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Sarah Banet-Weiser
sarah.banetweiser@asc.upenn.edu

Jack Bratich
jbratich@rutgers.edu

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Abstract

Between 2007 and 2018, the pick-up artist community—"gurus" who teach online networks of heterosexual men to seduce women—gave rise to a different online community, that of "incels," who create homosocial bonds over their inability to become a pick-up artist. In this article, we offer a conjunctural analysis of this shift and argue that this decade represents a decline in, or even a failure of, neoliberalism's ability to secure subjects within its political rationality. We argue that neoliberalism cannot cope with its failures, especially its promises of self-confidence. Such promises themselves become exposed as confidence games, which are then rerouted through networked misogyny, resulting in ordinary and spectacular violence against women. Moreover, incels express their rage through language of uprising and a war on women. Their actions are on a continuum of reactive violent responses to women's refusal of social reproduction roles and aim to defend and restore patriarchal order.

Keywords

incels, misogyny, popular feminism, neoliberalism, pick-up artists, social reproduction, confidence

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Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

From Pick-Up Artists to Incels: Con(fidence) Games, Networked Misogyny, and the Failure of Neoliberalism

JACK BRATICH¹
Rutgers University, USA

SARAH BANET-WEISER
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Between 2007 and 2018, the pick-up artist community—“gurus” who teach online networks of heterosexual men to seduce women—gave rise to a different online community, that of “incels,” who create homosocial bonds over their *inability* to become a pick-up artist. In this article, we offer a conjunctural analysis of this shift and argue that this decade represents a decline in, or even a failure of, neoliberalism’s ability to secure subjects within its political rationality. We argue that neoliberalism cannot cope with its failures, especially its promises of self-confidence. Such promises themselves become exposed as confidence games, which are then rerouted through networked misogyny, resulting in ordinary and spectacular violence against women. Moreover, incels express their rage through language of uprising and a war on women. Their actions are on a continuum of reactive violent responses to women’s refusal of social reproduction roles and aim to defend and restore patriarchal order.

Keywords: incels, misogyny, popular feminism, neoliberalism, pick-up artists, social reproduction, confidence

In 2007, the cable channel VH1 aired *The Pickup Artist* (Demyanenk & Gladstone, 2007), a reality program featuring a group of men who had difficulties connecting romantically with women. The contestants were mentored by a “master” pick-up artist (PUA) named Mystery, whose perspective was simple: Learn the requisite techniques of seduction and control, and you will be able to have sex with any woman you want. Each week, the contestants tried out their new skills “in field” (in nightclubs, in grocery stores, on city streets). At the end of each episode, Mystery eliminated the man who demonstrated the weakest PUA skills. At season’s end, Mystery “crowned” a new master PUA, who received \$50,000 and toured the globe with Mystery to train new PUAs. When interviewed in 2013 about his success in the PUA industry, Mystery said,

¹ We would like to thank Rosalind Gill, Catherine Rottenberg, Val Hartouni and Nick Anstead for reading drafts of this article. We are grateful to Vanessa Ciccone, who helped with formatting an earlier version. We also want to thank Zoe Glatt, who provided excellent feedback and editorial assistance with the final version.

I didn't have this when I started out. So I decided to take the bull by the horns and learn this, and solve this, by myself. Because back then there were no seminars, DVDs, "in-field" workshops. I then went online, seeking like-minded individuals . . . and I discovered a small online community of individuals like myself seeking some guru . . . I discovered that I became the reluctant guru. (Cliff's List, 2013, video clip)

A year after this interview, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people and wounded 14 others in Santa Barbara, California; the ostensible reason behind his massacre was that he was a "frustrated pick-up artist." He justified his actions in his "manifesto" as retaliation against women as a group for refusing to provide him with the sex he felt he was owed. Rodger went on his rampage apparently because he identified as an incel ("involuntarily celibate"), a member in an online community of men united in their injury by their inability to convince women to have sex with them.

In the years between 2007 and 2014, the PUA community, with men such as Mystery working as "gurus" to teach online communities of heterosexual men to seduce women, increasingly shared cultural space with a different online community, that of "incels," who create homosocial bonds over their *inability* to become a PUA. Mystery's techniques to pick up women, such as "peacocking" (wearing an unusual item of clothing to attract interest) or looking for IOIs (indicators of interest, such as playing with one's hair), seem benign, even laughable, in the face of what is increasingly the incel's response to rejection: violence and murder. Mystery stated that his goal was "protecting women and giving them pleasure," which is, on the face of it, quite different from Rodger's manifesto, titled "The War on Women." In addition, a number of commentators have noted the rise of the incel's rageful subject emerging from PUA and self-help schemes: "Men have generated ideas about self-improvement that are sometimes inextricable from violent rage" (Tolentino, 2018, para. 4). As one PUA has commented, "marginalized men in their ranks decide that exiting in a blaze of hot lead beats living in loveless obscurity" (North, 2009, para. 12). Indeed, it is telling that previous PUA sites attracted incels, many of them disaffected PUAs for whom "the game is rigged from the start" (Beau, 2018, para. 11). Sady Doyle (2018) makes the connection clear: "The incel movement grew directly out of the PUA fad, a storm cloud of disillusioned students who were ready to try more violent means of accessing female bodies" (para. 30).

According to a database from *Mother Jones* magazine, there have been 114 mass shootings (defined as killing four or more people) in the United States since 1982 (Follman, Andersen, & Pan, 2019). Research data from Everytown Gun Safety marks an even higher number, accounting for 173 mass shootings in the United States from 2009 to 2017 (Everytown, 2018). There have been 19 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2019 alone (as of August 2019; see Keneally, 2019; Wilson, 2019).² This period is also the context for the global rise of the extreme right. While theories abound about why the extreme right has had a heightened presence during the past decade, most concur that an intersecting discourse of loss, injury, and entitlement, primarily to and by White men, is a core logic to these movements. We see a parallel in mass misogynistic violence

² Our primary focus in this article is on mass shootings in the United States; however, we position incel mass killings on a global continuum of gendered violence. Inarguably, one factor in the dramatically increased number of mass shootings in the United States is easy accessibility to guns, especially semiautomatic rifles.

committed, in White nationalism (an overwhelming majority of mass shooters in the United States are White and have often left racist and misogynist messages on social media) and in the extreme right's increasingly aggressive public actions (which most often have racism and misogyny at their core; see Hawley, 2017; Neiwert, 2017; Stern, 2019). A study by *The Washington Post* on the rise of the extreme right in the United States found that White males are more likely to feel "white vulnerability," or a "strong perception that whites are losing ground to other groups through no fault of their own" (Fowler, Medenica, & Cohen, 2017). And although not all mass killers identify as incels, since 2007 in North America, many mass killings have been claimed by them, and almost all are White.³ It is clear that mass shootings often have a gendered dimension to them; a recent article in *The New York Times* states, "A professed hatred of women is frequent among suspects in the long history of mass shootings in America" (Bosman, Taylor, & Arango, 2019, para. 23). The article continues by pointing out that in mass shootings in the United States from 2009 to 2017, although it is often difficult to precisely locate motivations for these killings (all committed by men), "one common thread that connects many of them—other than access to powerful firearms—is a history of hating women, assaulting wives, girlfriends and female family members, or sharing misogynistic views online" (Bosman et al., 2019, para. 4).

