

The New Man of 4chan

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March 2016

Contents

Going Beta	4
The 4Chan War on Women	6
Like Uber, but for Violent Misogyny	8
All the Young Dudes	10
Remedial Class	12
Fascism, for the Lulz	14
The Tangled Net	16

“The first of our kind has struck fear into the hearts of America,” announced one commenter last year on the giddily offensive /r9k/ board of the notorious, anarchic site 4chan. “This is only the beginning. The Beta Rebellion has begun. Soon, more of our brothers will take up arms to become martyrs to this revolution.” The post, dated October 1, was referring to the news that twenty-six-year-old Chris Harper-Mercer had killed nine classmates and injured nine others before shooting himself at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon.

The night before the shooting, an earlier post on /r9k/ had, in veiled but ominous terms, warned fellow commenters from the Northwestern United States that it would be a good idea to steer clear of school that day. The implication was not lost on the /r9k/ community. The first responder in the thread asked, “Is the beta uprising finally going down?” while others encouraged the anonymous poster and gave him tips on how to conduct a mass shooting. The apparent link between the post and the killer remains under FBI investigation, but in the immediate wake of Harper-Mercer’s rampage, a number of the board’s users hailed it as a victory for the beta rebellion.

The details that emerged about Harper-Mercer’s online life made it difficult not to resort to stereotyping. On a dating site, he had listed pop-culture obsessions typical of “beta” shut-ins, including “internet, killing zombies, movies, music, reading,” and added that he lived “with parents.” His profile specified that he was looking for a companion with a shared set of personality traits: “introvert, loner, lover, geek, nerd.” The term “beta,” in the circles Harper-Mercer frequented, is an ironic inversion of the fabled swagger of the alpha male. Whereas alphas tend to be macho, sporty, and mainstream in their tastes, betas see themselves as less dominant males, withdrawn, obsessional, and curatorial in their cultural habits.

Withdrawn does not necessarily imply peaceable, however, which is where the “uprising” and “rebellion” parts of the beta identity come in. This particular brand of computer-enabled detachment easily seeps into a mindset of entitled violence and is accompanied by a mixture of influences from the far right to the countercultural left. The email on Harper-Mercer’s dating profile was ironcross45@gmail.com, but he was also a member of a group named “Doesn’t Like Organized Religion,” and blogged that “The material world is a lie ... Most people will spend hours standing in front of stores just to buy a new iphone.” Harper-Mercer left behind a manifesto in which he described his feelings of social and sexual rejection and showed he had studied mass killers. It was reminiscent of the video—circulated widely among exponents of the beta rebellion—recorded by “virgin killer” Elliot Rodger, who murdered six victims and injured fourteen more in Isla Vista, California, explaining how his own shooting spree was rooted in sexual frustration.

Going Beta

On men's rights sites and in some geeky subcultures, "beta male" is a common term of identification, one of both belonging and self-mockery. It has become a popular meme on 4chan's recreationally obnoxious /b/ board, a precursor to /r9k/ that produced hacker collectives such as Anonymous while also incubating scores of anti-feminist online attacks in recent years. Know Your Meme records the earliest use of the term "beta uprising" in 2011, on the men's rights movement blog *Fight for Justice*. From around 2013, the beta-male uprising was a regular topic among 4chan users; it encompassed elaborate fantasies of revenge against attractive women, macho jocks, and other "normies" with majority tastes and attitudes.

The post alleged to be Harper-Mercer's school shooting alert came with an image of Pepe the Frog, a character lifted from the Matt Furie comic strip *Boy's Club*, angrily brandishing a gun. This, too, was a trope of the beta rebellion: in his original cartoon form, Pepe was a sad sack, prone to bouts of humiliation. But as his froggy visage got meme-fied on 4chan, he took on a distinctly more menacing aspect. Pepe became a favorite icon of last-straw ranters spewing extreme misogyny, racism, and vengefulness. Much to the irritation of geeks, Pepe also became popular among normies, which is why you can find videos on YouTube of angry Pepe in a red rage accompanied by variations of the male scream, "Normies! Get the fuck off my board!"

