had in coming to this recognition (in “seeing the light” and “manfully” acknowledging unpleasant facts), and a relief in knowing that by quitting the chase he no longer has to suffer the humiliating and futile rigors of self-improvement as well as the myriad indignities of being continually rejected by women. As one moderator of a now banned incel online forum explained to journalist Aja Romano, “It is liberating...You can stop worrying about improving yourself, stop worrying about the years passing by and your chances getting slimmer, stop worrying about what will happen in the future, because you are certain of your place in the world and what is going to happen.”<sup>59</sup> In the language of subcultural theory, this is *reaction-formation*: rejecting in order not to be (further) rejected. In arriving at this “solution” the incel is not thereby healed; he still feels the pains of a life without sexual intimacy and must constantly strive to commit to his rejection of sexual intimacy, which he all the while secretly craves. But he can achieve a certain kind of

redemption in that he is (in his eyes) no longer hostage to the negative judgement of other women nor shackled to the secondary miseries of false hope (i.e. the belief that at some unspecified point in the future he might be able to break out of his incelism and find a female sexual partner).

Incels resemble what Robert K. Merton calls “retreatists”: namely, deviants who reject both the means and the goals of conventional society, for not only have they abandoned trying to make themselves attractive to women (i.e. the “conventional means” specified by society for achieving sexual success); they have also given up on the actual prescribed goal itself (i.e. sexual intimacy).<sup>60</sup>

In doing so, incels fatalistically condemn themselves to a life devoid not just of sexual intimacy but of all meaningful interaction with women. Indeed, the whole incel subculture can be understood as a veritable counsel of despair that facilitates the self-damnation of those who participate in it. However, and paradoxically, this damnation is experienced as an existential state of true (“blackpilled”) consciousness and authentic existence. By rejecting both the goal of sexual intimacy and the means of male self-improvement incels transform their shame and inferiority into a form of resistance against the “normie” status quo.

The above process is by no means a static one, and it is likely that some incels lurch between stoic resignation and quiet optimism that their fortunes might change for the better. It is also important to emphasize that a small number of incels reject the stoic attitude outright, dismissing it as a cowardly form of capitulation to the forces that oppress and demean them. For these men, it is impossible to passively accept the reality of their social mortification; for these few, only violence – against others or themselves – will solve their problems.

## **Incels and Other Extremists**

Many observers have noted that incels share much in common with far-right extremists. According to a recent report by the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, incels “are part of a growing trend of radical-right movements” that are particularly hostile to women’s empowerment and immigration.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Helen Lewis has pointed out that the broader “manosphere”<sup>62</sup> to which incels belong has “become a recruiting ground for potential mass shooters”.<sup>63</sup> “Anti-feminist rhetoric,” Lewis writes, “is a powerful gateway to violent white nationalism, and it is calculated to appeal to the demographic overwhelmingly responsible for mass shootings: young white men.”<sup>64</sup>

The overlap between incels and the far-right is certainly notable. Many incels disseminate conspiracies and employ tropes that are commonplace on the far-right. Alek Minassian, for example, confessed that although he didn’t hold “any political views” he was sympathetic to online “political discussions with an alt-right bias”.<sup>65</sup> Many incels, moreover, use racialized language and racial stereotypes. Chris Harper-Mercer, who killed nine people and himself in Oregon in 2015, was an unapologetic racist: “The black man is the most vile creature on the planet. He is a beast beyond measure. But don’t take these words to be racist. I don’t hate blacks. Just the men,” he wrote in his short memoir, “My Story”.<sup>66</sup> Although Harper-Mercer did not identify as an incel, he was a disgruntled virgin and idolized Elliot Rodger, who he referred to as “a god”. Incels commonly refer to Indian and East Asian incels as, respectively, “currycels” and “ricecels”. Anti-Semitism, too, is rife among incels.<sup>67</sup>

But it must also be acknowledged that there is a substantial number of incels who are themselves from minority backgrounds (Harper-Mercer was mixed race) and who are active participants in incel online spaces. The far-right, clearly, does not have a monopoly over misogynists. Nor is there any empirical evidence to demonstrate that the online

“incelosphere” functions as a conveyor belt for the far-right. And while some incels are undoubtedly troubled, they are not agentless victims in a game master-minded by “charismatic” far-right online recruiters.

One should also be attentive to real tensions between incels and other extremists. While the far-right is virulently anti-feminist, it is emphatically not a crusade against women. On the contrary, the far-right sees itself as the savior of women – of white women, that is. Indeed, white supremacists revere women for their role as the incubators of the next generation of white supremacists, while non-white women and white women who marry outside of their race are vilified.