In the following pages, we offer a conjunctural analysis of the shift from PUA to incel and position this shift within a wider arc of a specific neoliberal practice: We argue that this period, 2007–2019, represents a decline in, or even a failure of, neoliberalism's ability to secure subjects within its political rationality. We use a theory of conjunctures—or historical moments when previously separate forces merge to create political and economic transformation—as an analytic to examine the various forces in culture and the political economy that intersect as part of neoliberalism's decline (see Gilbert, 2019, for the most updated assessment of what it means to think conjuncturally).

That is, we do not wish to make a sweeping analysis of neoliberalism's wane as such. We take as our starting point Stuart Hall's analysis of 2008 as ushering in a new conjuncture, which he calls the Great Financial Crisis (Hall & Massey, 2010). State and private sector responses to this crisis have been organized around austerity, command, and enforcement. We want to focus on the cultural dimension of this crisis (which, in economic terms, is called a loss of "consumer confidence" in markets). We are highlighting culture as the production of subjectivity, especially as it sustained capitalism and governance pre-crisis and might now be unsustainable as a project of self-reproduction.

While speaking to a more general decline in neoliberalism's integrative powers, we are specifically examining the gendered dimension of that failure that manifests in networked misogyny and spectacular violence against women. Of course, there are many different points of entry to examine neoliberalism and the various ravages that this long era has wreaked on institutions, care networks, infrastructures, and everyday lives. We are looking at the time period of 2007–2019 within Western neoliberalism, and we focus on a specific practice of neoliberalism, that of subjectivation, within that decade. Again, there can be no

³ Incels have gone even further back in history to claim killers as one of their own, including Marc Lepine of the 1989 Montreal Massacre; Charles Carl Roberts IV, who sorted girls from boys in an Amish schoolhouse in 2006 and killed five girls; Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech killer of more than 30 who had recently been rejected by his girlfriend; and even serial killer Ted Bundy.

doubt that this period marks a devastating increase in violence against women, immigrants, people of color, and refugees. We have witnessed countless assaults on civil rights, policies, laws, and other mechanisms that have served to (albeit inadequately) secure basic human rights; these assaults have been fueled by the election of heads of state who endorse these ideologies (from Orbán to Trump to Bolsonaro) and by an emboldened extreme right ideology that features misogyny, racism, and White nationalism at its core. Here, we focus specifically on just one manifestation of this political and cultural context: mass gendered violence.

We position the shift from PUA to incel as one analytic from which to theorize the heightened violence of this decade. In so doing, we argue that neoliberalism cannot take care of its failures—especially its promises of self-confidence, and especially when White men are seen to lose self-confidence, to have been denied something they feel the world, and especially women, owes them. Confidence is exposed in these failures as confidence games, an exposure that results in rage and violence. In this project, we are not positing a cause (even conjunctural) for incel violence. Plenty of others have engaged in such diagnoses, and some have even made the key connection between PUA failure and incels (Beauchamp, 2019; DiBranco, 2018; Doyle, 2018; Nagle, 2017a; Wright, 2018). We are, however, adding more context to the specific mechanism of passage from PUAs to incels during the decade 2009–2019. More important, we are treating this passage as a symptom of a broader crisis in neoliberal subjectivation. This passage from PUA to incel gives us insights into the unsustainability and nonresilience of contemporary masculine neoliberal techniques of self. A number of writers have questioned neoliberalism’s ability to sustain itself, noting that its crisis has been profound enough to question whether its ideological techniques can hold (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010; Davies, 2017; Negra & Tasker, 2014). Rather than presume neoliberalism’s persistence, resilience, and continuity, we need to be attuned to its mutations. We see this unsustainability and crisis most acutely in the subject’s inability to restart itself as a subject.

We organize this article into two sections: The first, Part I, will lay out our analytic framework, which is a perspective from within neoliberal subjective failure and an attention to social reproduction undergirding responses to such failure. Here, we offer a broad analysis of the networked misogyny that is at the core of this failure, including an analysis of what has been called Red Pill philosophy. In Part II, we map the specific examples of incel violence onto this framework, positioning loss of male self-confidence as a key failure of neoliberal subjectivation, and we think through the shift from Red Pill to Black Pill philosophy. We see these two elements—neoliberal masculine subjective failure and the shift from Red Pill to Black Pill—as overlapping arcs, offering us a glimpse into one manifestation of what we see as a crisis in contemporary neoliberalism.

Part I: Neoliberalism in Decline: Analyzing From the Perspective of Failure

When we use the (rather overused) word *neoliberalism*, we are concentrating on its *modes of subjectivation*—the ways that postwar governing has encouraged the formation of selves through various discourses, strategies of address, and techniques of transformation (Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 2009; Rose, 1989). We focus on three dimensions of this mode of subjectivation: entrepreneurship, expertise, and expectations. At the intersection of the *entrepreneurial* orientation (self-starting, individualized, self-managed) and the reliance on *expertise* (self-help discourses, training mechanisms, pedagogic figures), we locate confidence as a core value and objective for neoliberal subjectivation (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Our third dimension is the gendered component to such confidence building: namely, the masculine *expectations*

around social reproduction (biological, care work, emotional support, comfort) that sustain this individualism. That is, rather than presuming that these confidence-building techniques are solely individualizing, we argue that neoliberal "individualism" always depended on others, from managing resources (including others as instruments) to trusting in experts as guides.⁴

In this broader framework, we address two failures or declining abilities emerging from the crisis in neoliberal reproduction. We first trace neoliberalism's inability to have its techniques of subjectivation stick (to entrepreneurialize subjects via expertise). We argue that the confidence in expertise (that would give confidence to the subject) is itself in crisis. We are witnessing a breakdown of expertise and trust in the very resources that were supposed to lead to a self-rebooting.

Second, we identify how neoliberalism fails to provide solutions when this subject fails. Consequently, the subjective failures (PUAs and incipient PUAs) seek solutions online and turn their individual disappointments into a community. Thanks to emerging networked misogyny and its mediated forms of support, the feeling of failure is no longer absorbed as one's own responsibility, but combined and accelerated. The result is a networked masculine subject that feels threatened, and a collective figure is to blame: women.

