“She Thinks of Him as a Machine”: On the Entanglements of Neoliberal Ideology and Misogynist Cybercrime

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Abstract
The “manosphere” is a constellation of masculinist social media communities loosely unified by an anti-feminist worldview. Although extant journalism and social media scholarship successfully delineate the manosphere as a significant social problem by associating it with misogynist cybercrime and cyberhate, the resulting narrative simplistically pathologizes manosphere discourse while leaving its misogyny undertheorized. In this article, I complicate this emerging narrative by demonstrating how a certain central manosphere discourse qualitatively overlaps with a broader neoliberal ideology. I do so by further developing a critical discourse analysis of quasi-representative manosphere documents drawn from “The Red Pill,” a sub-forum of Reddit.com. Although this forum is explicitly devoted to discussing heterosexual seduction strategies, I find that it also produces a discursive means for fiscally conservative men to reconcile their pro-capitalist economic beliefs with apparent evidence of capitalism’s destructive tendencies and contradictions. This forum’s anti-feminist discourse implicitly parallels Marxian theory while explicitly supporting free market capitalism and denigrating women, thereby providing men with a linguistic and conceptual framework to scapegoat women for economic problems while leaving neoliberal ideas and assumptions unchallenged.

Keywords
critical discourse analysis, manosphere, Marx, masculinities, neoliberalism, Reddit, seduction

Introduction
Social media technologies enable men to commit various “cybercrimes” against women (Todd, 2017) including intense online harassment, threats of rape or death, and publicizing private information (Penny, 2013; Poland, 2016). Such misogynist cyber-abuse, cyber-victimization, and cyberhate (Jane, 2017) are often associated with the “manosphere,” a constellation of masculinist Internet communities loosely unified by an anti-feminist worldview. In her germinal research on the manosphere, Ging (2017) constructs its five categories, including a “pick up artists (PUAs)/game” (p. 7) interest group, wherein men discuss strategies for seducing women. The term “manosphere” entered popular discourse after news media outlets associated this PUA interest group with embodied acts of misogynist violence and sexual assault (Dewey, 2014; Zadrozny, 2017). Most journalistic accounts and feminist blog posts highlight the manosphere’s many instances of hateful, brazen, and offensive language to demonstrate its relevance and significance as an object of investigation unto itself (Baker, 2017; Blake, 2015; Cohen, 2015; H. C., 2016; Pennacchia, 2016; West, 2014).

Although the ensuing cultural narrative successfully delineates the manosphere’s PUA communities as a significant social problem, it also simplistically positions manosphere participants as “pathetic, pathological or perverse” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 1). Similarly, as Rachel O’Neill (2018a) observes, preliminary research on the manosphere’s seduction discourses “dangerously underplays the extent to which the manosphere reflects and reproduces more widely held attitudes and beliefs.” Indeed, O’Neill’s (2015) own ethnographic research on a manosphere-related PUA community-industry hybrid indirectly troubles this early narrative and provokes the question of its limitations, insofar as her work demonstrates how the seemingly “deviant” beliefs of her

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pick up artist participants “are not dissonant from but are in fact consistent with broader reconstructions of intimacy, sex and capital” (p. 1) taking place under neoliberalism.

In this article, I complicate the preliminary pathologizing narrative—and add nuance to scholarly accounts that focus narrowly on manosphere misogyny—by combining O’Neill’s broad conceptual approach to studying modern Western seduction discourses with Ging’s methodological approach to studying the discourses of the manosphere. Drawing from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 26 quasi-representative online documents mined from one manosphere seduction forum, this article contributes to the study of social media and misogynist cybercrime by demonstrating ways in which this Internet PUA discourse “reflects and reproduces broader cultural rationalities” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 19) associated with neoliberalism as a political/economic project and invasive ideology. By describing women using terms and ideas which might otherwise be associated with Marxian criticism of capitalists, this manosphere discourse not only justifies amoral and harmful seduction practices (while producing a problematic language of misogynist cyberbait) but also provides a masculinist means for reconciling fiscal conservatism with apparent evidence of late capitalism’s destructiveness: Men don’t have to critically examine their own deeply held conservative economic beliefs so long as they can scapegoat women for alienation, exploitation, unemployment, and precariousness.

Theoretical Background

Social media scholars use the term “manosphere” to refer to a loosely connected group of anti-feminist social media communities that are associated with misogynist online phenomena including #GamerGate, the alt-right, and men’s rights activism (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Ging, 2017; Jane, 2017, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Massanari, 2017). The manosphere is commonly explained as a materialization of men’s preexisting misogyny, provoked into an online form by the meaningful gains of feminist social movements (Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Rafail & Freitas, 2019; Schmitz & Kazvak, 2016), the development of permissive and enabling technologies (Jane, 2017), as well as the incursion of women into previously masculinized online spaces (Banet-Weiser & Milner, 2016; Poland, 2016).

This overarching explanation recruits three common concepts as explanatory aids: homophily, anonymity, and the echo chamber effect. The homophily thesis suggests that “[a] online users tend to select claims that adhere to their system of beliefs and to ignore dissenting information” (Vicario, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley, & Quattrociocchi, 2017, p. 1). This thesis implies that men seek out manosphere content that they already agree with. If the homophily thesis explains why misogynists consume manosphere content, anonymity explains why they produce it. It is often presumed that many men feel inhibited by “feminist culture,” which renders expressions of hostile sexism impermissible or deviant in polite society (Jane, 2017). Thus, the anonymity and quasi-anonymity afforded by social media produce an “online disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004) such that men become “undisciplined” (Curlew, 2019) and more inclined to produce misogynist content. Anonymity has become an attractive explanation for the misogynist communities of Reddit in particular (Kilgo, Ng, Riedl, & Lacasa-Mas, 2018).