Correspondingly, the sexual defilement of white women by non-white men is a persistent theme in white supremacist propaganda. For example, the Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant drew attention in his manifesto to the Rotherham sex-abuse case in which seven Pakistani-British men were found guilty of grooming young girls.<sup>68</sup> “Rotherham is just one of an ongoing trend of rape and molestation perpetrated by these non-white scum,” he fumed.<sup>69</sup> Far-right activists see it as a matter of manly honor to violently avenge these injustices and to protect “their” women,<sup>70</sup> unlike incels who profess no interest in defending the honor of women and whose claim over them is one of sexual entitlement not paternalistic ownership.

One should also be wary about making comparisons between incels and jihadists for the same reason. While both trade in misogyny and fixate on sex to an unusual degree,<sup>71</sup> jihadists seek to defend the honor of Muslim womanhood,<sup>72</sup> whereas incels, to reiterate, accord women no honor whatever. More centrally, incels, in the main, do not see it as their sacred duty to murder members of the reviled outgroup, however much they may excuse or even glorify those who do. (Elliot Rodger is celebrated among many incels as the “supreme gentleman.”<sup>73</sup>) Furthermore, there is a profound difference between incels and jihadists in

how they conceptualize suicide. For jihadists, suicide for individualistic reasons is categorically condemned, whereas among incels it is often justified or recommended. Jihadists, by contrast, justify suicide only if it is altruistic (i.e. is undertaken selflessly in defense of the Muslim *ummah* and at the expense of its enemies).<sup>74</sup> Nor do incels revere death as an entry point for eternal bliss, but instead see it as an end to their personal suffering.

A more promising starting-point for exploring the possible links between incels and other extremists may lie in the psychological traits they share. Drawing on a large body of research in political psychology, Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog note that individuals on the extreme far-right exhibit a number of distinct psychological traits.<sup>75</sup> One is a proneness to be easily disgusted: a special sensitivity to objects that are felt to be polluting or corrupting. Another trait is the need for closure: that is, “a preference for order, structure and certainties”.<sup>76</sup> A third trait is a “rigid in-group preference,”<sup>77</sup> and a fourth is “simplism,” which is “a penchant to seek simple and unambiguous explanations of the social world and its ills”.<sup>78</sup>

According to Gambetta and Hertog, Islamic radicals exhibit the self-same traits. They, too, are disgust prone, displaying a particular squeamishness about women’s bodies and sex;<sup>79</sup> they long for the order and rigidities of an Islamic state; they divide the world into the saved and the damned; and they believe that all the world’s ills are caused by deviation from the “true” path of Islam.

Incels would appear to share some of these traits, although as yet there is no firm evidence to demonstrate this. Disgust among incels – and associated fears to do with pollution – is especially worthy of further investigation. The most striking example is Minassian, who had reportedly displayed obsessive-compulsive qualities during his interrogation, “using paper towel to turn off the taps then taking fresh paper towel to avoid touching the doorknob to open the door, explaining ‘I had to ensure that there would be no

germs on my hand’”.<sup>80</sup> It remains to be seen whether he was disgusted by women and their “pollution”.

Disgust is a recurring theme in the memoir of Elliot Rodger. “In an ideal world,” he wrote, “sexuality would not exist. It must be outlawed. In a world without sex, humanity will be pure and civilized.”<sup>81</sup> Sex is thus dirty and uncivilized – “a barbaric act” no less.<sup>82</sup> And women, as Rodger came to see them, were the apotheosis of dirty and uncivilized: “All women must be quarantined like the plague they are.” It is hard to know if Rodger had always regarded sex (and women) as dirty and contaminating or if it was part of his reaction-formation against women. In one passage in his memoir Rodger recalls the time, when he was 18, that he was offered a job: “To my horror and humiliation, the job turned out to be a menial custodial job, and I had to clean offices and even the bathrooms.”<sup>83</sup> Rodger obviously regarded the job as beneath him, but you do wonder whether he had a special aversion to shared bathrooms and all the noxious and contaminating things that are deposited in them. Revealingly, he relayed that he “felt like utter shit from even considering working at such a place”.<sup>84</sup> In another suggestive passage Rodger recalls the first time he saw a pornographic video. He was fourteen and on a sleepover at a friend’s house. “To see a video of human beings doing such weird and unspeakable things with each other revolted me,” he wrote.<sup>85</sup> But he also felt a shiver of excitement: “And yet, I noticed I was feeling aroused.”<sup>86</sup> It would be interesting to find out whether this particular “vortex of summons and repulsion” (to use Julia Kristeva’s phrasing<sup>87</sup>) is common among incels.

