

No Culture for Alienated Men

Ross Douthat

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There were three important deaths recently: Ted Kaczynski, Silvio Berlusconi, Cormac McCarthy. A strange assortment of characters — the murderer who imagined himself a philosopher, the louche tycoon who created modern Western populism, the novelist who traded in biblical cadences without biblical reassurances.

Or maybe not so strangely assorted; maybe the three men were variations on a theme — that theme being alienation, and specifically masculine alienation, from the patterns and rules of late-modern civilization, and the different rebellions that alienation might inspire.

There is a lot of talk lately about a crisis of manhood, manifest in statistics showing young men falling behind young women in various indicators of education and ambition, answered from the left by therapeutic attempts to detoxify masculinity and from the right by promises of masculine revival. The root of the problem seems clear enough, even if the solutions are contested: The things that men are most adapted for (or socialized for, if you prefer that narrative, though the biological element seems inescapable) are valued less, sometimes much less, in the peacetime of a postindustrial civilization than in most of the human past.

In a phrase, when we talk about traditional modes of manhood, we're often talking about *mastery through physical strength and the capacity for violence*. That kind of mastery will always have some value, but it had more value in 1370 than in 1870 and more in 1870 than it does today. And the excess, the superfluity, must therefore be repressed, tamed or somehow educated away.

So what happens to men who aren't interested in that taming process? One answer is offered by Kaczynski's terrorist career: They become enraged and twisted; they fantasize about a truer, freer, more authentic past; they confuse grievance with philosophy (the Kaczynski manifesto has its online admirers, but most of what he's preaching is packaged more entertainingly by "Fight Club"); they imagine revolutions but deliver empty homicidal gestures. School shooters, religious terrorists, paladins of the meaningless atrocity — these are Kaczynski's heirs.

Then there is Berlusconi, a very different kind of he-rebel. For the Italian prime minister, modern society's taming of masculinity allowed him to offer machismo as a form of burlesque, an entertainment, rebellion with a wink, a leer, and a snigger rather than the Unabomber's alienated rage. In his shtick the danger of male violence was reduced to the milder threat of male misbehavior, and in his political career you could see how the bad boy politician can thrive in a feminized context — by being just shocking enough to stand out from the crowd, just different enough to draw the discontented to his banner, but always reassuringly performative and cheesy, a bunga-bunga man rather than a killer.

It's not surprising that other populist leaders have offered this same kind of masculine burlesque — Donald Trump, of course, but also Boris Johnson with his shambolic naughtiness. It's also not surprising that for both Berlusconi's Italy and Johnson's Britain, the policy results feel like a dead end: If our therapeutic age tends toward a

certain kind of stagnation, electing men who make a spectacle of their virility isn't any kind of magic ticket back to dynamism.

Finally, where Kaczynski represented rage and Berlusconi spectacle, Cormac McCarthy represented — well, call it witness, maybe, or memory, or prophecy, or all three. His novels were intensely masculine, intensely violent, and largely unconcerned with the burdens of being a man under tamed or civilized conditions. He simply left those conditions behind — personally to some extent, leading a life substantially rougher than many of his literary contemporaries, and absolutely in his novels, whether they went out to the violent fringes of our own peaceful world, back into a berserker past, or forward into our civilization's ashes.

In “No Country for Old Men,” not his most important book but one of the best entry points, you get the essential McCarthy vision — a view of the civilized world as a passing thing, enfiladed by shadows, haunted by forces it can deny but not withstand.

In this vision it doesn't matter how much the world is tamed and softened: Violence will always come back; masculinity will always have its day. But not a day of power and domination, of the sort that certain online influencers fantasize about. Instead, as Graeme Wood wrote in *The Atlantic*, McCarthy placed his men in conditions they couldn't fully master, “in the crossfire of gods and demigods on a battleground that preceded human existence and will continue long after we are all gone.”

His characters' admirable manliness, where it existed, consisted in survival, endurance, integrity. His cosmology was pre-Christian, shorn of any liberal optimism, but not entirely purged of hope. But that hope could only be glimpsed, not seized — discovered not in mastery, but mystery.

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Ross Douthat is an Opinion Columnist and co-host of “Matter of Opinion”. A version of this article appeared in print in Section SR, Page 3 of the New York edition of The New York Times, with the headline: ‘3 Models Of Masculine Rebellion’.

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