Although anonymity helps to explain the manosphere as an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable anti-feminist discourses (Poland, 2016), masculinist social media hubs also seem to have unique causal properties insofar as they produce “echo chambers,” wherein “similar opinions reinforce each other and lead to attitude polarization” (Wollebæk, Karløsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Enjolras, 2019, p. 1). Researchers have demonstrated the echo chamber effect taking place not only in misogynist Reddit communities (Rafail & Freitas, 2019) but also in other social media platforms including Facebook (Quattrociocchi, Scala, & Sunstein, 2016) and Twitter (Matuszewski & Szabó, 2019).

In combination, concepts such as these produce an explanatory narrative that depicts inhibited misogynists creating and easily locating ideologically congruent content in the manosphere, which can both align with and exacerbate their preexisting misogynist beliefs (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). In short, the manosphere is said to create a virtual space in which deviant misogynists are free to become further radicalized (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Extant social media scholarship on this subject has been invaluable insofar as it has refuted a naïve impression that social media are fundamentally democratic spaces, and has highlighted the ways in which men use Internet technologies to abuse or harass women (Jane, 2017; Penny, 2013; Poland, 2016).

However, this body of research is limited to the extent that it treats online misogyny solely as explanans, rather than explanandum. Symptomatically, Jane (2017) explains that misogynists spew anti-feminist vitriol on social media simply “because they can” (p. 43). But research that understands anti-feminist social media as merely a “digital extension of fraternal social spaces” (Rodriguez & Hernandez, 2018, p. 9) implicitly presumes that such misogyny is generated ex nihilo by pathological individuals. And as O’Neill (2018a) writes, “unless we accept the idea that some men just hate women—that misogyny really is an immovable force—then we need to understand what draws men to the manosphere.” Such a deeper understanding has practical stakes insofar as misogynist cybercrimes turn out to be “the digital transmogrification of very real political problems, whose potential solution may only be actualised if material equality and social justice become universal conditions of emancipation” (Koulouris, 2018, p. 759; see also Hodapp, 2017).

This knowledge gap in research on misogynist social media mirrors a parallel lacuna within masculinities scholarship. Connell (2012) has observed a tendency for contemporary social scientists to focus on “specific patterns of masculinity revealed in culture and social relations in a
particular time and place” (p. 5), while neglecting the ways in which masculinities can be affected by “largescale institutions and the structural conditions of social life” (p. 15) including “neoliberal globalization” (p. 4). O’Neill’s (2018b) recent ethnography of a London seduction community-industry hybrid presents a valuable exception to this tendency by demonstrating the ways in which “neoliberal rationalities” (p. 19) parallel and shape her male participants’ constructions of heterosexuality. Drawing from the work of Wendy Brown (2015), O’Neill understands neoliberalism not merely as a political and economic project that promotes globalization and free trade (Harvey, 2007) but as the extension of a fiscally conservative economic mind-set into seemingly noneconomic spheres of life and ways of thinking. Accordingly, O’Neill finds narratives that are normally associated with neoclassical economics—such as an individualist ethos of meritocracy and a managerial mind-set—infusing her participants’ views of heterosexuality.

Drawing from O’Neill’s (2018b) work, I too understand neoliberalism to be a political/economic project, as well as a “cultural rationality” (p. 18) that resonates with fiscal conservatism and extends its economic logics into noneconomic discourses. (As such, I use the terms “fiscally conservative” and “neoliberal” interchangeably.) In this article, I locate connections, similarities, and entanglements between a neoliberal cultural rationality of economic individualism and a sexual discourse that has become influential within the manosphere’s PUA interest group. But, although this discourse explicitly teaches men how to seduce women by borrowing from a neoliberal cultural framework (Van Valkenburgh, 2018), it also implicitly offers them a means for superficially resolving ambivalences about global capitalism.

This article’s contribution is to argue that this online seduction discourse has a secondary and latent ideological function, insofar as it provides men with a way to avoid challenging their firmly ingrained neoliberal beliefs and assumptions, while still accounting for apparent economic problems. This discourse, which recasts Marxian concepts in anti-feminist terms to scapegoat women for men’s economic problems, also reflects a parallel dynamic in the historical transition between “men’s liberation” and “men’s rights” movements, which I will relate through a brief analysis of the works of Warren Farrell. This article thereby adds nuance to the narrative which suggests that manosphere content merely reproduces men’s preexisting misogyny and patriarchy in an online setting. Although I do not altogether reject this thesis, I do wish to productively complicate it: Manosphere PUA interest group.

From Men’s Liberation to Men’s Rights

In mid-century America, men’s lives were partly characterized by workplace dissatisfactions (Kimmel, 2008). Their phenomenological experiences of workplace alienation were significant subjective causes of early men’s rights activism, which was initially allied with second-wave feminism against a common enemy of rigid gender roles (Messner, 2000). But as Kimmel (2008) observes, the men’s liberation movement’s failure to meaningfully address the economic roots of these roles allowed it to sidestep any systemic critique and instead revert to blaming women for men’s problems.

The career arc of Warren Farrell—the “godfather” of the men’s rights movement (Messner, 2016)—often read as a microcosm of this shift (Hodapp, 2017; Kimmel, 2008; Messner, 2000). His book The Liberated Man (1974) begins as a critique of a stifling male breadwinner role, which requires men to suppress their emotions to advance their careers and provide for their families. However, Liberated conflates these masculine prescriptions with the alienating pressures of the capitalist labor market, such that Farrell’s (1974) gendered liberation comes to be defined as the “freedom to make a living doing what I had come to love” (p. xxvii). Accordingly, Farrell’s (1974) opening questions for raising men’s consciousness are, “First, what do I really want to do, and second, how do I make a living doing it?” (p. xxiv). Rather than proceeding from these questions to interrogate the capitalist social relations which impede free and creative labor, Farrell (1974) isolates gender prescriptions as his object of criticism: “[m]en’s liberation means breaking down stereotyped roles so that men can gain the freedom to change places with women, or switch jobs or even just resist on their jobs without risking the entire family income” (p. 65). It’s as if men’s freedom to trade places with women would mean that men no longer have to worry about money.