### **“Gone ER”: Shame and Dehumiliation**

Terrorism is commonly understood as a form of coercion. Igor Primoratz, for example, writes that terrorism is “intimidation with a purpose: the terror is meant to cause others to do things

they would otherwise not do. Terrorism is coercive intimidation”.<sup>88</sup> According to the UK Terrorism Act 2000, terrorism is “the use of serious violence against persons or property, or the threat to use such violence, to intimidate or coerce a government, the public, or any section of the public for political, religious or ideological ends.”<sup>89</sup> The FBI similarly defines terrorism as the “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government or civilian population in furtherance of political or social objectives.”<sup>90</sup>

But not all terrorism can be understood as a tactic of coercive intimidation and need not be part of a coercive strategy at all.<sup>91</sup> For example, and as C. A. J. Coady remarks, terrorists may want to cause anger more than fear, “believing that an angry population and government would act foolishly and play into their hands”.<sup>92</sup> Or they may want to use spectacular violence as a means of publicizing their cause or grievances.<sup>93</sup> Or they may want to use violence as a way of getting even – as a form of punitive revenge so as get justice for perceived wrongs. In all of these cases, the aim is not to coerce, but to provoke, publicize or punish.

Jeremy Waldron points to three further possibilities. First, “violent action might be viewed as a form of therapy for the perpetrator, particularly where the perpetrator has suffered for a long time in the ignominy and humiliation of some oppressive form of subordination”.<sup>94</sup> This is exactly how Frantz Fanon saw the matter, notoriously observing that “violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction, it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect”.<sup>95</sup>

Second, “terrorist acts might be intended as acts of expression, to send a message of some sort to the targeted population or to the world at large”.<sup>96</sup> The message, for example, may involve a denunciation: “You are despicable and deserve this.” Or it may express a

demand to be heard: “You need to recognize my pain/that we exist.” Or it may convey a message of self-aggrandisement: “I will no longer take it anymore.”

Third, “terrorism may aim at the inculcation of terror...in a population for ethical reasons, either for its own sake, or in order to bring about some sort of further ethical transformation in the mentality or attitudes of the targeted population”.<sup>97</sup> Waldron is careful to note that in using the term “ethical terrorism” he means “only to categorize the strategy, not endorse it”.<sup>98</sup> Elaborating, he writes:

The idea, as I understand it, is this. The populations of prosperous countries are often perceived to languish in complacency and self-satisfied indifference to what happens in less prosperous parts of the world: their mentality is inauthentic and irresponsible, they give little thought to the predicament of anyone other than themselves and their fellow-countrymen. Their mental state...is offensively inappropriate to the reality of the world in which they live, but of which they seem blithely and viciously unaware...So – the terrorist reckons – these mental states...ought to be changed...It would be good, the terrorist reckons, for U.S. citizens to become less arrogant and complacent; or it would be good for the British or the Israeli citizenry to experience the fear and insecurity that their subject populations have to live with every day. And so the terrorist considers various means by which this could be accomplished – public education and leaflets, for example – and he concludes that there might be nothing so effective as a few atrocities – bombings, murders, spectacular acts of destruction – calculated to generate widespread terror, [or] panic.<sup>99</sup>

Incel-inspired terrorism, I wish to argue, is primarily a non-coercive form of political violence that serves four interrelated purposes: 1) to punish women and the specified



categories of men (“Chads” and “Faggots”); 2) to therapeutically de-humiliate the perpetrator; 3) to communicate a message of hurt and visibility; and 4) to attack what is seen as the complacency and self-satisfied indifference of mainstream (“normie”) society.

Elliot Rodger’s mass-shooting in 2014, which I take to be the paradigmatic case of incel-inspired terrorism, combines all four of the above purposes.

On May 23 2014 Rodger, a 22-year-old university dropout of British-Malaysian heritage, killed six people and injured fourteen others. The rampage began in his apartment, where he stabbed three men to death. Three hours later he drove to a sorority house at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where, after failing to gain entry, he shot three women outside, two of whom died. He then drove through Isla Vista, shooting and wounding several pedestrians and ramming others with his car. After exchanging gunfire with the police, he crashed his car and committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. He died a virgin.