We are thus calling for an analytic shift from one that sees neoliberalism's mode of subjectivation as coherent and successfully shored up (e.g., keep taking initiative, overcome your own obstacles, "fail better") to one situated in its crisis (without re-legitimation or recuperation). We do not, in other words, presume neoliberalism's steady recuperative power as a material and ideological practice. We posit that failure is the most adequate perspective from which to perform a conjunctural analysis, one situated not in the conjuncture's dominance and reproduction, but in its decline. From that we ask, what is emerging from its decline?

This is a perspective from the suture's unraveling, from an irrecoverable operation where the cycle of what Laurent Berlant has called cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) and unhappy attachments (O'Neill, 2018) breaks—resulting in an *unhappy detachment*. Additionally, we take seriously the fundamental question about the role of media culture in this subjectivation as posed by Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai (2018): "What kinds of media are needed in order to maintain what seems to be an otherwise unsustainable attachment to individuality?" (p. 325). We now situate that query in a crisis moment within those media strategies, the inability to maintain such an attachment, which now becomes increasingly unsustainable. These media strategies often find purchase in the context of networked, mediated misogyny and violence against women.

Networked Misogyny

⁴ In other words, the entrepreneurial subject has always relied on social relations, even to disrupt or break them as "creative destruction." As key economist Joseph Schumpeter defines it, "What matters is the disposition to act. It is the ability to subjugate others and to utilize them for his purposes, to order and to prevail that leads to 'successful deeds'—even without particularly brilliant intelligence" (quoted in Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. 141).

Clearly, misogyny is not unique to the contemporary moment. However, recent developments in the digital media environment have been crucial to constructing what is referred to as the “manosphere,” a corner of the Internet that supports and amplifies different kinds of masculinities and men’s rights, including “anti-feminists, father’s rights groups, ‘incels’ (involuntary celibates), androphiles (same-sex attracted men who don’t identify as homosexual), paleomasculinists (who believe male domination is natural) and even more obscure fringe groups” (Marwick & Lewis, 2015, p. 13; see also Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dewey, 2014; Domise, 2018; Ging, 2017; Jane, 2016; Massanari, 2017; Nagle, 2017a).

The various sites within the manosphere should not be understood as distinct units or groups, but rather as interconnected nodes in a mediated network of misogynistic discourses and practices. As Marwick and Lewis (2015) point out, what binds the manosphere is “the idea that men and boys are victimized; that feminists in particular are the perpetrators of such attacks” (p. 15). These narratives cohere in what is called the Red Pill philosophy (TRP). Taken from the movie *The Matrix*, TRP touts itself as a revelatory shift in masculine thinking that “purports to awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing, and is the key concept that unites all of these communities” (Ging, 2017, p. 3). TRP is a worldview “balancing emotion and ideology to generate consensus and belonging among the manosphere’s divergent elements” (Ging, 2017, p. 8) and thus provides a shared orientation and belief system for a community—a truly networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015). Sharing this TRP worldview, we also find pick-up artists, seduction communities, and incel threads on sites and forums such as 4chan, Reddit, Return of Kings, redpill.com, Chateau Heartiste, and Red Pill Room that are dedicated not only to the accumulating of more erotic capital for men, but also to recouping that capital that has been lost. Popular misogyny, expressed concisely in TRP, capitalizes on men’s apparent injuries, caused by women and feminism, and offers routes to recoup men’s “natural” capacities.

Within this mediated environment, various modes of networked misogyny authorize and support one another—for example, when extremism of more violent sites works to support other nodes that are seen as milder by comparison. Popular misogyny is a system of shared interconnections and links as well as worldviews; PUA sites are interconnected with formalized political attempts to roll back reproductive rights for women, which are in turn interconnected with online misogyny and harassment.⁵ Popular misogyny is invested in what Gayle Rubin (1975) has called the traffic in women, but not necessarily to restore the nuclear family; there is little sense that PUAs or incels primarily want to settle down into a lifelong committed relationship that involves biological reproduction. Instead, their version is tied to ensuring that women provide various affective resources: assuaging male egos and confidence via sexual availability, gratifying

⁵ This TRP-inspired ecology of neo-masculinization is tied to another emergent force out of the crisis of neoliberalism: right-wing movements that seek to impose traditional White identitarian societies. Angela Nagle opens the documentary *Trumpland: Kill All Normies* (2017b), on the rise of the alt-right, with a 10-minute excursion into the passage from PUAs to incels. Others have noted how the manosphere offers a primed terrain for alt-right radicalization (Futelle, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2015). As online analyst Richard Anderson (2016) notes, “So much of the process occurs in public, from the initial steps into seeking a community of support, advice on love and life, and the slow redirection into alt-right radicalism” (para. 9). Within this overlap between right-wing movements and TRP ecologies, we want to highlight the ways reproduction figures in this dynamic.

needs, and ensuring feelings of control. As Joey, an incel interviewed for a feature article, puts it, “Women represent our way to enter the social hierarchy” (Reeve, 2018, para. 11). In other words, the expectation by these masculinized subjects is to access what has been called *social reproduction*.⁶

Social Reproduction

In a well-established definition, social reproduction refers to the “various kinds of work—mental, manual, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain the existing life and to reproduce the next generation” (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, pp. 383–384). Within 1970s Marxist-feminist formulations, the economic role of social reproduction was the (unwaged) labor needed to restore men’s capacities for (waged) labor (Dalla Costa & James, 1973; Federici, 2004; Hartmann, 1981). Recently, these discussions over gender and value have been extended, updated, and made more visible (Fortunati, 2015; Serra, 2015; Thorburn, 2016).

What happens when the masculinized forms of waged labor change, when some men no longer can realize capacity for labor? The social reproduction framework anchors our analysis of the gendered failure of neoliberal subjectivation. When the PUA fails, and men don’t receive what they feel entitled to (specifically by virtue of being male, and often also by virtue of being White), how does disappointment express itself? When disillusionment with expertise arises, what other recuperative resources are at hand? We posit that women, in their role of social reproduction, are expected to be “ready at hand.”

The social reproduction framework thus allows us to connect neoliberalism’s “failures” with its “successes”: In both cases, we see expectations of women to enact their role in social reproduction (and women’s at least partial refusal of such roles). The failures turn against women because of the (presumed) successes that also expect access to women.⁷ Social reproduction is thus more than a sphere geared toward reproducing men’s abilities to work—it reproduces the social order itself. While ostensibly about “sex,” the PUA/incel coupling thus foregrounds the extreme desire to maintain a social order via the central role women play in maintaining it. And in turn, this mode of subjectivation works through confidence.

