

The manosphere

Balls to all that

The rebalancing of the sexes has spawned 21st-century misogyny

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W. BRADFORD WILCOX, an academic at the University of Virginia who holds robust views on the benefits of marriage for adults and children, is used to sparking debates. But, after publishing a video about the economics of marriage, he was surprised to field criticism online from a character called “Turd Flinging Monkey”. In his own 15-minute broadcast, the chimp equated marriage to slavery. TFM, as he’s sometimes called for short, is a YouTube character created by a disciple of the Men Going Their Own Way movement. An online fraternity, MGTOW believe that marriage fails basic cost-benefit analysis. Why sacrifice sexual freedom for a wife who may later divorce you and take your children and assets? Better to eschew “gynocentric” conventions in favour of self-sovereignty, the logic goes.

“Save a male and stop a wedding™” is an unregistered trademark of MGTOW.com, one of many websites and blogs that form the manosphere, a diffuse and nebulous corner of the internet. The groups sometimes overlap and sometimes feud; their aims range from fighting for fathers’ rights in family courts, where they believe men get raw deals, to trading in tips about how to seduce women. One keyboard Don Juan, Roosh V, has won fame (and ire) for publishing books like “Day Bang: How to Casually Pick up Girls During the Day” and “Bang Poland: How To Make Love With Polish Girls in Poland”.

Dedicated members of the manosphere groups tend to see the world as divided between consumers of blue pills and red pills, a concept borrowed from the “Matrix” films. If Neo, the film’s hero, takes the blue pill, he will remain blissfully ignorant of the powerlessness of humans. Gulping down the red pill will mean reckoning with the truth and seeing “how deep the rabbit hole [went]”. In the manosphere, blue-pill thinkers are those who uncritically accept the idea that society discriminates against women. “Red Pillers”, by contrast, recognise that it is men who are worse-off. As proof, they point to false rape accusations, disparities in the length of prison sentences—63% longer for men, on average—and gaps in college enrolment, where women outnumber men by 12%.

Such grievances led Paul Elam, a 50-something Texan truck driver, to found AVoiceForMen.com in 2009. The site is among the most popular in the manosphere, though Mr Elam objects to this categorisation. “We consistently clash with other groups—like pick-up artists—considered part of the manosphere,” he explains.

Mr Elam had his red-pill epiphany after reading “The Myth of Male Power” by Warren Farrell. At the time he was working as a substance-abuse counsellor in Houston, Texas. He noticed his

colleagues asked every woman who came into the centre whether she had suffered harm at the hands of a significant other, and every man whether he had perpetrated such harm. The questions were never posed the other way round. When Mr Elam inquired why, he says his male and female colleagues snapped at him. “The idea of men taking care of themselves frightens people. People have always relied on men to create safe societies,” Mr Elam says. “When they say ‘What about me?’ that creates fear. The impulse is to think ‘Well then, who’s going to take care of us?’”

Interest in such ideas is not robust enough to make them mainstream, but it is too widespread for the manosphere to be considered just a fringe. The popular Red-Pill group on Reddit, a platform for online discussion groups, has grown from 19 followers in 2012 to more than 155,000 today. The “Men’s Rights” Reddit group has also seen its subscriber base double to over 100,000 in the same period.

Observers of the manosphere disagree over exactly what fuels it. Barbara Risman, the head of the sociology department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, attributes its rise to a fear that as women become more liberated, men are struggling with feeling dispensable. “Previous men’s movements dealt with an expansion of the idea of what men could be. This is different. This is about men feeling as though they’ve lost dominance.”

For his part, Mr Wilcox, the simian provoker and professor, thinks the movement is related to the decline of the traditional family unit. The percentage of Americans over 18 who are married has dropped precipitously in the past half century from 72% in 1960 to 50% in 2014. “Family breakdown can be a breeding ground for misogyny,” he says. Mr Elam retorts that Mr Wilcox’s views are sexist towards men. “You would never tell a woman to ‘woman up’ and get married if she didn’t want to. But that’s what he’s telling men to do.”

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