Before embarking on his attack, Rodger posted a video on YouTube titled “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution”.<sup>100</sup> It is saturated in self-pity, narcissistic self-regard, resentment, shame and rage:

For the last eight years of my life, ever since I hit puberty, I’ve been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection, and sex and love to other men but never to me.<sup>101</sup>

Rodger interpreted this as a grave injustice, all the more so because of his outsized *amour propre*,<sup>102</sup> which itself was rooted in a deeply felt sense of aggrieved male entitlement:<sup>103</sup>

You girls have never been attracted to me. I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it. It's an injustice, a crime, because...I'm the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman.<sup>104</sup>

Warming to the theme of violent revenge, he warned:

On the day of retribution I'm going to enter the hottest sorority house of UCSB. And I will slaughter every spoiled, stuck-up, blond slut I see inside there. All those girls I've desired so much, they would have all rejected me and looked down upon me as an inferior man if I ever made a sexual advance towards them [scoffs] while they throw themselves at these obnoxious brutes. I'll take great pleasure in slaughtering all of you. You will finally see that I am in truth the superior one. The true alpha male. [laughs] Yes. After I've annihilated every single girl in the sorority house, I will take to the streets of Isla Vista and slay every single person I see there. All those popular kids who live such lives of hedonistic pleasures while I've had to rot in loneliness for all these years. They've all looked down upon me every time I tried to go out and join them, they've all treated me like a mouse. Well now I will be a god compared to you. You will all be animals. You are animals and I will slaughter you like animals. I will be a god, exacting my retribution on all those who deserve it. You do deserve it. Just for the crime of living a better life than me. All you popular kids, you've never accepted me, and now you will all pay for it.<sup>105</sup>

There is much going on here, but the core emotions are shame and revenge. Shame, C. Fred Alford observes, "is about what others think of us", whereas guilt "is about what we think of

ourselves”.<sup>106</sup> Shame, more specifically, (this is Jon Elster), “is triggered by the contemptuous or disgusted disapproval by others”.<sup>107</sup>

As is clear from the video, Rodger felt no sense of guilt for the things he had done (or not done) in his short and unremarkable life. But he had an acute and inexhaustible sensitivity to what others thought of him and could not abide what he saw as the inhumane disregard in which he was held by his peers. This made him feel deeply ashamed, as though he was worthless, a nobody. To feel shame, Elster suggests, is to feel small.<sup>108</sup> And this is precisely how Rodger felt: “like a mouse”, as he put it.

There is a potent sexual element to Rodger’s shame: he felt sexually inadequate, a “gentleman” who, while gentle – indeed, “the supreme gentleman” - was not a “true” man because he was a little *mouse* whom, in his words, “they’ve all looked down upon”. He felt emasculated.

“Nothing,” Mark Juergensmeyer writes, “is more intimate than sexuality, and no greater humiliation can be experienced than failure over what one perceives to be one’s sexual role.”<sup>109</sup> According to Juergensmeyer, such failures “can lead to public violence,” which is performed to cancel out feelings of shame and to reassert the claim to manhood.<sup>110</sup> Juergensmeyer describes this process as “dehumiliation”, an “escape from humiliating and impossible predicaments”.

Rodger’s rampage can be understood in this light: not only as an act of violent revenge against his perceived oppressors (both female and male), but as a way of reasserting his claim to virility as a man and restoring his status as the towering male “god” he thought he was. In reality, of course, it was neither of these things: it was an inexcusable act of mass murder and violence against young and defenseless civilians. But, from Rodger’s perspective, he was bravely righting all the wrongs that had been done to him, which would have made him feel righteous and powerful – god-like. In Jack Katz’s terminology, he was “killing in

defense of the Good”; he was a “righteous killer”.<sup>111</sup> And the good he was defending was his male pride and honor.<sup>112</sup>

Rodger is not unlike the figure of the “radical loser” described by Hans Magnus Enzensberger: the marginal man who sees himself as the perennial victim of some insult, humbling or humiliation deliberately orchestrated by others. Whatever the disappointment or failure that befalls them, it is always others who are to blame. And yet they can never entirely rid themselves of the suspicion that their predicament is self-inflicted and that they do not deserve the esteem they feel is their just entitlement. For Enzensberger, the loser’s attraction to homicidal-suicidal violence is obvious: it allows him not only to “triumph over others by annihilating them,” but also to put an end to his own existence, which is subconsciously felt to be worthless.<sup>113</sup>