Farrell’s apparent inability or unwillingness to critically interrogate capitalist social relations can be situated within a broader cultural milieu and historical trajectory. Historically, Marxian critical theory has provided a powerful explanation for alienation, exploitation, and economic disruption, and in doing so has been instrumental in framing anti-capitalist social movements. However, late capitalism is paradoxically characterized by both heightened economic contradictions and the re-entrenchment of neoliberal ideology (Au, 2018). Even as income inequality has increased dramatically in the United States over the past several decades (Stewart, 2018), the percentage of Americans who identify as middle class remains remarkably consistent (General Social Survey [GSS], 2019). A collective dismissal of Marxian critique and historically low union membership are paired with heightened economic inequality and crises (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013). Thus, structural conditions that might otherwise foment class-consciousness are partially interrupted by the entrenchment of neoliberal ideology. Under such circumstances, how do men make sense of their alienation and exploitation?
In Farrell’s case, a lack of critical theory eventually permits him to identify women—rather than any structural or economic conditions—as the cause of his workplace troubles. The logic of his later “men’s rights” polemic *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) proceeds as follows: women pressure men into accepting unfurling professions by making their “beauty and their sex” conditional on men’s economic success (or men’s “labor, money, life”) (p. 57). Accordingly, Farrell (1993) posits a “male obligation to earn more money than a woman before she would love him” (p. 29). In this view, it is women’s conditional love which coerces men into accepting alienating labor, rather than a lack of access to the means of production. In a revealing personal anecdote, Farrell recollects, “as soon as I started dating, I started mowing lawns” (p. 18)—a job that he especially hated. If in *Liberated* it is the masculine breadwinner ideal that pressures men into accepting alienating wage labor, in *Myth* it is women’s conditional love and withholding of sex which does the pressuring. In neither text are coercive economic conditions implicated.

Tellingly—and consistent with concurrent neoliberal ideology—*Myth* is at pains to portray the free market as socially healthy and the welfare state as oppressive, while associating the latter with women and feminism. And interestingly, Farrell’s critical view of the welfare state takes place in gendered terms (Thorpe, 2016). For example, feminism-induced divorces result in “raising taxes mostly on other men to provide money mostly for women” (p. 169) creating a “gender entitlement” (Farrell, 1993, p. 7) and a childlike “financial learned helplessness” (Farrell, 1993, p. 181) among women. As such, Farrell’s position resonates with other contemporaneous anti-feminist texts that are intertwined with libertarian principles. For instance, the thesis of Levin’s (1987) libertarian tract *Feminism and Freedom* is that “[i]t is not by accident that feminism has had its major impact through the necessarily coercive machinery of the state rather than through the private decisions of individuals” (p. 2). In what follows, I will demonstrate similar ideological processes taking place in *r/TheRedPill* (TRP), a particularly popular and influential social media hub positioned at the center of the manosphere.

**Method**

If it is the goal of feminist social scientists to “get the story right” (Ezzell, 2013) about online communities which may hold abhorrent misogynist beliefs, it is imperative to systematically identify discursive samples that adequately represent the views of manosphere populations. Toward these ends, I selected data for this study from TRP, a PUA sub-forum of Reddit.com whose seduction discourses have become central to the manosphere, influencing online spaces that are seemingly unrelated to heterosexual seduction practices and discourses (Ging, 2017; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Accordingly, Donna Zuckerberg (2018) uses “r/TheRedPill” and “manosphere” interchangeably, whereas Hodapp (2017) equates “red pill philosophy” with “men’s rights philosophy.” If TRP’s original worldview unites the manosphere’s various assemblages and communities—as Ging (2017) suggests—then for the purposes of preliminary research, the forum’s core beliefs can be provisionally treated as representative of broader manosphere ideologies. As such, this forum becomes an attractive site for determining meaningful ways in which manosphere discourses overlap with or diverge from broader cultural formations.

Because the TRP subreddit in and of itself contains a vast amount of qualitative data—including many thousands of unique comments, links, and original text posts—further systematic data selection was necessary to produce a manageable sample and isolate content that is defensibly representative of the community’s worldview. To these ends, this study further develops an analysis of data drawn from TRP’s “sidebar,” a list of hyperlinks prominently displayed on the first screen that participants see when they visit the TRP subreddit. On the right side of TRP’s homepage, beneath the sub-heading “New here? Read the following threads and the Theory Reading below. Read before participating” lies a list of links redirecting visitors to texts written by various quasi-anonymous authors and consisting of approximately 130,000 words. These documents containing “threads and theory reading” are commonly referred to as “the sidebar,” and they outline theories of human nature and Western society that establish a baseline of knowledge for quotidian participation in the TRP community (Van Valkenburgh, 2018).

Forum moderators possess absolute power to curate these sidebar texts—though the texts sampled in this study have remained unchanged for several years (Van Valkenburgh, 2018)—and moderators claim to delete forum posts which demonstrate ignorance of these contents. Reddit’s specific social media technology allows moderators to prominently highlight these documents, affording visitors especially easy access to their content. Thus, Reddit’s format enables the TRP community to cluster around a core of ideas and principles, making the sidebar especially attractive as a provisional representation of the community’s essential ideological core. Although these documents are relatively few in number, they comprise a remarkably substantive and rich source of data. If TRP can be treated as representative of the manosphere’s PUA interest group (Ging, 2017; Van Valkenburgh, 2018), then TRP’s sidebar can provisionally be treated as representative of TRP’s ideology for the purposes of close textual analysis in preliminary TRP scholarship.

