Roy Den Hollander doesn’t exactly look like a revolutionary. He’s a reasonably good-looking guy—nattily dressed, sort of preppy-corporate, Ivy League–educated, former New York corporate lawyer. He should be comfortable in his late middle age, approaching retirement at the top end of the top 1 percent. Yet Den Hollander is not only an angry white man; he is, as he told me, “incensed,” furious at the ways that men like him, upper-class white men, are the victims of a massive amount of discrimination—as white men. In this self-styled revolutionary, the legions of oppressed men have found a self-proclaimed champion.

Men’s oppression is not an accident, Den Hollander says. It’s the result of a concerted campaign against men by furious feminists, a sort of crazed-feminist version of “girls gone wild”—more like “feminazis gone furious.” And they’re winning. Roy Den Hollander is one of the few who is standing up to them, or at least trying to. He suffers, he says, from PMS—“persecuted male syndrome.” As he told a reporter,
“The Feminazis have infiltrated institutions and there’s been a transfer of rights from guys to girls.”

A corporate attorney by training, Den Hollander has refashioned himself a civil rights champion, fighting in court for the rights of men that are being trampled by the feminist juggernaut. He’s funded his lawsuits himself and fancies himself the Don Quixote of gender, tilting at feminist legal windmills, fighting the good fight. (This rebranding has brought him a lot of fame—he’s been profiled in heaps of media, including a very funny and self-mocking takedown on *The Colbert Report*—even if he’s had no legal success at all.) Over the past decade, Den Hollander has filed three different lawsuits (each seems to have had multiple iterations). He may sound like some masculinist buffoon, but I think his efforts, taken together, form a trinity of issues raised by the angry middle-class white guys who march under the banner for men’s rights. As he puts it, “This trilogy of lawsuits for men’s rights makes clear that there are now two classes of people in America: one of princesses—females, and the other of servants—males. Governments, from local to state to federal, treat men as second class citizens whose rights can be violated with impunity when it benefits females. Need I say the courts are prejudiced, need I say they are useless, need I say it’s time for men to take the law into their hands?”

First, Den Hollander went after bars in New York City that offered ladies’ night. You know, those promotional come-ons that offer women reduced or free admission to clubs, but require that men pay admission. Bars and clubs offer ladies’ nights, of course, to entice men to come to the club; men are more likely to show up, and more likely to buy women drinks, if there are more women there—that is, if the odds tilt in the guys’ favor.

Ladies’ nights obviously discriminate against men, Den Hollander argued. They’re supposed to; it’s good for business. So, in 2007, he filed a federal lawsuit against six New York City bars and clubs (hoping they’d come to constitute a class for a class-action suit), claiming they violated the Fourteenth Amendment (specifically, the Equal Protection Clause). According to the suit, these bars “allow females in free up to a certain time but charge men for admission until that same time, or allow ladies in free over a longer time span than men.”

Nearly forty years after women had successfully sued McSorley’s Old Ale House for the right to drink alongside men (a suit that is cited
as some sort of antidiscrimination precedent here), is this what civil rights law has come to—infantile parodies of serious civil rights cases? When asked by a reporter what would happen if he were to win, Den Hollander replied, “What I think will happen is that clubs will reduce the price for guys and increase it for girls. Every guy will have ten or fifteen more dollars in his pocket, which the girls will then manipulate into getting more drinks out of him. If they drink more, they’ll have more fun, and so will us guys. And then when she wakes up in the morning, she’ll be able to do what she always does: blame the man.” (Either way, according to Den Hollander, women win: they get lower prices, or they get more drinks, have more fun, and then still get to blame the men.) Den Hollander needn’t have worried. The case was thrown out of court—by a female judge, of course.