In addition to the video he made and circulated, Rodger wrote a 137-page memoir (“My Twisted World”), which he sent to his therapist and members of his family. All of the above-mentioned themes are present in this document, especially shame. “I had to suffer the shame of other boys respecting me less because I didn’t get any girls,” he wrote,<sup>114</sup> suggesting that his perceived rejection by girls was all the more emasculating because other boys were aware of it. But there is something else that requires emphasis: Rodger wanted to punish – to terrorize - *all* women. And he wanted to do this not for the purpose of bringing about any specific, tangible political goal, but *for its own sake*, because he thought it was right that they recognize some deep truth about the world and their unjust lording over marginal and “magnificent” men just like him. He wanted to send them a message and to shock them out of what he saw as their callous indifference or, in Waldron’s phrasing, to “bring about some sort of further ethical transformation in the mentality or attitudes of the targeted population”, to make them become “less arrogant and complacent” about the plight of incels. Consider, for example, the following lines:

I cannot kill every single female on earth, but I can deliver a devastating blow that will shake all of them to the core of their wicked hearts. I will attack the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender... Finally, at long last, I can show the world my true worth.<sup>115</sup>

Rodger's atrocity is the first recognized incident of incel-inspired terrorism, and among many incels he is accorded the status of a martyr: a figure worthy of sympathy and even praise. It is not difficult to see why: Most incels identify with Rodger not because he killed women, but because they too share his sense of sexual shame and injured male pride (or aggrieved entitlement). If they can understand his vengeful rage, it is because they too feel an abundance of it. Any explanatory account of incel-inspired terrorism that does not foreground these two core and closely related emotions<sup>116</sup> - shame and revenge - is likely to be partial or seriously incomplete.

## **Conclusion**

Incels, although alone and lonely, are part of a fringe online subculture that provides an identity and source of meaning and solidarity for those who identify as incels. While the incel subculture sizzles with hateful rhetoric against women, feminists and their male supporters, it would be a mistake to categorize it as a form of violent extremism, since it does not advocate the use of violence as a necessary remedy for in-group defence. By portraying incels as the maligned victims of demonic women and a hostile society, the incel worldview serves to minimize acts of incel-inspired terrorism. But it does not *ideologically justify* these acts or affirm violence against women and other enemies as a sacred duty incumbent on all incels.

Indeed, the prevailing condition among incels is one of apathy, not violent rebellion. Of the few who have committed acts of terrorism, at least part of their motivation was to awaken other incels from their passivity and to provoke them into rising up against their perceived tormentors. “I was thinking that I would inspire future masses to join me in my uprising,” said Minassian in his interrogation,<sup>117</sup> echoing Harper-Mercer, who wrote in his memoir, “I hope to inspire the masses with this [attack], at least enough to get their passions aroused”.<sup>118</sup> Indeed Minassian was contemptuous of other incels who remained resigned to their sad, lowly state. “I would consider them too cowardly to act on their anger,” he said.<sup>119</sup> Rodger was similarly disdainful of like-minded incels on PUAHate.com, a website dedicated to discrediting pick-up artists. “Many of them share my hatred of women, though unlike me they would be too cowardly to act on it,” he wrote.<sup>120</sup>

None of this implies that the incel subculture is benign. It is far from benign for all the obvious reasons. It is replete with hatred and conspiracy thinking. But is it dangerous? More research needs to be done on this. How does active participation in incel online spaces affect the mental well-being of those who so participate? Does it help them by offering a community of like-minded souls with whom they can bond and “vent”? Or does it hinder them by normalizing hateful attitudes toward women, making them even less likely to “ascend” from their incel status? Perhaps it both helps and hinders. Moreover, what is the relationship between incel online spaces and actual incel-inspired terrorism? Does active participation in the former have any bearing on the latter, and if so, how should we understand and measure this? The consensus among scholars of jihadism is that exposure to jihadist propaganda, while not itself a cause of jihadist radicalization, serves to reinforce pre-existing assumptions and beliefs that are already tending toward the extreme.<sup>121</sup> Does sustained exposure to incel online spaces function in much the same way? Rodger certainly hinted as this in his comments about PUAHate.com: “The posts on that website only

confirmed many of the theories I had about how wicked and degenerate women really are.”<sup>122</sup> Rodger also wrote how “most of the people on that website have extremely stupid opinions that I found very frustrating,”<sup>123</sup> implying that he was far from some dupe who had been tricked or seduced into accepting the views he encountered on it.

Incel-inspired terrorism follows a non-coercive logic, whereby the primary purpose is to punish women for their supposed sins against incels. This urge to punish, I have suggested, is rooted in shame, where chronic sexual rejection at the hands of women is experienced as a grave personal insult that must be avenged so as to restore a sense of male honor. Further research is needed to support and develop this line of analysis, drawing on a wider range of case-studies.