The (Crisis of the) Neoliberalization of Confidence

Neoliberal capitalism mandates that individuals become self-entrepreneurs as the best route to economic and personal success. Many scholars have analyzed the different ways that “confidence” is a key logic to that route for both men and women (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 2018; Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2017; McRobbie, 2009). Health campaigns, educational programs, and gender equality initiatives are centered on “building” confidence in individuals. Even though very few individuals become economically successful as self-entrepreneurs, neoliberal logics rest on individualization, which in turn depends on one

⁶ White supremacists also want these aspects of social reproduction, now configured around a desperate need for offspring.

⁷ We are thus proposing a different emphasis from the economic analysis that locates the rise of incel violence in an economic crisis that leads to working-class loss of jobs (status). That analysis then says that these primarily White men scapegoat others—in this case, women.

being confident enough in its techniques. Thus, even when they fail, subjects are supposed to restart the process (trusting in the techniques and finding responsibility in oneself; Littler, 2017).

Yet, the idea of confidence as an attribute residing in the individual is a recent invention. Historically, confidence has been understood primarily as an intersubjective relationship based on trust. Confidence, as Sara Ahmed (2016) states, is a "manner of existence . . . the word confidence rests on faith or trust. To be confident can thus mean to have trust in an expectation" (para. 11). Confidence, in other words, has historically signaled a dyadic and social process, not an attitude that one cultivates in isolation.

By the time neoliberal confidence culture takes hold in the 21st century, confidence has morphed from a relational attribute based on trust in others to an individual quality that one must learn to cultivate. But despite some of the undeniable ways that neoliberal confidence is individualized, the intersubjective quality remains as a trust in experts to help cultivate individual confidence: confidence organizations, self-help industries, life coaches, gurus, and motivational speakers (Binkley, 2014; Illouz, 2008; McGee, 2007; Rose, 1989), often via popular culture (Gill & Orgad, 2017; Hearn, 2008; McRobbie, 2009; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). The guidance of conduct requires confidence in the guide.

Yet alongside all the exhortations for individuals to be confident, with all the emerging industries that specialize in confidence experts to guide such individuals, another historical root of "confidence" needs mentioning: the "confidence man" and his "confidence games." The confidence scheme and its con artist relied on the investment of trust, the taking of confidence, to achieve its own ends, forming an interpersonal relationship via swindling (Ahmed, 2016; Hearn, 2017). This more sordid history of confidence is crucial to understanding the role it plays in the contemporary neoliberal context.

For the classic con game to work, the artist needs to get the mark firmly attached to the game itself. This means investing trust in the process and confiding in the artist-guide. When conducting the confidence game of neoliberal confidence, trust is directed at the self-help industries, the public pedagogy of the confidence game's instructors. The neoliberalization of confidence means that neoliberalism itself *needs* confidence. What happens when trust in those guides erodes? It is this confidence, in the con games, that is in crisis when we speak of neoliberalism's crisis.

A number of analysts have noted neoliberalism's declining effectiveness, inducing a crisis of confidence in the system itself (Davies, 2017; Duménil & Lévy, 2011; Wallerstein, Collins, Mann, Derlugian, & Calhoun, 2013). We need only look at the broader global economic crisis of 2007–2008 to see a concomitant decline in trust in authorizing discourses: journalism, politicians, science. We are indeed in a culture of mistrust, often called a post-truth era (Harsin, 2015) connected to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, antifactual argumentation, "fake news," climate change skepticism, and religious-faith-based action. The acute crisis of trust also permeates the expertise key to neoliberal modes of subjectivation, including dating.

Increasingly since 2008, the failures of neoliberalism to live up to its promise of economic success, entrepreneurship, and happiness have been revealed as not just miscalculations or poor efforts, but swindles and scams: as confidence games (Hearn, 2017; Lears, 2017; Monbiot, 2017). While the system quickly

found individual embodiments of such con artists to function as scapegoats (e.g., Bernie Madoff, whose accelerated trial focused collective crisis attention from December 2008 to July 2009), a wider interest in con artistry (and exposures of it) became prominent (Konnikova, 2017). We have entered a moment that could be characterized as a crisis not only in the techniques of confidence culture (e.g., commodity empowerment), but in the underlying confidence in the interpersonal process that allows any technique to stick, that allows the confidence game to exist. Neoliberalism, designed to manage and feed off precarity, now finds its own techniques and expertise—and trust in them—becoming precarious.

Perhaps most important, the neoliberal strategy of placing responsibility for self-confidence on the individual has been exposed as a swindle. As Alison Hearn (2017) notes, the hegemony of the con is “also directly linked to a flawed and failing neoliberal governance system that places the responsibility for serious systemic problems at the feet of individuals, insisting that we see market exchange as ‘an ethic in itself’” (p. 84). The individualization of confidence is breaking down, returning us to the confidence games that founded the techniques of individualization: a generalized spread of confidence’s opposite: doubt, mistrust, skepticism, or *diffidence*.

When that confidence, in confidence itself, is broken, what are the results? What happens after the great reveal, when we realize that all con artists are, in fact, confidence artists? To address these questions, we return now to pick-up artists who are, as their name references, con(fidence) artists.

Part II: Pick-Up Artists as Antisocial Sociability: Entrepreneurs, Expertise, and Expectations

We began this article with a description of the 2007–2008 cable reality television series from VH1, *The Pickup Artist*. In this section, we’d like to return to *The Pickup Artist* in the context of the precarity of neoliberal confidence—the exposure of the “con” of confidence.

As Rachel O’Neill (2018) argues in her ethnography of seduction communities in London, pick-up artist training refers “to a very particular set of knowledge-practices organized around the belief that the ability to meet and attract women is a skill heterosexual men can cultivate through practical training and personal development” (p. 3). The PUA industry includes hundreds of websites and organizations across the globe dedicated to seducing women. Seminars and boot camps similarly charge exorbitant fees to participate; the PUA’s “bible,” *The Game* by Neil Strauss, has been widely covered in the media and was the impetus for VH1’s *The Pickup Artist*.

This industry promises transformation. As the trailer for *The Pickup Artist’s* second season states, “A man named Mystery took eight lovable losers and turned them into Casanovas.” Mystery attests that the seduction industry is dedicated to a kind of masculine pedagogy: a “guru” offers his guidance to those who cannot find their way in the heterosexual world of sexual conquest. These communities, and their concomitant industries, focus specifically and intensely on confidence—and lack thereof—for men. One of Mystery’s accomplices, a woman named Tara, tells the men chosen to be on the VH1 show, “You have to go in confident and motivated with lots of energy.”