Overwrought digital threats and confrontational online rhetoric are nearly as old as the Internet itself. Posters on 4chan/b/'s more transgressive threads regularly claim that they are about to do terrible things to themselves and others.

But some posters are also acting out those fantasies. Among the stale memes, repeat posts, true-life confessions, pre-rampage tip-offs, and cock-and-bull stories that make beta forums so impenetrable, sometimes even insiders can't tell which are which. In November 2014, an anonymous 4chan user submitted several photos of what appeared to be a woman's naked and strangled corpse, along with a confession: "Turns out it's way harder to strangle someone to death than it looks on the movies ... Her son will be home from school soon. He'll find her then call the cops. I just wanted to share the pics before they find me. I bought a bb gun that looks realistic enough. When they come, I'll pull it and it will be suicide by cop. I understand the doubts. Just check the fucking news. I have to lose my phone now."

Later that same day, police in Port Orchard, Washington, announced that they were investigating a suspected homicide, after the thirteen-year-old son of a woman in her early thirties found her dead in their home. The victim, Amber Lynn Coplin, was indeed the woman in the 4chan/b/ photo. Her thirty-three-year-old live-in boyfriend,

David Michael Kalac, was arrested after a brief police chase and charged with murder. Every dead body on 4chan is a joke, unless it isn't.

Elliot Rodger's rampage, too, was real. On a spring day in 2014, Rodger stabbed his roommates, drove to a University of California–Santa Barbara sorority house, and hammered on the door. When he was denied entry, Rodger shot at people outside, in the end killing mostly men. The rampage ended when he crashed into a parked vehicle; police found him dead in his car with a self-inflicted gunshot wound in his head.

Midway through his massacre, Rodger uploaded a final video to YouTube, titled "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," outlining his purpose. He announced his desire to punish women for rejecting him and railed against sexually active, macho, dominant men, whom he called "brutes" and "animals":

Well, this is my last video, it all has to come to this. Tomorrow is the day of retribution, the day in which I will have my revenge against humanity, against all of you ... I've been through college for two and a half years, more than that actually, and I'm still a virgin. It has been very torturous ... I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it ... I'm the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman.

The 4Chan War on Women

Rodger also left behind a lengthy autobiographical manuscript, titled *My Twisted World*. In it, he describes his frustration at not being able to find a girlfriend, his hatred of women, and his contempt for ethnic minorities and interracial couples (in spite of his own mixed-race background). The manifesto specifically mentions a “War on Women,” which will unfold in two stages: “The Second Phase will take place on the Day of Retribution itself, just before the climactic massacre ... My War on Women ... I will attack the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender: The hottest sorority of UCSB.”

On 4chan/b/, the day the story broke, Rodger was the subject of much fevered attention. One contributor posted a selfie of Rodger from his Facebook profile and wrote, “Elliot Rodger, the supreme gentleman, was part of /b/. Discuss.” “That dude was fairly good looking,” one commenter remarked. “He must’ve just been the beta to end all betas if he never got laid.” Another commenter wrote, “Manifesto had ‘I do not forget, I do not forgive’ and ‘kissless virgin,’ etc., he was a /b/tard.” Rodger’s “I do not forget, I do not forgive” was likely a reference to a sign-off used by Anonymous, which emerged from 4chan/b/. Anonymous has gone on to do some activist work that intersects with feminist concerns, including the exposure of the names of those allegedly involved in the ugly Steubenville, Ohio, rape case. But the Anonymous doxer who exposed the high school footballers went on to be accused of sexual assault himself. Whoever the target, the group’s vengeful sensibility survives, not only in the Guy Fawkes iconography that has been adopted by various protest movements, but also in the beta rebellion’s reformist rhetoric.

Rodger identified as an “incel,” or involuntarily celibate. He would troll Bodybuilding.com’s “miscellaneous” section posting comments like “Men shouldn’t have to look and act like big, animalistic beasts to get women. The fact that women still prioritize brute strength just shows that their minds haven’t fully evolved.” After the Harper-Mercer shootings, one 4chan commenter wrote, “/r9k/ needs a new martyr alongside our hallowed Elliot.”