One crucial step forward for understanding incels would be to conduct life-history interviews with them, probing how they became incels, what this status means to them and how being an incel shapes their lives and interactions with others, especially women. The journalist Naama Kates, who has interviewed many incels, has shown that recruiting incels for this purpose can be done and that a great deal can be learned from interviewing them, including much of interest about their motivations, psychological traits and mental health.

Incels attract considerable attention across different forms of media, some of it prurient and drenched in contempt. Incels are often tarnished as white supremacists or as terrorists - or terrorists-in-the-making. One thing that terrorism studies can do is to act as a coolant to these more hysterical impulses and narratives in the broader culture by offering a sober, dispassionate and empirically-driven analysis of incels and the threat they pose. But it can also draw on a broader range of interdisciplinary tools for better understanding the subculture to which incels belong and the emotions that animate it, as I have tried to do in this article.

## **Notes**

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I am extremely grateful to Bruce Hoffman, Keith Hayward and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Porter, “Eight of 10 Victims in Toronto Van Rampage Were Women,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/27/world/canada/eight-of-10-victims-in-toronto-van-rampage-were-women.html>.

<sup>2</sup> On vehicle ramming attacks, see Keith Hayward and Vince Miller, “‘I Did My Bit’: Terrorism, Tarde and the Vehicle Ramming Attack as an Imitative Event,” *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59 (1) (2019), 1–23.

<sup>3</sup> Humphreys, “‘It was time that I stood up to the Chads and Stacys’: What the van-attack accused told Toronto police,” *The National Post*, September 27, 2019, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/toronto-van-attack-police-interview>.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43:7 (2020), 565-587, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459. See also See Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “Incels: America’s Newest Domestic Terrorism Threat,” *Lawfare*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/incels-americas-newest-domestic-terrorism-threat>.

<sup>5</sup> December Maxwell *et al*, “A Short Story of a Lonely Guy”: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit,” *Sexuality & Culture*, March 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09724-6>.

<sup>6</sup> Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (New York: The Free Press, 1955); Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1968)

<sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1963); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959).



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<sup>8</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Debbie Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere,” *Men & Masculinities*, 22(4) (2019), 638-657.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas J Scheff, *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994); Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Discussion threads were collected between May 5 and June 5, 2020. They were selected from three subforums: “Must-Read Content”, “Inceldom Discussion” and “OffTopic”. Threads were chosen on the basis of recurrent topics and on the number of comments posted (50 or over). Topics included the following: the meaning and miseries of inceldom; physical appearance and penis size; feminism; suicide; pornography; coping strategies (“copes”) for incels; prostitution; terrorism; Elliot Rodger; white nationalism; media reportage on incels; and homosexuality. In total, I collected and surveyed over 5000 comments.

<sup>12</sup> A “master status” is a primary identifying characteristic of an individual (Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*).

<sup>13</sup> Renske van der Veer, for example, argues that the incel “phenomenon needs a consciously gender-neutral approach” (Renske van der Veer, “Analysing personal accounts of perpetrators of incel violence: what do they want and who do they target?,” ICCT, June 4, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/analysing-personal-accounts-of-perpetrators-of-incel-violence-what-do-they-want-and-who-do-they-target/>). This seems to be a curious argument to make in respect to an all-male subculture in which a gendered hatred of women occupies

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the foreground, unless by “gender-neutral” Van der Veer simply means that women can be involuntarily celibate too.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Of the 300 respondents surveyed in a 2001 study of involuntary celibates, 108 were women: see Elisabeth O. Burgess, Denise Donnelly, Joy Dillard and Regina Davis, “Surfing for sex: Studying involuntary celibacy using the internet,” *Sexuality & Culture* 5 (2001), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Robert S. Weiss, *Going It Alone* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 197.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Nick Chester, “Meet the women of the incel movement,” *Huck*, December 5, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/tech/meet-the-women-of-the-incel-movement/>.

<sup>19</sup> See Jia Tolentino, “The Rage of the Incels Incels,” *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rage-of-the-incels>. Jia writes: “None of the people [virgins, both men and women] I interviewed believed that they were owed the sex that they wished to have.”

<sup>20</sup> Alex DiBranco, “Male Supremacist Terrorism as a Rising Threat,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, February 10, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/male-supremacist-terrorism-as-a-rising-threat/>; Ging “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, 639-640.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” 658.

<sup>22</sup> Robert S. Weiss, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1973), 72.

<sup>23</sup> The reference to “blackpilled” is an adaptation of the “blue pill/red pill” binary from the science fiction movie *The Matrix*, according to which those who take the blue pill live in a world of illusion, whereas those who take the red pill see the world as it truly is (see Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence”, 568).