The rise of seduction communities is apparently a response to large numbers of heterosexual men who have, for the most part, achieved some financial and career success, as in the tech industries, but have yet to overcome the “hurdle” of seducing a woman (Chu, 2014; O’Neill, 2018). Indeed, the men who are depicted in the VH1 series are selected for their damaged or stunted masculinities (understood within the assumption of heteronormative masculinity). These men never had confidence in the first place—they admitted they couldn’t talk to women, they were virgins, they were socially awkward. Sexual confidence is explicitly depicted as something that is entitled to them, precisely because they are men.

In PUA communities, men attain a sense of self-confidence through seducing and controlling women, which is achieved through learning “game.”⁸ The training is predicated on the instrumentalization and objectification of women, who become vehicles for masculine senses of success and achievement. The PUA industry cultivates confidence in oneself (Banet-Weiser, 2018), but, as with neoliberal subjectivation in general, via a dependence on others. As Catherine Rottenberg argues (via Wendy Brown), neoliberal rationality “recast[s] individuals as capital enhancing agents” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 7). The entrepreneurial subject thus instrumentalizes women as capital to build its self-confidence. These PUA techniques and worldviews thus “reconfigur(e) intimate and sexual subjectivities and produc(e) distinctly *anti-social forms of sociability* [emphasis added]” (O’Neill, 2018, p. x). It is this tension—antisocial sociability—that we wish to highlight.

As with other strands of neoliberal confidence culture, PUA training individualizes confidence, turning it into a personality trait or internal subjective feature. This entrepreneurialism recasts the sociality at the base of classic confidence (confiding in a peer or investing trust in an intimate social relation) into an instrumental, antisocial relation. Next, trust is redirected and reinvested in a mediator/expert (Mystery as guru, *The Game* as instructional manual). Entrepreneurship, even when developed as a capacity within the self, is thus an inherently social subjectivity—in this case, with gender as the primary axis for (anti)social relations. The production of antisocial forms of sociability within intimate relations results, not unexpectedly, in a level of sexual manipulation.

The PUA and seduction community emerged as a way to “teach” confidence, to instill mastery in men who had been denied this skill mainly by the visibility of popular feminism, where women are exhorted to be confident, sexual subjects. Here, sexual confidence is seen as a resource, one in short supply. The more women have it, the less men do. Once sexual confidence is defined as a scarce resource, women are considered threats to the supply and are thus themselves turned into resources.

Thus, women must be controlled and made less confident in order for men to become confident. With PUAs, this includes undermining a woman’s self-confidence (e.g., negging, or insinuating negative comments to get her to seek approval). Confidence here means procuring trust and taking one into confidence, the core technique of getting the con game to stick—in this case, conning her into having sex with you. In this way, the PUA industry is neoliberal misogyny at its peak—a self-help industry that

⁸ “Game” refers to the pick-up artist’s premier guide book, Neil Strauss’s *The Game* (2005), in which he offers a tutorial on how to master a skill set (game) to pick up women.

encourages masculine entrepreneurship for self-confidence, relies extensively on experts as pedagogical guides, and expects women to enact social reproduction.

In an interview about his success, Mystery (in the way an ideological subject often slips truth into statements) indicates that social reproduction was his motivation. On reflection, he says “[I] realized just how lonely I felt. I was so frightened. I didn’t have anyone to hold my hand. If I had the information before, I could have saved countless, countless failures. If I had someone, I could have gone through this with much less pain.” He became a “reluctant guru” with a vision for intergenerational masculine reproduction: “And one day, when they have a beautiful wife, they get to teach this to their son. That’s why I’m doing this” (Cliff’s List, 2013, video clip). PUAs develop techniques that instrumentalize women, with the aim of controlling women’s sexuality as a means of ensuring women’s place within social reproduction for generations to come.

Hate the Game and the Artist (But not for Long)

PUAs also return us to the con at the heart of confidence. In using words like “the game” and “pick-up artists,” this masculine confidence community borrows from a previous era’s con(fidence) culture. When these neoliberal logics of PUAs break down and neoliberalism itself is exposed as a general set of rackets, what effect does it have on the pick-up industry, on the artist himself? What results when the jig is up, when they’re exposed as petty affect criminals working confidence games, eros grifters running rackets by training others? One easy way to see the results is in the story of one website (now defunct) simply titled PUAHate.

VH1’s *The Pickup Artist* debuted during neoliberalism’s peak, and the series ended with the season 2 finale in November 2008, in the immediate wake of global economic crashes and anxieties. In the subsequent decade, the PUA industry began to generate failures—those who took the classes, attended the workshops, watched the videos, or just read the forums, but still could not achieve their goals. Despite its failures and unfulfilled promises, neoliberalism’s only resolution to these failures is to continue the con—to continue to establish markets around precarity and the loss of confidence. But others used digital culture to create a platform for other solutions.

PUAHate was a site formed by such failed seducers; they directly called out PUA confidence culture as con games with con artists, identifying the PUA industry as “the scams, deception, and misleading marketing techniques used by dating gurus and the seduction community to deceive men and profit from them” (Greig, 2014, para. 36). The game was exposed *as a game*: no illusions, just power. When the promise of successful seductions was not fulfilled, in these cases, there was no cruel optimism that rebooted the subject. The only cyclical return to the experts was via hostility. Perhaps PUAHate resulted from the lack of a process that con artists call “cooling the mark out” after the swindled realize they’ve been duped. The anger born of feeling robbed is not managed; there is no “art of consolation” (Goffman, 1952). One result, as Goffman names it, is “personal disorganization,” which can result in violence.

PUAHate is a critique of PUA from within a crisis of masculine confidence in the masculine confidence game. But this severance from tutelage is only temporary. The blame for failure quickly and vehemently moves from the con game to the recalcitrant instruments for self-confidence: women. Evidence of this shift

can be found when the PUAHate site temporarily closed in 2014 and reopened with a new name: *sluthate*. Why the shift? If hating PUAs was the reason for the community to exist, why weren't gurus, or sexually successful men, targeted?

Here we would cite the power of PUA antisocial sociality. While PUAHate's unity was an antisocial social bonding against the former instructors, the core antisocial sociality of PUA itself was directed against women. That is, even in the PUAHate community, key PUA elements are retained: not a faith in their techniques, but an ethos and orientation toward women, who remain an instrument, a target, a reward. Women are commodities, they are simply "codes to be broken" (Ricard, 2018).