Rodger’s online identity is traceable to several other forums, too, including the now-defunct PUAhate, where men laid into pick-up artists for putting women on a pedestal and occasionally espoused hardcore separatism in the vein of the Men Going Their Own Way movement. Rodger wrote in his long manifesto that on PUAhate he had discovered “a forum full of men who are starved of sex, just like me.” He also frequented a subreddit for incels called ForeverAlone (referencing a meme made popular by 4chan) and one called TheRedPill (alluding to *The Matrix* movie), which hosts anti-feminist

men and men who take a dim view of what is involved in the game of sexual conquest. After the Rodger massacre, a thread appeared on TheRedPill called “Omega man kills 6 and commits suicide.” One commenter on the thread wrote:

If you read his manifesto, you also learn that he pedestaled pussy to an extreme degree basically his entire life since puberty. It turned into hating of women and sex in the very end, but it was twenty years of making vagina the Holy Grail of his existence that really fucked up his head.

To which another commenter responded:

Feminists and religious zealots strive to take all sexual outlets away from men, be it prostitution, sex travel, or mere pornography for masturbation. Thus these politicians bear partial responsibility for increasing sex crimes against women and children, and probably for the mayhem created by Elliot Rodger.

And another, sympathetically:

He was incel. Lonliness [*sic*] and extreme sexual deprivation can have extremely serious psychological effects on some people ... this kind of shit breaks a young man’s spirit.

Like Uber, but for Violent Misogyny

It's easy to mistake the beta rebellion for a youthful, but otherwise undifferentiated, variation on the bad old tradition of patriarchy. Yet the phenomenon bears the unmistakable signs of a new, net-bred brand of misogyny. It exists squarely within the libertarian ethos that infused computer cultures spanning from the early, back-to-the-land, frontier hacker culture of the sixties and seventies to the Californian rebel capitalism of the dotcom neoliberalism of the nineties.

As the same frontier sensibility that characterized early Internet culture also runs through American gun culture, it's no great surprise that the rites of gun worship and principled geek isolation should overlap—or that they should find expression in the targeting of women whom beta men believe are dedicated to a matriarchal thwarting of male freedom and desire. But this seamless convergence of women-demonizing forces is, indeed, something new under the sun, an innovative incarnation of the free-floating male grievance that, as we've seen, metastasizes through culture. It's striking, then, to note just how thoroughly both the press and the social media-centric feminist commentariat have consigned the beta rebellion to the dustbin of outmoded patriarchy—treating it as an obsolescing bug, as opposed to a distressing feature, of today's Internet discourse.

In her 2013 book *Cybersexism*, feminist journalist Laurie Penny admits that the culture of digital woman-hating does indeed have a surface affinity with geek culture, but then goes on to suggest that online misogyny is a conservative remnant of the pre-Internet past. “We have a brave new world which looks far too much like the cruel old world” and “recreates offline prejudices,” she writes.

Academics have echoed this view, characterizing online misogyny as the politics of conservatism and patriarchy reproducing itself anachronistically in new media, or as just another emanation of hegemonic masculinity. For example, in a study of gender and age bias in online communities, Jonathan Warren, Sharon Stoerger, and Ken Kelley wrote that “many age-old forms of discrimination appear to have been preserved.” Pamela Turton-Turner analyzed “recent online hate campaigns mobilized against females,” which, she argues, are “symptomatic of a broader normalization of old-style sexism.” Adrienne Shaw agreed in an article titled “The Internet Is Full of Jerks Because the World Is Full of Jerks,” stating that “misogyny, racism, homophobia, etc. were not invented by the internet.”

In response to Harper-Mercer's massacre, *Salon* ran the headline, "Toxic Masculinity Is Tearing Us Apart." The *Huffington Post* and *Ms.* magazine ran articles declaring the problem was "masculinity, masculinity, masculinity." Writer Soraya Chemaly asserted, "What we really need ... is a public conversation about hegemonic masculinity in the United States... Schools, parents, coaches and religious communities all need to be thinking deeply about how traditional ideas about gender and gender stereotypes work to create a national culture."