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<sup>24</sup> Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint’: Analyzing the Violent Worldview Behind the 2018 Toronto Attack,” *Terrorism & Political Violence* (August 2019), DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1638256, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> C. A. J. Coady, “Defining Terrorism,” in Igor Primoratz, ed., *Terrorism: The Philosophical Issues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

<sup>28</sup> See Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence”, 568, footnote 19.

<sup>29</sup> See Phil Gurski, “Incel violence is not terrorism...at least not yet,” May 28, 2020, <https://borealistthreatandrisk.com/incele-violence-is-not-terrorism-at-least-not-yet/>.

<sup>30</sup> See Olivier Roy, *Jihad and death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (London: Hurst, 2017), 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> See Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” 568.

<sup>32</sup> How this classification is applied in actual cases will of course be the subject of controversy and disagreement: see Simon Cottee, “Canada Will Host the World’s First Incel Terrorism Show Trial,” *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/canada-may-host-the-worlds-first-incele-show-trial/>.

<sup>33</sup> Baele *et al*, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint’”, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” 569.

<sup>35</sup> This is a strong theme in the work of journalist Naama Kates, who has interviewed scores of incels on her superb podcast “Incel”, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/incele/id1469915971>.

<sup>36</sup> Maxwell *et al*, “A Short Story of a Lonely Guy,” 19.

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<sup>37</sup> On the importance of “discursive frames” in political mobilization, see esp. David A. Snow, and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research*, vol. 1 (1988), 197–217.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, *Delinquent Boys*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> See Allie Conti, “Learn to Decode the Secret Language of the Incel Subculture,” *VICE*, June 26, 2018, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/7xmaze/learn-to-decode-the-secret-language-of-the-incel-subculture](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/7xmaze/learn-to-decode-the-secret-language-of-the-incel-subculture).

<sup>40</sup> See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 203.

<sup>41</sup> Maxwell *et al*, “A Short Story of a Lonely Guy,” 18.

<sup>42</sup> On the centrality of intentionality in recovering meaning, see esp. Skinner, *Visions of Politics I*.

<sup>43</sup> Sylvia Jaki *et al*, “Online Hatred of Women in the Incels.me Forum: Linguistic Analysis and Automatic Detection,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 7(2) (2019), 20, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00026.jak>.

<sup>44</sup> Incels refer to the latter as “shit-posting”: “the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers (Robert Evans, “Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre,” *bellingcat.com*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/>).

<sup>45</sup> Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” 577.

<sup>46</sup> See esp. Baele *et al*, “From ‘Incel’ to ‘Saint’”, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Akil Awan, “Radicalization on the Internet?”, *The RUSI Journal*, 152 (3) (2007), 77, [https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/25855972/AWAN\\_Radicalization\\_RUSI.pdf](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/25855972/AWAN_Radicalization_RUSI.pdf)

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Cushman, “Intellectuals and Resentment Toward Capitalism,” *Society*, 49 (2012), 249.

<sup>49</sup> On aggrieved male entitlement, see esp. Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> Cushman notes that “resentment is particularly intense when the desired good is highly visible, but cannot be had” (Cushman, “Intellectuals and Resentment Toward Capitalism, 249).

<sup>51</sup> Elliot Rodger, *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* (2014): 117, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1173808-elliott-rodger-manifesto.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Some incels, it should be noted, suffer from physical deformities.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Goffman defines a sad tale as “a kind of lamentation and apologia” which someone tells “as a means of accounting for his present low estate” (Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 67).

<sup>55</sup> See esp. Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Weiss, *Loneliness*, xviii.

<sup>57</sup> Cohen, *Delinquent Boys*, 53, emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–54.

<sup>59</sup> Aja Romano, “What a woman-led incel support group can teach us about men and mental health,” *Vox*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/20/17314846/incel-support-group-therapy-black-pill-mental-health>.

<sup>60</sup> Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 207.

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<sup>61</sup> Justin Gilmore, “Incels: The New Politics of Indifference,” Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, November 11, 2019, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/11/11/incels-the-new-politics-of-indifference/>.

<sup>62</sup> See Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”; Alice E. Marwick and Robyn Caplan, “Drinking male tears: language, the manosphere, and networked harassment,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 18 (4) (2018), 543-559, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1450568.

<sup>63</sup> Helen Lewis, “To Learn About the Far-Right, Start With the ‘Manosphere,’” *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/anti-feminism-gateway-far-right/595642/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Humphreys, “‘It was time that I stood up to the Chads and Stacys’.”

<sup>66</sup> See <https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Christopher-Sean-Harper-Mercer-My-Manifesto.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” 573.