While neoliberalism encouraged—even promised—happiness, self-confidence, and success (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2014), it was not ready to provide an affective structure for the nonattainment of these. When these pursuits fail, neoliberalism has no answer—except to place blame on individuals, to fail better, to keep consuming. But individuals eventually lose confidence in the command to restart. Even when DIY networks of care and support fill the void left by the neoliberal incapacity to provide social solutions, this care work often reproduces and affirms the patriarchal social reproduction structures that undergird neoliberalism in the first place. As Rottenberg (2018) argues,

as an economic order, neoliberalism relies on reproduction and care work in order to reproduce and maintain so-called human capital. However, as a political rationality—and in contrast to liberalism—neoliberalism has no lexicon that can recognize let alone value reproduction and care work. (p. 16)

Rather, this care work comes in the form of sexual and emotional availability of women, or what Sarah Sharma (2018) calls post-mommy labor, an "antisocial" tech design rooted in patriarchy.

The expectations that women will be working for social reproduction, as caregivers (soothing egos, offering sexual comfort), are dashed. Without a social solution, failed PUAs turn to each other for support. And they do so in hostility against the women who "deny" them their presumed entitlement to intimacy. This rage becomes stronger than the frustrated feeling against their tutors. In sum, when the PUA promises are unfulfilled, the PUA system might be exposed as a con, but because it depends on the instrumentalization and objectification of women, it is easy to slide into vilification of those objectified. As Alex Ricard (2018) points out about those who are disaffected by the PUA system, "While they exist as nearly polar opposites of the Pick Up Artist community, the result is the same: they view women's thoughts and feelings as irrelevant. They just want a vaguely woman-shaped thing for them to use" (para. 3). The antisocial sociality that structures PUA practices also shapes ways of restoring subjects that fail in those practices.

While PUAHaters lose confidence in the con game, they preserve its patriarchal fantasy of entitlement and faith in masculine solutions. Because the PUA subject relied on others (in this case, women as instruments for entrepreneurial projects and as social reproductive care/comfort givers), the internecine hate toward the PUAs easily mutated to indifference, insensitivity, and, ultimately, hostility toward women. Here we begin to see the explosive misogynistic results within neoliberalism's decline.

Incels

Enter the incel. Since around 2009, a subculture of heterosexual men calling themselves incels—involuntarily celibate—has operated as a de facto online peer support community for sexual failures. In 2009, George Sodini shot and killed three women outside a gym in Pennsylvania, claiming that “30 million women” had rejected him in his life (Roth, 2009). Sodini attended seduction seminars and was an avid consumer of PUA pedagogy. Pick-up artist Roissy, in good neoliberal fashion, wrote on his blog that if Sodini had only learned “game,” women’s lives would have been spared (North, 2009). Two years later, in 2011, another PUA, Allen Robert Reyes (who had been featured in *The Game* under the name “Gunwitch”), nonfatally shot a woman in the face for rejecting his advances.

But 2014 became the major turning point for hostile reactions to women as a way to regain masculine capacity. Rodger expressed his frustration in his “manifesto,” which he titled “The War on Women,” and in his final video when he succinctly expressed the passage from PUA to incel: “If I can’t have you, girls, I will destroy you.” He was also a frequent poster to the online site PUAHate discussed earlier (Woolf, 2014). The figure who is most infamous for gender-based killing was not only a failed PUA, but one who turned against the confidence game that failed him. And, in a telling twist, it was after Rodger’s murders that the online site PUAHate was shut down (and transformed into sluthate).

Rodger subsequently became an incel hero, complete with religious fan art that turned him into a martyr and saint.⁹ Just before Alek Minassian killed 10 people in Toronto in 2018 by driving a van into pedestrians, he announced on Facebook, “The Incel Rebellion has already begun!” and exclaiming, “All Hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” Since Elliot Rodger killed seven people in his “frustrated pick-up artist” rampage, mass killings justified by women’s sexual rejection of men have dramatically increased in the West (Bosman et al., 2019; Dvorak, 2018).

Some examples include the following. On February 14, 2018, 19-year-old former student Nicholas Cruz killed 17 people at Mary Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He reportedly had committed domestic violence against his ex-girlfriend and her mother, in addition to threatening his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend. A month later, a 17-year-old male student at Great Mills High School in Maryland shot two classmates; one of the victims, who died later of her injuries, was reportedly his ex-girlfriend. In May 2018, 17-year-old Dimitrios Pagourtzis, of Santa Fe High School in Texas, shot and killed 10 people, including a female student who reportedly rejected the shooter after repeated advances. The student’s mother said her daughter “embarrassed him” in front of classmates. In an all-too-familiar reversal of agency, the shooter’s father claims that his son was “bullied” and was a “victim, not a criminal” (Crane, 2018). And a mere month later, 38-year-old Jarrod W. Ramos went on a shooting spree at the newsroom of the *Capital Gazette* in Annapolis, Maryland, killing five people and wounding two others. The apparent rationale for the violent rampage was Ramos’s anger at the paper’s journalists for running a story about his social media harassment of a woman. According to court documents, Ramos initially wrote to the woman (a former high school classmate) thanking her “for being the only person ever to say hello or be nice” (Dvorak, 2018, para.

⁹ Incel killings were internally designated as “Going Sodini” until Rodger’s massacre. Subsequently, it became known as “Going ER.”

15). When the woman suggested counseling, Ramos began sending increasingly hostile and violent messages and embarked on a crusade to harass her. The *Capital Gazette* covered this story; Ramos sued them for defamation and lost (Bui, Wiggins, & Jackman, 2018).

During the writing of this article, there have been more mass shootings based in misogyny (though the killers were not always identified as incels). In Sutherland Springs, Texas in 2017, a man shot and killed 26 people in a church; he had been previously convicted of domestic violence, and his wife claimed that "he once told her that he could bury her body where no one would ever find it" (cited in Bosman et al., 2019, para. 3). In August 2019, Connor Betts, who killed nine people (including his sister) with an assault-style weapon at a Dayton, Ohio, nightclub, had compiled a kill list and rape list of his high school female classmates. He was also in a pornogrind band, singing songs about sexual violence and necrophilia (Wyatt, 2019).

While the established understanding of incels today is infused by what Jia Tolentino (2018) calls a "violent political ideology around the injustice of young, beautiful women refusing to have sex with them" (para. 6), it didn't start out that way. Online forums like Reddit's r/ForeverAlone, IncelSupport, and Love-Shy.com were places of commiseration and therapeutic expression of isolation, peer support groups for men and women who were lonely, alienated, and shy. Individuals sought sociality via peer rather than expert advice. Yet the therapeutic function of these earlier communities shifted in accordance with neoliberalism's declining arc, becoming spaces for misogynistic frustration and hostility (e.g. 4chan's /r9k/, Kiwi Farms). As one former incel put it, "Rage . . . has completely taken over" (Beauchamp, 2019, para. 7).