Following Ging’s germinal manosphere research as an admirable example, I then subject these systematically selected documents to CDA. Proponents of this methodology routinely assert that there are no single set of rules or instructions for producing CDA (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). For instance, Wodak (2006) posits that CDA consists of “heterogeneity of methodological and theoretical approaches” to textual analysis (p. 186). What unites these
dive approaches is a “shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society” (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 357). Thus, CDA pays particular attention to the ways in which discourse legitimizes power hierarchies or ideologically obfuscates the roots of social problems.

According to Jäger (2001), after identifying texts which are “as typical as possible of the discourse position” of the researcher’s population of interest, CDA may produce close discursive analysis to identify various textual phenomena including (but not limited to) both “[t]hemes addressed” and “striking absence of certain themes” within the text, as well as “[c]ollective symbolism or ‘figurativeness’, symbolism, metaphorism, etc.” (p. 55). Subsequently, CDA can compare the text to other, seemingly unrelated cultural objects along these qualitative features of interest, and/or situate the text within the broader cultural milieu in which it is produced: “The historical context is always analysed and integrated into the interpretation, although there exists no stringent procedure for this task” (Meyer, 2001, p. 27). Because this study investigates possible qualitative parallels between manosphere discourse and seemingly unrelated cultural formations and social problems, CDA was selected as an adequate methodological approach for analyzing TRP’s representative content and comparing it to the cultural logics of neoliberalism. In the “Findings” section of this article, I will compare the sidebar to Marx’s theory of capital (Marx, 1995), not to suggest any direct relationship between TRP and Marx as an individual, but to identify a series of uncanny—albeit, unintentional—connections to a broader Marxian discourse, of which Marx’s work constitutes an exemplar par excellence.

Findings

The Matrix Is to Humans as TRP Is to Men

The sidebar discloses that TRP borrows its root metaphor from _The Matrix_ (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) (I), a film premised on humanity-developing machines which come to dominate and parasitically feed on their human creators. The “matrix” under consideration is a system of digital illusions that tricks humans into believing that they live free lives, and masks the fact that they are confined within energy-extracting pods. Nevertheless, it is possible for humans to awaken to their imprisonment: the main character of _The Matrix_ chooses to swallow a “red pill,” which dissipates the illusion of freedom and reveals the ugly truth of humanity’s bio-exploitation—thereby enabling revolution.

But, although the TRP community finds in _The Matrix_ an attractive foundational metaphor (Ging, 2017; Van Valkenburgh, 2018), the film is also a remarkably apt allegory for Marx’s theory of capital, as many have noticed (Cloud, 2006; Leary, 2004). Marx (1995) famously described exploitative capital as “dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (p. 342). This could also be a description of the machines in _The Matrix_ : nonliving objects which suck the energy out of human beings to reproduce themselves. Such a reversal between subject and object arguably defines Marx’s oeuvre (Hudis, 2012). In _Capital_, for instance, Marx (1995) wrote that capitalist societies are characterized by “material [dinglich] relations between persons and social relations between things” (p. 166). The matrix-as-simulation figures for Marx’s ideology and commodity fetishism, a network of illusions that hides the cruel truth of exploitation. Although “taking the red pill” dispels the myth of human freedom in _The Matrix_, Marx’s (1995) critique of political economy dispels the myth of “Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham” (p. 280) in capitalist societies.

However, although TRP appropriates an apparently Marxian root metaphor, the community rearranges the terms of this narrative, substituting “woman” for machine/capital. Although Marx and _The Matrix_ evoke humanity’s enslavement by the objects of their creation, TRP is premised on men’s exploitation by women. Accordingly, TRP accuses feminism of disguising the truth of _male_ exploitation.

TRP Is to Woman as Marx Is to Capitalist

There is a quasi-Marxian outrage regarding exploitation and alienation—albeit veiled behind anti-feminist rhetoric—in Esther Vilar’s (1972) _polemic The Manipulated Man_ (MM). Although originally written in the 1970s by an Argentinian woman, a pdf of MM is now prominently linked on the sidebar as “required reading.” At 42,221 words, MM accounts for approximately 30% of the sidebar’s content. MM reveals direct comparisons between the woman and the capitalist corporation:

A woman may, in fact, be compared to a _firm_ in a number of ways. After all, a firm is only an impersonal system aimed at achieving a maximum profit. And what else does a woman do? Without any emotion—love, hate, or malice—she is bound to the man who works for her. (VIII)

Here, the sidebar equates the woman–man relationship with the exploitative and utilitarian employer–employee relationship.

But far from being confined to a single explicit metaphor, an implicit anti-capitalist narrative pervades MM, with criticism redirected away from the capitalist/capital and displaced onto women/feminism. For instance, Vilar writes that if a woman’s partner leaves, the woman does not feel any sentimentality or heartbreak, but sees the situation “from the angle of the entrepreneur who loses his best worker to a competitor. As far as a woman is concerned, the heartache involved is nothing more than a reaction to letting good business go elsewhere” (VIII). In a clear parallel, Marx believed that the archetypical capitalist considers the well-being of the worker only insofar as it relates to the production of surplus value. In
bourgeois society, sentimentality and romance are rendered worthless, because they have nothing to do with profit (Marx & Engels, 2006). In capitalist societies, the worker is treated as just another commodity, the particular use-value of which is to create surplus value (Marx, 1995).