All the Young Dudes

But how, exactly, does “hegemonic masculinity” accurately sum up a scene explicitly identifying as beta male? And can “traditional ideas about gender” really be bursting forth from an Internet culture that also features gender-bending pornography, discussions about bisexual curiosity, and a male My Little Pony fandom? What’s more, can a retreat from the traditional authority of the nuclear family into an extended adolescence of videogames, porn, and pranks really be described as patriarchal?

Those seeking to defend their ideological turf will say that the killers are measuring themselves against a damaging masculine ideal, but at what point is this stretching the hegemonic masculinity theory so far that it becomes tautological—and a rote explanation for all bad male behavior?

In fact, a great deal about the beta-male rebellion runs counter to theories of masculinity advanced by scholars like R. W. Connell and Michael Kimmel. In her 2005 book *Masculinities*, Connell lists the words “nerd” and “geek” among the terms that stigmatize marginal masculinities. The beta style draws from a countercultural genealogy and identifies itself against feminism but also against social conservatism, political correctness, mainstream consumer culture, and most important, against hegemonic masculinity itself.

The self-organized corps of women-hating men, by the lights of conventional academic-feminist theory, should be united in the repression of any and all gay male tendencies expressed online. But 4chan/b/ traffics openly in gay and trans pornography and hosts discussions of bisexual attraction. During one such discussion, a /b/ user wrote, “Why can’t you just tell yourself you’re bi and be happy with that? When I first came here /b/ made me question my sexuality real fucking fast. Just admit you’re half faggot half straight and be done with it, no shame in that.”

Similarly, the beta view of gender is complicated by an anti-mass-culture outlook. As copycat threats multiplied on /r9k/ after the Harper-Mercer shootings, one commenter advised, “Make sure you got molotovs. it is really easy and painfully [*sic*] way to kill many normies.” Another wrote that “Chads and Staceys” should be targeted, referencing a 4chan meme devoted to a parodic figure known as Chad Thundercock. As his name none too subtly suggests, Chad is a stand-in for the young, attractive, muscular football player claiming dominance over the beta-world in the contest for sexual success with women. Chad and his female equivalent Stacey are embodiments of the “normies” meme—and are typically depicted as sports playing, small-town ciphers of mass culture with generic tastes. One famous post, accompanied by an image of a football player and cheerleader kissing, describes with relish a fantasy of the couple

going home together in his Ford, him crashing, and Stacey's "last moments spent in utter agony" as she tries to tear her "bronze arm" free.

Remedial Class

As one patiently surveys the varieties of online expression favored by beta males, it becomes apparent that, in addition to their all too palpable sense of self-loathing, they're further actuated by a pronounced sort of class contempt. One key source of their rage—against both the sexual pecking order and society at large—is that their own sense of superiority over the masses, the unspecial “normies,” is not reflected back to them by others in real life.

Beta-male defenders like *Breitbart* tech editor Milo Yiannopoulos have argued that feminism has created cruel conditions for men who are different and geeky, while some feminists criticize the beta rebellion even as they regard the marginalized masculinities at its heart as a progressive force—a kind of counter-hegemonic corrective to an older notion of masculinity based on physical strength and machismo. But surely the idea that geeks are a victim group is out of date today. The American high school movie cliché has for several decades been the story of the geeks and the jocks. Invariably in such popcult fables, we see how the bullied members of the former group go on to prosper and thrive in adulthood with their superior intellect, while the discredited high school impresarios of physical prowess languish in small-town backwaters, mired in dead-end blue-collar jobs and unhappy marriages. The hard-to-miss moral is that the geeks shall inherit the earth—and that the athletic, macho, blue-collar male, once admired for his physical strength, now deserves his own decline.

The beta insurgents likewise heap scorn on the conservative cultural mores of the small-town and blue-collar populace. Indeed, the beta-sphere is almost as fiercely opposed to conservative family values as it is to feminism. For a pretty typical example from 4chan, a gruesome image was once posted on /b/ of an aborted fetus, lying on a doctor's table beside instruments and blood. The poster who uploaded the photo wrote, “I am undecided about abortion. On the one hand I support it because it is killing children. On the other, it gives women a choice.” Commenting on another image of a severely handicapped newborn child accompanied by a discussion of whether the mother should have had an abortion, another 4chan/b/ commenter wrote, “This is literally a sack of cells with a heart beat, it is not a human being. This is just Christfags being Christfags.” Outsiders to the subculture will no doubt be confused by this term, which seems to be mocking pro-life conservatives as gay, but “fags” as a suffix is ubiquitous on 4chan and exists alongside discussions of gay sexual fantasies and a general knowing awareness of the failed masculinity and outsider identity of those using the term. Like much of beta culture, this practice tries to carve out a cultural

politics that rejects both the strict moral values of conservatism and the constraining political correctness that beta adherents associate with feminism and liberalism.