What were some of the mediated and misogynistic conditions for the revamped incel, now rejecting therapeutic transformation in favor of a toxic masculinity in which women are targeted as the instigators of the injuries? There is no incel without the community provided by social media: subreddits, 4chan, blogs—the online worlds where networked misogyny flourishes (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015; Ging, 2017; Manne, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2015; Massanari, 2017). Ricard (2018) points out that "previous generations of men with these same emotional issues would have been solitary, confined to only their own thoughts. But modern technology has allowed them to feed on each other and build into frothing extremism" (para. 33). Social media sites became spaces where sadness and loneliness could be worked on and multiplied. As lonely as they might be, incels are not so as individuals. They are a networked set of actors, in communication, inspiring and feeding off each other, while sharing a misogynistic core—an entire misogyny media ecology (Ging, 2017).

We can explain some of that shift from the therapeutic function by examining two symbols or metaphors in that networked misogyny. As we explained earlier, the Red Pill is a mutated PUA community that is focused not solely on sexual strategy, but on the type of men's rights activism that proclaims "feminism is cancer." The combination of PUA + men's rights creates a worldview with the belief that women are inferior and need to be reduced to their place in sexual and social orders. Red Pill certainly advocates a PUA style of self-improvement, but it also furthers a particular antifeminist and antiwoman ideology, one that asserts that feminism is strategically trying to harm men.

If the Red Pill retained the PUA style of self-improvement via entrepreneurial strategies and expert advice, another tendency in the manosphere is a more nihilistic attitude to improvement, even to existence.

The Black Pill rejects the notion that desire and attractiveness are socially constructed and therefore malleable, opting instead for more conventional evolutionary biological explanations (Doyle, 2018). For them, women are irresistibly attracted to men with certain physical features (prominent jawlines, symmetrical faces). No amount of peacocking, negging, or weightlifting will overcome these core features.¹⁰

A Black Pilled incel finds life to be an eternal sentence, a curse, a destiny. There is no restarting, no possibility of skills-based training for improvement. There's also no responsibility for one's lot. As journalist David Futrelle notes,

Incel ideology also encourages a sort of nihilistic hopelessness, convincing [men] that they are too weird and too uniquely ugly (or short, or whatever) to ever appeal to women, and that there's no hope that they can change themselves or that women will change to accept them. . . . And *don't really care if they live or die* [emphasis added].
(in Doyle, 2018, para. 11)

For these adherents, the depressive certitude of being "forever alone" generates a subject ultimately indifferent to their own existence. Unlike previous depressed subjects (brooding solo individuals), here we see a loneliness that finds others. But in contrast to a therapeutic mode of connecting with others, this nihilistic network does not seek to overcome its condition: Black Pillers accept their fate and even dwell in its finality. If *forever alone* indicates peak neoliberal individualism, it emerges in and through online digital culture that connects the isolated in their isolation. Forever alone, together.

With the combination of Red Pill and Black Pill ideologies infusing the milieu, incel support transforms from a mutual aid and solidarity network to one that encourages its members to individualize via hostility. Internally, the network fosters competition through goading and insults. As one former incel writes, there was a "rapid undercurrent of social pressure constantly trying to push me to be the coldest and most callous person alive" (Ricard, 2018, para. 18). Individualization remains, but without taking responsibility; instead, it crystallizes via trollish competition as a race to extremes. The notion of "support" loses its connection to therapeutic empathy and instead becomes mutual incitement and escalation. "To exist in these communities is the ultimate contradiction. You share your loneliness, but then to build it into anything other than anger is a sign of weakness. There's a ritual to it" (Ricard, 2018, para. 13). Contemporary incels are thus birthed in an inwardly focused, mutually assured antisocial sociability.

While antisocial sociability infuses incels' own interactions, the aggression is more acute against the "social" named in the "social justice Internet" or, for our purposes, "social reproduction": in a word, women. As argued earlier, entrepreneurial reduction of women to instruments and objects continues within seemingly oppositional camps (PUAs and incels) and thus enables a slide of frustration from the con game failure toward women. When techniques fail, it is because women aren't playing the game fairly (that is,

¹⁰ Some Black Pillers advocate plastic surgery, the masculine makeover that takes neoliberal-era makeovers and entrenches them in biological imperatives. It is unclear how widespread or effective the surgeries are. See Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1987) for more on fascist aesthetics and women as targets of rage within fascism.

they are not acting as proper object/tool). So the game is destroyed by abolishing women, which is only possible because of the inaugural antisocial sociability infusing PUA.

While the incel community sites show contempt for all sexually active women (Staceys) and the men who get to sleep with them (Chads), and even for the experts/PUAs, the focus of the violence shifts to the women. The passage of online incel communities from sadness and shared isolation to rage and vengeance could not have occurred without the easily available affective resources of popular misogyny (in this case, the Red Pill and Black Pill), which is always engaged in a threatened relationship with popular feminism and indeed blames feminism and women for their sexual disappointment. The misogynist incel community targets those who they feel reject them as men, resulting in a manosphere built on desperate preservation and violence. And this is where we see the crucially uneven overlay of neoliberalism and patriarchy. The failed PUA subject does not act as neoliberalism's ideal failed subject; he does not turn back to himself to restart the project. Rather, he seeks to blame others, namely women, for the failure or, more specifically, for robbing him of success. When the reboot short-circuits, and the expectation of women as care providers is unmet, the resources of misogyny are readily available for masculine failures.

In the contemporary context, dominant patriarchies both need women (as social reproduction) and are threatened by them (feminism in particular). The "injuries" dealt to masculinity are seen as in need of repair and recuperation—often through brutally vicious and violent means if social reproduction is not performed. And, while misogyny takes different forms, the failed PUAs wield those forms based on their expectations about women's bodies promised by heteronormativity and social reproduction, as well as those forms that prescribe rage and vitriol. Neoliberalism's arc of decline produces a situation in which misogyny can accelerate, because it provides a handy template for meaning and action.

Incels and the War on Women

While not all these examples explicitly identify as incels, they are mass killings justified by women's sexual rejection of men. In a conjuncture where popular misogyny is formed around "aggrieved entitlements" to women,¹¹ the announced war on women is an extension of everyday expectations and a violent response to women's own responses: their rejection of those expectations (Kimmel, 2014). Incels, rather than being an outlier or a subculture, form a networked subject on a continuum of everyday violence, mediated and physical. Incel murders are simply the starkest versions of techniques designed to incapacitate women, techniques ranging from PUA negging to gaslighting to drugging. Of course, violence against women as a control measure is not new, but increasingly the level of impersonality has grown: The killers target particular people, but also add indiscriminate victims to their toll—an extension of domestic violence to public spaces usually reserved for religious or ideological terrorism.