In MM, the woman’s view of the man neatly mirrors the capitalist’s view of the worker as a value-producing object: “she thinks of him as a machine—a machine for the production of material goods” (VIII). Here, the man, who labors on behalf of his romantic partner, is akin to the factory worker who is treated as a commodity-producing commodity. Vilar reinforces this connection between man and machine with striking metaphor. Woman’s “dependence” on man does not involve any subjective interdependence, but is akin to “a café proprietor’s on his espresso machine . . . Such dependencies hardly involve agonizing” (VIII). Here, the relationship between woman and man is simply the relationship between subject and tool. This woman bears a distinctive resemblance to Marx’s capital, which “has no heart in its breast” (Marx, 1995, p. 343), only the blind reproductive drive of a parasite. When a woman feels pleasure from receiving male attention, it has nothing to do with romance. Instead, “[h]er pleasure may be compared to that of a shareholder who finds that his stocks have risen” (VIII).

Vilar even seems to sympathize with Marx’s description of the man’s phenomenological experience as an alienated worker (Marx, 1964). She captures the essence of Marxian alienation when she describes the boring life of the professional bus driver who drives “always the same route, at the same time, in the same town, day after day, year after year,” all in the service of the woman who exploits him:

No matter what a man’s job may be—bookkeeper, doctor, bus driver, or managing director—every moment of his life will be spent as a cog in a huge and pitiless system—a system designed to exploit him to the utmost, to his dying day. (VIII)

With remarkable rhetorical resonance, Marx (1993) wrote in the Grundrisse that workers are distributed “among the machinery as so many cogs” (p. 585), whereas elsewhere Vilar observes that “man is only a tiny cog in a gigantic business machine” (VIII).

Vilar identifies women as the “prime cause” (VIII) of this alienation and exploitation, using terms that might otherwise be reserved for the parasitic capitalist. For instance, “[a] man is a human being who works. By working, he supports himself, his wife, and his wife’s children. A woman, on the other hand, is a human being who does not work” (VIII). The man-laborer generates value for the woman-capitalist who does not generate any value. Appropriately, in almost explicitly Marxian language, Vilar writes that “Women let men work for them, think for them and take on their responsibilities—in fact, they exploit them” (VIII). When Vilar describes the “one-sided exploitation of one group of human beings by a parasitic clique” (VIII), she is not referring to Marx’s parasitic bourgeoisie, but women who suck the life and labor out of their male partners, via the workplace as an extractive mechanism.

This narrative is echoed elsewhere in the sidebar. Supposedly, there is a “significant number of women [who] seek primarily attention and material goods from men” (IV) and who engage in “parasitic dating, a kind of economic predation upon the male by the female” (IV). Borrowing from evolutionary psychology (Van Valkenburgh, 2018), the sidebar understands this “economic predation” as an expression of women’s “feminine imperative” (I) to ensure that their children have enough resources to survive.

**TRP Is to Subjective/Sex as Marx Is to Objective/Wealth**

Although Marx reasons that laborers are pressured into exploitative factory work by their separation from the means of subsistence, Vilar accordingly recognizes “man’s need for sex” (VIII) as the constricting biological fact which pressures him into exploitative sexual relationships—paralleling Warren Farrell’s worldview. If men “need” sex, then women are the gatekeepers to that crucial resource. Vilar articulates this in terms that evoke Marx’s understanding of wage labor: being a woman “consists of choosing a man and letting him do all the work. In return for his support, they are prepared to let him make use of their vagina at certain given intervals” (VIII). We can easily translate this into Marxian terms: being a capitalist consists of choosing a laborer and letting him do all the work. In exchange for this labor, capitalists are prepared to give him a portion of the value generated (the wage).

Other sidebar texts similarly reason that men are driven into economically exploitative relationships by a contradiction between an inherent need for sex and a reality in which their sexual access has been restricted: there is a prevalent belief that “men need sex to be happy” (V). When sex is equated with happiness itself, a lack of sex tells a man that he is “a hideous grotesque abomination” and “would probably be better off dead” (VII). Women, by contrast, supposedly need sex “mainly during ovulation, control the access of it and demand a resource extraction for it” (VII). The parallels between woman and private property owner are palpable here, forcing men to live in sexual poverty. Instead of Marx’s objective means of subsistence, TRP recognizes sex as the subjective means of subsistence, a lack of which pressures men into acquiescing to exploitative and alienating employment as a means for procuring a sexual “wage” from female partners.

Although the sidebar presupposes that men work to eventually have sex—rather than acquire wealth—the sidebar’s articulation of sexual inequality plays a claims-making role that bears a striking resemblance to populist grievances about economic inequality. The sidebar describes disproportionate sexual activity in terms that might otherwise be
reserved for economic injustice. For example, the sidebar asserts that “20% of men are fucking 80% of the women” (V). This idea is termed the “Pareto Principle” (V), named after 19th-century economist Vilfredo Pareto, who is (incorrectly) remembered in TRP for finding that 80% of Italian land belonged to 20% of the Italian population. One sidebar text renders explicit this affinity between sexual and economic inequality:

the lack of [sex] during the height of your sexual awakening, coupled with the feminine free for all leaves a sort of Occupy Wallstreet sense of injustice. The 1% (or in this case 20% of men) enjoy the bounty of 80% of the women who feast aplenty on the trough of sluttery. (VII)

If sex is considered the only real currency, and money is valued primarily as an indirect means for obtaining sex, then sexual inequality easily comes to replace economic inequality in the sidebar. The sidebar offers seduction strategies and theories as an individualistic remedy for this “injustice” (Van Valkenburgh, 2018), which is understood as the natural byproduct of dissolution of traditional marriage as an institution. This dissolution can also be understood in quasi-Marxian terms.