In this way, the betas don't easily map onto either end of the Kulturkampf, and are therefore liable to confuse ideologues. A notorious hacker and troll known as weev was the primary orchestrator of attacks against female technology blogger, programmer, and game developer Kathy Sierra in 2007. The weev offensive, joined by many others in the hacker-troll milieu, involved "doxing," posting personal details about Sierra's family and home address among highly sexualized and threatening messages, like photoshopped images of her with a noose beside her head, with a shooting target pointed at her face, and being gagged with a thong.

In response to the attacks, Sierra closed down her blog and withdrew from speaking engagements and public life. In the time since the attack, weev has since become famous for hacking a phone company—a maneuver that triggered a Twitter-based #freeweev campaign, which gained support from prominent progressive endorsers such as Laurie Penny and Gabriella Coleman. Embarrassingly for those who expressed the view, fashionable in the heyday of the Occupy movement, that 4chan/b/ is a "counter-hegemonic space" and that trolls in the 4chan/b/ vein are, as Coleman argued, inheritors of the Dadaist and Situationist traditions, weev is a fascist sympathizer with a swastika tattoo on his chest. Penny claimed to be unaware of his far-right views, while Coleman not only continues to defend his rights as a hacker, but also presents him as an endearingly impish figure in her latest book.

Fascism, for the Lulz

The casual racism embedded in this geeky beta world comes wrapped in several layers of self-protective irony, with black masculinity treated as both the object of jealousy and of hatred. Commentators like Coleman have lent a certain credibility to the beta uprising's contention that its motives are misinterpreted by a public that fails to grasp its unique brand of postmodern wit. Some people, they say, simply "don't get" that the betas are in it strictly "for the lulz." But while forum chatter certainly doesn't inevitably escalate to violence and even the worst speech does not amount to violence, some of 4chan's self-described geeks have taken their faux-ironic bigotry offline. After the November 2015 shooting of five Black Lives Matter protesters in Minneapolis, a video emerged of two of the men involved, clad in balaclavas and driving to the BLM protest, saying, "We just wanted to give everyone a heads up on /pol/"—referring to the politics board on 4chan, a group that partially overlaps with the /b/ community. The speaker then points at the camera and says, "Stay white."

Significantly, weev's sensibility fuses elements of the anti-establishment far right, like the militia movement (which styles its anti-government activities a form of "leaderless resistance"), with the left-leaning vision of the old anti-establishment counterculture. In a recent magazine interview, a journalist spoke to some of the hackers and trolls of Anonymous, LulzSec, and 4chan/b/, including weev (a.k.a. Andrew Auernheimer):

I'm at a restaurant with Auernheimer and his friend Jaime Cochrane, who is a softly spoken transgender troll from the group Rustle League, so-called because "that's what trolling is, it's rustling people's jimnies." They're explaining to me their version of what trolls do. "It's not bullying," says Cochrane. "It's satirical performance art." Cyberbullies who drive teenagers to suicide have crossed the line. However, trolling is the more high-minded business of what Cochrane calls "aggressive rhetoric," a tradition that goes back to Socrates, Jesus and the trickster god Loki, from Norse mythology. Auernheimer likens himself to Shakespeare's Puck. Cochrane aspires to Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman. They talk of culture jamming, the art of disrupting the status quo to make people think. They talk of Abbie Hoffman.