<sup>68</sup> See “Rotherham child sexual abuse: Gang of seven guilty,” *BBC News*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-45980210>.

<sup>69</sup> Brenton Tarrant, “The Great Replacement,” [https://www.ilfoglio.it/userUpload/The\\_Great\\_Replacementconvertito.pdf](https://www.ilfoglio.it/userUpload/The_Great_Replacementconvertito.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> See Elizabeth Pearson, “Gendered Reflections? Extremism in the UK’s Radical Right and al-Muhajiroun Networks,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2020), 8. DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759270. Referring to British activist Tommy Robinson, Pearson writes: “[he] situates the ability to protect (particular) women at the heart of his vision of masculinity, and nationalist virtue, ‘it’s honorable to want to protect women.’”

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<sup>71</sup> Simon Cottee, “Sex and Shame: What Incels and Jihadists Have in Common,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/opinion/sex-shame-incelsjihadists-minassian.html>.

<sup>72</sup> See Pearson, “Gendered Reflections?,” 14.

<sup>73</sup> Hoffman *et al*, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence”, 575.

<sup>74</sup> See esp. See Diego Gambetta, “Can We Make Sense of Suicide Missions,” in Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 295-298.

<sup>75</sup> Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 129-130.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>79</sup> The most notorious example is Mohamed Atta, the ringleader of the 9/11 attacks: In his will Atta instructed that his body be prepared for burial by “good Muslims” and that no woman was to go near it; in his life Atta refused to date women or to even shake their hands (see “Mohamed Atta’s Last Will And Testament,” *Frontline*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/network/personal/attawill.html>).

<sup>80</sup> Humphreys, “‘It was time that I stood up to the Chads and Stacys’.”

<sup>81</sup> Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 136.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>87</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>88</sup> Igor Primoratz, “What Is Terrorism?”, in Primoratz, ed., *Terrorism: The Philosophical Issues*, 16.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends Achievements and Failures* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 5.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> This is not, of course, to deny that many acts of terrorism are intended very precisely to coerce both civilians and governments.

<sup>92</sup> Coady, “Defining Terrorism,” 6.

<sup>93</sup> Publicity, Jeremy Waldron writes, “is itself a strategic asset” for a terrorist group, which “it can use for all sorts of purposes, not just for the narrow range of intimidatory purposes.” “It may be used,” he writes, “to win recruits, or to put an issue on the political agenda, or to attract international attention to some situation which the terrorist manages to associate with the campaign.” (Jeremy Waldron, “Terrorism and the Uses of Terror,” *Journal of Ethics*, 8(1) (2004), 27)

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>95</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 122.

<sup>96</sup> Waldron, “Terrorism and the Uses of Terror,” 28.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>100</sup> See <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1wpb28>  
<https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-transcript-ucsb-shootings-video-20140524-story.html>



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<sup>101</sup> Megan Garvey, “Transcript of the disturbing video ‘Elliot Rodger’s Retribution’,” *The Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-transcript-ucsb-shootings-video-20140524-story.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Roy F. Baumeister writes that “the most potent recipe for violence is a favorable view of oneself that is disputed or undermined by someone else – in short, threatened egotism (Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 141).

<sup>103</sup> DiBranco, “Male Supremacist Terrorism as a Rising Threat”.

<sup>104</sup> Garvey, “Transcript”.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> C. Fred Alford, *Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>107</sup> Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 149.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>109</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 198.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 199

<sup>111</sup> Katz, *Seductions of Crime*, 15.

<sup>112</sup> See Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, 454: “Humiliation is emasculation: humiliate someone, and you take away his manhood. For many men, humiliation must be avenged, or you cease to be a man.”

<sup>113</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “The Radical Loser,” *signandsight.com*, December 1, 2005, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/493.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 135.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1173808-elliott-rodger-manifesto.html>.

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<sup>116</sup> See Scheff, *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994); see also Katz, *Seductions of Crime*, 23: “As a lived experience, rage is livid with the awareness of humiliation.”

<sup>117</sup> Humphreys, “‘It was time that I stood up to the Chads and Stacys’.”

<sup>118</sup> See <https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Christopher-Sean-Harper-Mercer-My-Manifesto.pdf>

<sup>119</sup> Humphreys, “‘It was time that I stood up to the Chads and Stacys’.”

<sup>120</sup> Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 117.

<sup>121</sup> See Ines von Behr et al., “Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism,” RAND (2013), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR453.readonline.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.readonline.html), 17; and Peter R. Neumann, “Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36(6) (2013), 436.

<sup>122</sup> Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 117-8.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.