**TRP Is to Marriage as Marx Is to Feudalism**

The sidebar understands institutionalized marriage of bygone times as a kind of sexual feudalism, which, although oppressive in certain respects for both men and women, previously ensured broad male access to the sexual means of reproduction. Thus, the dissolution of traditional marriage—caused by the material forces of birth control and housework technologies—produced the same “freedom in the double sense” (Marx, 1995) as capital’s technological and organizational dissolution of feudalism. On one hand, liberated men and women became free to pursue any number of sexual partners: “[t]he sexual revolution asserted the right of each individual to sex on his or her own terms—in other words, a right of perfect selfishness in erotic matters” (IV). This kind of liberation has positive implications for individual freedoms. Suggesting a social liberalism, the sidebar declares that “marriage had to change if we were to see equal rights” (II).

On the other hand, individuals are also free to “starve” sexually, as a sexual meritocracy initially produces sexual inequality:

What happens when female sexual desire is liberated is not an increase in the total amount of sex available to men, but a redistribution of the existing supply . . . A situation emerges in which most men are desperate for wives, but most women are just as desperately throwing themselves at a very few exceptionally attractive men. These men, who had always found it easy to get a mate, henceforward get multiple mates. (IV)

This economic language of “redistribution” of sexual supply such that “a few” men get “multiple mates” clearly resonates with a sentiment of economic injustice and wealth inequality. Although the sexual revolution allows the woman to sleep with whomever she likes, it also makes it “impossible for many decent men to find wives” (IV). After the marriage institution dissolves, “all women choose the same few men” (IV).

**Woman Is to Man as Government Is to Capitalism**

The sidebar’s ambivalence toward marriage parallels its ambivalence toward feminism, stemming from an unequivocal fiscal conservatism and an equivocal social conservatism—at times, the sidebar speaks disparagingly of “social conservatives” as “sadistic” (III). As such, the sidebar expresses a version of “postfeminism,” insofar as supports women’s individual marketplace liberties yet disdains feminist collective action (O’Neill, 2018b). In the sidebar, feminism is applauded insofar as it promotes personal freedom of choice:

Feminism was inevitable. Equal rights are something I strongly am in support of. For men and women. Women have the right to pursue happiness. Nobody should tell them otherwise. Maximizing happiness is the goal of every living creature on this planet. (II)

However, at the same time that the sidebar supports feminism’s historical support of women’s individual liberties, feminism is also disparaged, insofar as it promotes collectivism and a social safety net. This position is reflected in the sidebar’s view of reproductive rights:

a woman should get to decide how many children she bears, or even whether or not to have any children at all. However, a childless old woman should not then be able to extract resources from the children of other women. (III)

In other words, an individual woman should be free to choose what she does with her body, but also free from having to pay taxes to support other women. Thus, the sidebar supports women’s negative freedom from social constraint, yet opposes their positive freedom to gain material well-being (Thorpe, 2016). The sidebar applauds women for “securing voting rights, achieving educational parity, and opening employment channels for women,” yet vilifies feminism for promoting “taxpayer-funded handouts” to women (III).

Indeed, in the sidebar’s glossary, modern feminism and the welfare state are defined as mutually constitutive. Feminism is defined as,

[a] doctrine built on the pre-supposition of victimhood of women by men as a foundation of female identity. In its goals is always the utilization of the state to forcibly redress this claimed victimization. In other words, the proxy use of violence and wealth appropriation. In whatever flavor, and variation, these two basic features are common to every doctrine using the label feminism. Feminism is therefore, a doctrine of class hatred, and violence. (VI)
It is notable that feminism is characterized as “class hatred,” and that women are akin to an “upper” class that practices “wealth appropriation.” The terms of Marxian polemic are thereby rearranged to support an anti-feminist agenda. But this rearrangement is inseparably intertwined with a critical view of federal governance, such that the welfare state becomes women’s overarching mechanism for exploiting men: “The vast majority of social security taxes are paid by men, but are collected by women.” Furthermore, “women consume two-thirds of all U.S. healthcare, despite most of this $2.5 Trillion annual expenditure being paid by men” (III). Feminism thereby produces an unjust “transfer of wealth from men to women and from private industry to the government” (III):

virtually all government spending except for defense and infrastructure, from Medicare to Obamacare to welfare to public sector jobs for women to the expansion of the prison population, is either a net transfer of wealth from men to women, or a byproduct of the destruction of Marriage 1.0. In either case, “feminism” is the culprit. (III)

Thus, modern feminism is disparagingly associated with a feminized welfare state, and separated from the state’s positively valenced and masculinized military functions (Thorpe, 2016).

**TRP Is to Seduction as Marx Is to Revolution**

Reflecting its ambivalence toward marriage, the sidebar finds both negative and positive potentials embedded in modern sexual relations. On the negative side, “[b]eta males who were told to follow a responsible, productive life of conformity found that they were swindled” because women “pursue alpha males while extracting subsidization from beta males without any reciprocal obligations” (III). Via state mechanisms, women gain “power without responsibility” (V), whereas “beta” men are denied sexual compensation for their labors. On the positive side, “[feminism] created a climate where men have invented techniques and strategies to adapt to the more challenging marketplace’” (III). That is to say, feminism is the mother of invention, insofar as it spurs men to develop novel seduction strategies in response to women’s empowerment.

Thus, the sidebar’s vilification of feminism functions as a kind of claims-making process that establishes justification for TRP’s existence as a seduction community. If feminism deploys the welfare state to aid women’s genetic reproductive interests, then TRP’s “discussion of sexual strategy” becomes necessary as men’s corrective response. Constructing feminism thusly encourages men to abandon preconceived notions about sexual relations—as well as considerations of women’s well-being (O’Neill, 2018b; Van Valkenburgh, 2018)—and develop counterruitive seductions strategies. If feminism helps women “locate the best dna possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve,” then TRP is men’s strategic reaction: “Reality is happening, and we need to make sure that we adjust our strategy accordingly” (II). The sidebar draws attention to these feminism-induced changes ostensibly to help men improve their sexual strategies:

I think our focus should always remain on ensuring that we challenge the reality we perceive . . . I am a firm believer that potential success can only be maximized by maximizing your knowledge of the factors surrounding your success. (II)

The sidebar not only offers particular sexual strategies but also theorizes the “feminist” forces that inhibit such discussion. This offering is consistent with Marx’s critique of political economy, which theorized the forces that obstruct class-consciousness. For Marx, these obfuscating forces included commodity fetishism and ideology, which also find corollaries in TRP’s worldview.