Along with the presupposition that misogyny must spring from conservatism often comes the notion that transgression and countercultural gestures are somehow incompatible with it. But women have long figured in the countercultural imagination as

agents of conformity and avatars of a vain, mindless consumerism. It seems to me that this is the tradition that 4chan and the wider beta-sphere, perhaps unknowingly, are really carrying on. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press's brilliant 1996 study *The Sex Revolts* charts how the attribution of blame to women for the bland conformism of post-war America influenced the counterculture. In 1942's *Generation of Vipers*, the pulp novelist and social critic Philip Wylie described an America in a state of national decline and shallow materialism due to the feminizing influence of the "destroying mother." Wylie described feminized mass culture—a.k.a. "momism"—as "matriarchal sentimentality, goo slop, hidden cruelty." Norman Mailer presented the psychopath as a noble and transgressive figure, who used his charismatic force to oppose feminized mass culture and emasculating consumer capitalism. "We are victims of a matriarchy here my friends," says Harding, a psychiatric inmate in Ken Kesey's classic counterculture novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. And in *Fight Club*—the 1996 Chuck Palahniuk novel famously adapted to the screen in 1999 by David Fincher and invoked as a quasi-biblical authority on 4chan—Tyler Durden's pink soap, made from the reconstituted fat of women who have undergone liposuction and had it contemptuously "[sold] back to them," acts as a potent symbol.

Here the counterculturalists of the beta world are tapping into a misogynic tradition—only it's aligned with the bohemian left, not the buttoned-down right. Long before the postwar counterculture emerged, Emma Bovary symbolized the dreary and banal feminine massification of culture for nineteenth-century culture rebels. Channeling this same tradition, the beta world inveighs continually against the advanced feminization and massification of Internet-age culture. This is why their misogyny sits so comfortably alongside their mix of geeky and countercultural styles and why the pat "hegemonic masculinity" answer is so inadequate.

The Tangled Net

Today, we see the weirdly parallel ascent of an Internet-centric feminism that, like the beta revolution, glories in geeky countercultural elitism, and whose most enthusiastic partisans spend a great deal of time attacking other women for being insufficiently radical. Many of these feminists are active on the microblogging site Tumblr, and they are less apt to write about material issues that have concerned left-wing feminists for decades, like parental leave or unequal pay, than about the online obsession du jour: from feminist video games to coloring books, cosplay, knitting, cupcakes, microaggressions, trigger warnings, no-platforming, bi-erasure, and the fastidious avoidance of anything remotely resembling cultural appropriation. The recent popular left candidates Bernie Sanders (in the United States) and Jeremy Corbyn (in the United Kingdom) have come in for heavy rhetorical fire from this new wave of wired feminists, who deride them both as retrograde prophets of “brocialism.”

In response to the Oregon attacks, Milo Yiannopoulos wrote, “Today’s man-punishing, feminized culture is creating killers... Why not harness that [masculine] power and set men back to work? To make America great again, we need to rescue our lost generation of young males.” According to a wealth of scholarship cited by Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, the feminization of culture is a feature of the decline of violence, not a cause, and there are many countries with better work and childcare conditions for women than America that are not producing mass shooters. Yiannopoulos conflates two enemy forces: Young geeks may be the losers in the cruel and chaotic modern free market of sexual choice, but they are the relative winners in the dominant economic ideology of the day. It is the geeks—those who merged the counterculture with information technology in the 1990s—who have already inherited the earth.

In the information age, the tastes and values of geeks are elevated above the masculine virtues of physical strength and material productivity that preceded them. Today, the market ideology of the information society is ascendant—particularly with its main Anglophone challengers tarred as brocialists—and it is immensely comfortable with its cultural power, which means that it happily accommodates transgression, gender fluidity, self-expression, and an abundant choice of niche online subcultural identities. It’s been a depressing spectacle to see two post-political, economically illiterate forms of subcultural identity politics—Tumblr feminist and beta/hacker anti-feminist—doing battle online. This feminism certainly has things to answer for; in addition to its penchant for sabotaging its own allies, it must be challenged on the damage it has done to university life with its militant opposition to free speech. But only one side of this

new Internet gender rivalry is producing killers, and despite what polemicists such as Yiannopoulos are saying, it isn't the feminists.

Angela Nagle is the author of *Kill All Normies: From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*.

The Ted K Archive

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The New Man of 4chan
March 2016

The Baffler, no. 30. <www.thebaffler.com/salvos/new-man-4chan-nagle>
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