Not all revenge violence results from being a failed PUA, obviously. Rejection of men by women is certainly not new, and it routinely results in hostile reactions, from online harassment, in-person resentful comments, and extreme physical violence, including mass killings of women (Citron, 2016; Ging, 2017;

¹¹ In this way, the distinction between incel and normie is not a primary bifurcation when it comes to violence against women. Instead, these are both on a continuum of masculinity, in the way Ging (2017) articulates it.

Manne, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2015; Nagle, 2017a). Domestic and public interpersonal violence is a hostile response to women's individual rejections (examples include women's refusals to pay attention to street-harassment-as-erotic advance, to conform to sexual expectations on a date, to stay within an abusive domestic arrangement). On a broader scale, what is being rejected is a social order that puts women in particular places: a collective refusal to participate in social reproduction as has been coercively assigned to women. Incels are a contemporary version of a long-standing reaction "to women not being unofficial service and care-industry denizens from birth" (Beauchamp, 2019, para. 118). When women refuse that role in the social order, or simply reject particular men in their pursuit of it, their unruliness becomes a target for wounded men.

Again, not all of the mentioned revenge-based mass killers are self-described incels, but all have been claimed by them, often in an explicitly articulated language of uprising and a war on women. Incels have incorporated the language and forms of warfare, revolt, and terrorism, but now in the defense of patriarchy. While men's rights activists already employed the concept and efforts of activism, incels announced that they are part of a "revolution" and "rebellion."

Like other forms of warfare, networked misogyny develops a culture filled with martyrs and heroes: Before his mass car killing, Minassian also posted, after hailing Elliot Rodger, the line "Private (Recruit) . . . Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161." Saints, martyrs, honor killings: Others have noted the parallel to ISIS in the form of online radicalization and in spectacle-based terrorizing via mass killings (Martin, 2018). They pen manifestos. They claim credit for mass killings, even if there is no self-admission. Moreover, they share a common violent patriarchy, replacing the honor killings based on family (the more traditional patriarchal order) with ones based on ego-based individual reputation. As Zoe Williams (2018) puts it, "the perpetrators don't have to meet and their balaclavas don't have to match. All they have to do is establish their hate figures and be consistent" (para. 19). Networked misogyny, formed over the years through online harassment, guided trolling, and mutual encouragement, turns into networked physical action, what we can call "honor terrorism." Networked into the fatalistic monadism of "forever alone," incel violence combines femicide with suicide, breaking with the program of self-improvement and becoming innovators of technologies of self-destruction. These necropolitical soldiers would rather die and kill than lose any patriarchal foundation.

If anyone thought that the war on women was merely metaphorical or juridical, they might have a different perspective now that Rodger and others have declared that war, recruited others, and weaponized sociality to enact terror. As feminist author Laurie Penny (2018) puts it,

The context is despair. The context is cultural civil war. The context is two thousand years of violent religious patriarchy, five centuries of brutal capitalist biopolitics, and a decade of punishing austerity that has left a great many young men quaking in the ruins of their own promised glory, drowning in unmet expectations. (p. 23)

From involuntary celibate to volunteer soldiers in a misogyny militia, war has clearly been declared (Federici, 2012).

Conclusion: Out of the Ruins

The PUA community embodies a failure of neoliberal promises—that through tutelage and subsequent mastery of a technical skill set, one will achieve success. Asked to entrepreneurialize themselves through a reliance on experts while expecting access to women, PUAs were ideal masculine neoliberal subjects. PUAs depended on a two-fold confidence: as a resource to be cultivated in oneself (neoliberal individualization), and the relation to others in the form of trust in expertise (neoliberal training).

While some attempts at recuperating from failure involve cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), or a repetitive reattachment to neoliberal techniques of self-help, in the PUA failure cases, there is no return to the confidence game. The “countless, countless failures” Mystery notes can no longer trust the gurus; they have lost confidence in the confidence game. Instead, failed PUAs reveal the con(fidence) game, exposing the “con” of confidence. The crisis of the entrepreneurial sexual subject gives us insights into neoliberalism’s wider crisis: Technologies of the self are no longer tied to coherent and continuous governing systems, but revert to material rackets and swindles. The transition from PUA to incel is emblematic of this decline and emergence via de-conning and diffidence.

The result? The command to entrepreneurialize itself becomes an object of mistrust. The ideological suturing of peak neoliberalism is now torn, disrupting the smooth operations of the self-starting subject. What happens when the resources and techniques encouraged by neoliberal subjective governance are no longer renewable? When the subject exhausts them (and themselves in the process) via disillusionment? Exposing the con has no necessary politics attached to it. Once the con(fidence) game is revealed as such, neoliberalism cannot recuperate failures into its own mechanisms of reproduction and integration. It fails to manage its failures. PUA support networks of information and inspiration don’t work, producing disillusionment. This disillusionment opens a space for new solutions. What arises from the ruins, or what slouches from decline, matters greatly.¹²

Neoliberalism’s social care deficit means there is no social support, only antisocial support. Incels are mutated entrepreneurs—men of action, turning others into instruments, but now subtracting the creative from “creative destruction.” Their techniques of disruption are increasingly techniques of pure negation. Like the unsuccessful con artist who reverts to armed robbery, some of these failed PUA students turn to weapons after their arts of persuasion flop. Instead of mastering the PUA technique of “negging,” which subtly puts down a woman to lower her self-esteem, incels are putting down women for good. If incels can’t grift their confidence, they too will turn to armed robbery—stealing life from others.

The incel homi-suicidal solution is not a recuperation or a reboot, but a collective reaction that annihilates via a necropolitical network. It is on a continuum of reactive techniques to overcome women’s refusal of social reproduction roles and to reestablish order (tricks, cons, drugging, abuse, rape, murder). Also on this continuum are authoritarian heads of state like Orbán, Trump, and Bolsonaro, who authorize

¹² It’s important to note that, in some ways, the failure of PUAs seems to be a relatively minor outcome compared with other neoliberal failures, such as global economic collapse, widespread precarity and poverty, or the emergence of a kind of neo-fascism.

movements to control biological reproduction. What incels call an uprising or rebellion is thus the latest version of the war on women that accompanied the rise of capitalism and that, in its current crisis, continues to impose a sphere of social reproduction (Federici, 2012). A perspective that begins with neoliberal capitalism's crisis and reversion to its foundational strategies of hostility can better orient us to the terrain, actors, and stakes of these antagonisms.

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