**TRP Is to Matrix as Marx Is to Fetish**

The sidebar describes the woman in the same way that Marx (1995) describes the fetishized commodity. Whereas Marx reasons that the commodity’s obfuscating fetish must be dispelled to reveal the existence of capitalist exploitation, Vilar writes:

If men would only stop for a moment in their blind productivity and think, they could easily tear the masks off these creatures with their tinkling bracelets, frilly blouses and gold-leather sandals. Surely it would take them only a couple of days, considering their own intelligence, imagination, and determination, to construct a machine, a kind of human female robot to take the place of woman. (VIII)

In insisting that the woman’s mystique is a matrix-like illusion, Vilar unintentionally provides a transposed summary of Marx’s connection between commodity fetishism and class-consciousness. If man could somehow prevent woman’s sexual fetish illusion from clouding his vision, he could see through her metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. Although she is at first glance a mysterious thing, she is actually something ordinary, which nevertheless comes to dominate and exploit male agents who obliviously toil away in “blind productivity.” Vilar even equates the defetishized female with the machine, the product of ordinary human labor. Here, women are understood as commonplace objects which have perversely come to exploit the male subject—just as the machines in *The Matrix* have come to exploit humanity. This same logic is reproduced elsewhere in TRP’s sidebar:

Natural instinct makes young men almost literally “crazy” about girls. They believe young women are something wonderful when in fact most are not. The male sex drive that modern women complain so much about exists largely for women’s benefit. As Schopenhauer wrote: Nature has provided [the girl]
with superabundant beauty and charm for a few years . . . so that during these years she may so capture the imagination of a man that he is carried away into undertaking to support her honorably in some form or another for the rest of her life, a step he would seem hardly likely to take for purely rational considerations. Thus nature has equipped women, as it has all its creatures, with the tools and weapons she needs for securing her existence. (IV)

The fetishized female body intoxicates the male, impeding his awareness of his own exploitation in her service. It tricks the man into “undertaking to support [the woman] honorably,” which he would never do under “purely rational considerations.” Thus, we have the theft of man’s labor power, enabled by woman’s “beauty and charm” which colonize man’s imagination and make him “crazy.”

TRP Is to Feminism as Marx Is to Capital

The latent parallels between Marxian theory and the sidebar extend to macro-social and economic considerations, with parallel rhetorical modifications. If in MM the individual woman-capitalist is blamed for the alienation/exploitation of the individual man-laborer at the microeconomic level, then elsewhere in the sidebar the woman-collective is blamed for macro-social ills that Marx would otherwise attribute to capital’s essential nature. This is particularly evident in The Misandry Bubble (MB), a sidebar post which maintains that feminism is the cause of,

- everything from unsustainable health care and social security costs, to stagnant wages and rising crime, to crumbling infrastructure and metastasizing socialism, to the economic decline of major US cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore. (III)

Deindustrialization in the Midwest, for example, is not caused by the neoliberal flight of capital away from union protections. Anticipating such a presumably threatening argument, MB writes, “The auto industry moved jobs out of Detroit long before 2003, so the decline cannot be attributed to just industrial migration” (III). Instead, capital flight itself is supposedly caused indirectly by the feminization of men due to single motherhood.

Rather than by strength of reasoning or surplus of evidence (MB’s logic here is certainly specious and not worth describing in detail), this explanation seems motivated more by sheer willful insistence that “there will never, ever be a successful human society where men have no incentive to aspire to the full maximum of their productive and entrepreneurial capabilities” (III). Amid polemics against women, MB sporadically interjects unprovoked outbursts of support for the free market, such as “[c]ompetition between technologies is always productive for the consumer” (III). In MB, injunctions against feminism anxiously defend an unimpeachable assumption of capitalism’s benevolence, in the face of evidence that threatens to contradict it. For instance, MB feels entirely comfortable explaining the 2008 financial crisis not an inevitable expression of capitalism or a consequence of Wall Street greed, but as the outcome of unjust alimony laws, which make it so that “men have no incentive to start new businesses or invent new technologies or processes” (III).

Indeed, MB is at pains to exonerate capitalism for recession unemployment, blaming instead the state’s relationship to collectivized women in a perceived unfairness in the redistribution of resources:

In the recent recession and ongoing jobless recovery, the male unemployment rate continues to be much higher than the female unemployment rate. If this was simply due to market forces, that would be fine. However, “feminist” groups have lobbied hard to ensure that government stimulus funds were steered to boost female employment at the expense of assistance for men. (III)

Here, an uncritical assumption of the free market’s benevolence is on full display. Unemployment caused by “market forces” is reflexively defined as “fine,” whereas unemployment presumably caused by state intervention is necessarily assumed to be oppressive. State redistribution of resources is therefore thought to exacerbate male unemployment caused by the “feminist” recession. With such libertarian assumptions firmly entrenched, evidence of economic crises and unemployment does not provoke the questioning of these assumptions, but only fuels the scapegoating of women for macro-social problems. Rather than producing a critical view of neoliberalism, the financial crisis motivates the construction of feminist activism as the cause of a plethora of social ills—supposedly arising from the fact that “the state forcibly transfers resources from men to women” (III).

Conclusion

Although the TRP Reddit community is devoted to helping men seduce women, a close reading of its definitional texts—its “sidebar”—reveals unexpected latent parallels with Marx’s theory of capital—albeit, recast in anti-feminist terms—coexisting alongside a manifest fiscal conservatism. Consistent with a pragmatist theory of cultural resonance (McDonnell, Bail, & Tavory, 2017), I understand this contradiction as a manifestation of cultural problem-solving: faced with accumulating evidence of late capitalism’s negative economic outcomes—such as economic crises, alienation, exploitation, and unemployment—yet evidently unable to question capitalism’s supposed benevolence, the sidebar discourse enables men to divert hostility away from their surrounding economic system and redirect it onto women.

TRP further enables this scapegoating by adorning women with characteristics that might otherwise be associated with the bourgeoisie or capital: in TRP’s account, women are exploitative, uncaring, profit-driven, and fetishizing. Although this projection of utilitarianism onto women justifies amoral
sexual strategies (O’Neill, 2018b; Van Valkenburgh, 2018), it also provides a hidden curriculum insofar as it helps men superficially reconcile the contradictions of late capitalism and neoliberalism as a political/economic project and invasive ideology. Freud (1925) wrote that “the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness on condition that it is negated” (p. 367). In the sidebar, the content of a forbidden image—the capitalist enemy—seems to make its way into the fiscally conservative consciousness on the condition that late capitalism’s pathology is negated, and that instead feminism is blamed for economic problems. Thus, TRP’s culture of misogyny is shaped partly by ordinary views about—and real-world problems associated with—late capitalism.

These findings complicate extant studies on misogynist social media which undertheorize the manosphere’s “gendered cyberhate” (Jane, 2017) and “cybersexism” as simply a means for “creating, enforcing, and normalizing male dominance in online spaces” (Poland, 2016). Although I do not dispute this narrative—nor do I wish to minimize the harms of social media misogyny or excuse any destructive behavior—I do suggest that it is meaningfully incomplete. My findings are consistent with Michael Messner’s (2016) prediction that if men are treated as “dispensable by the economy,” they may “find resonance with Internet-based anti-feminist men’s rights discourse that blames women and the liberal state for men’s woes” (p. 12). While masculinist Reddit communities can indeed produce “echo chamber” effects that exacerbate and radicalize men’s misogyny, and while anonymity and accessibility afforded by Internet technologies undoubtedly afford men easier access to misogynist content, my study suggests that a deep understanding of what draws privileged men to manosphere discourses demands greater consideration of capitalism as it relates to relatively privileged communities (Cousin, Khan, & Mears, 2018).

This study thereby supports O’Neill’s (2018b) recent sociological work that observes parallels between Western seduction discourses and broader neoliberal logics, thereby further de-sensualizing this discourse without “exculpat[ing] it from criticism” (p. 2). As O’Neill (2018b) suggests of the proponents of this discourse:

> It is only too easy to condemn singular figures and caricature those who follow them, but politically this strategy does not take us very far. Examining the seduction industry as the product of a wider reorganisation of intimate life—one in which we are all implicated—is at once a much more complicated, and much more urgent, endeavour (p. 20).

However, although O’Neill finds an implicit neoliberal logic infusing her participants’ discourse, this study identifies an implicit Marxian logic coexisting alongside an explicit neoliberal logic, thereby drawing attention to a possible ideological mechanism by which ordinary men initially resonate with manosphere discourses, which may in turn lead to further misogynist radicalization online.

As a part of preliminary and exploratory research on the manosphere and TRP, this article necessarily contains a number of limitations. I have investigated TRP’s discourses in an attempt to make sense of the manosphere as a social problem. However, although TRP is a significant and influential component of the manosphere, the manosphere is ultimately irreducible to TRP. Indeed, the manosphere’s traditional conservative or “tradcon” hub is largely positioned against TRP’s interest in casual sex and ambivalence toward marriage (Ging, 2017). Furthermore, although TRP’s sidebar is supposed to establish a baseline of knowledge for TRP participants, the degree to which the average TRP participant endorses, discusses, and familiarizes himself with these sidebar materials remains an important subject for future research. Thus, although I have tried to sample texts that are “as typical as possible of the discourse position” (Jäger, 2001, p. 55) of the manosphere more broadly, such a selection process always produces a sample that imperfectly represents the population of interest. Relatedly, although this study seeks to provide further analysis of TRP’s self-designated canon, the method employed is unable to determine the ways in which everyday TRP participants actually interact with, interpret, or challenge the sidebar’s contents. Further work should explore how Reddit’s specific technologies enable or hinder such interactions. Finally, although TRP ideology finds a striking corollary in a preexisting men’s rights discourse, further research will examine the ways in which TRP shapes and amplifies this discourse, and to what ends.

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**Note**

1. A previous study analyzed the same data set as this study (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). However, in this study, I select an entirely separate set of quotes from this data set as evidence for a separate but complementary argument. As I have previously observed (Van Valkenburgh, 2018), the sidebar is a rich source of qualitative data that provoke multiple qualitative studies, interpretations, and findings. This study draws its quotes from eight of the documents that comprise...
TRP’s sidebar, hereafter referred to simply as “the sidebar.” References for quoted sidebar texts direct to digital archives of these online documents made using the website archive, is (with the exception of “The Manipulated Man” which is widely available online and in print).

References: Quoted Sidebar Links

I. “All-in-One Red Pill 101” http://archive.is/HXzzD
II. “Introduction” http://archive.is/cmQQa
III. “The Misandry Bubble” http://archive.is/CVeEk
IV. “Sexual Utopia In Power” http://archive.is/6iyIL
V. “Red Pill Antibiotic Nuke” http://archive.is/l5Nl1
VI. “Glossary of Terms and Acronyms” http://archive.is/nxTLB
VII. “Confessions of a Reformed InCel” http://archive.is/ixQl0
VIII. “The Manipulated Man” https://dontmarry.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/the_manipulated_man.pdf

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