The next year, he went after the Violence Against Women Act or, as he likes to call it, the “Female Fraud Act.” VAWA is a favorite target for the men’s rights movement, since they see its specific scrutiny of violence against women as both discriminatory toward men as well as failing to acknowledge, let alone minister to, the pervasive violence perpetrated by women against men. Den Hollander’s logic is a bit more tortured—and more torturedly personal. In his view, VAWA provides legal cover for scheming, conniving non-US women to trap native-born American men. (This is, he claims, his own story.) If they have been the victims of violence, VAWA gives “alien females who married American guys a fraudulent track to permanent residency and U.S. citizenship.” All she has to do is claim her husband battered her or subjected her to “an overall pattern of violence.” So, he argues, the reason that the feminist establishment pushed for this law is to “intimidate American men into looking for wives at home,” though it isn’t entirely clear why feminists would promote this. Again, the judge (a man this time) dismissed the case as without merit.

Most recently, in 2009, Den Hollander brought a suit against Columbia University. Essentially, the case centered around the fact that Columbia has a women’s and gender studies (WGS) program—a pretty good one, for that matter—but it doesn’t have a men’s studies program. According to Den Hollander, that qualifies as gender discrimination right there—failing to provide comparable services based on gender. What’s more, the WGS program at Columbia promotes “feminism,” which is, Den Hollander alleges, a religion—“a belief
system that advocates an accident of nature, born a girl, makes females superior to men in all matters under the sun.” Thus, Columbia University is violating not only the Fourteenth Amendment, but also the First Amendment, guaranteeing the separation of church and state. So men are doubly injured—by their absence from the women’s studies curriculum and by the unfettered spread of feminism, the religion.

The judge—again, Den Hollander notes, surprised, a man—disagreed and called Den Hollander’s case “absurd.” “Feminism is no more a religion than physics,” Judge Lewis Kaplan wrote, perhaps ignoring all those creationists and biblical literalists who believe that physics is also a religion. Although subsequent appeals were denied, Den Hollander is convinced that the judge ruled “with an arrogance of power, ignorance of the law, and fear of the feminists.”

Roy Den Hollander’s men’s rights legal trilogy makes for fascinating reading on his website. Although not exactly Tolstoyan in the arc of its emotional compass, it captures both the spirit and the substance of the men’s rights movement, a loose but loud collection of Internet blog sites, policy-oriented organizations, and legions of middle-class white men who feel badly done by individual women or by policies they believe have cheated them. These men don’t generally do well with expressing pain—so they translate it into rage.

His cases perfectly illustrate their positions: men are the victims of reverse discrimination in every political, economic, and social arena; feminism has been so successful that men are now the second sex; and men have to stand up for their rights. In doing so, they believe, they strike a blow against the wimpification of American manhood: they get their manhood back by fighting for the rights of men. Who says the personal isn’t also political?

Den Hollander’s lawsuits may not have found sympathetic judicial ears, based, as they were, on the shakiest of legal and empirical foundations. But they provide a triumvirate of issues that incense the men’s rights activists (MRAs): the putative institutional arenas of discrimination against men; the “special treatment” of women, especially around violence and in family life; and the dramatic tilt toward women in education. We’ll look at each one, after I describe the historical emergence of the men’s rights movement and its trajectory in the present. (I’ll turn to the claims of discrimination in family life in the next chapter.) These issues also lay bare several contradictions that lie at the
heart of the men’s rights movement—contradictions so fundamental that it leaves them personally paralyzed and politically unpersuasive.

WHERE DID THE MEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT COME FROM?

Given Roy Den Hollander’s characterization of feminism as a vicious, man-hating ideology—a sentiment shared by many in the men’s rights movement—it might come as a bit of a surprise to know that the initial seeds of the contemporary men’s rights movement were planted in the same soil from which feminism sprouted. When the “second wave” of feminism began to emerge in the 1960s, it was fed by two distinct streams of political outrage. (The first wave was, of course, the woman suffrage movement.) First were the women mobilized by Betty Friedan’s scathing critique of domestic life in The Feminine Mystique (1963), that furious wake-up call from the somnambulant 1950s, which suppressed the ambitions of a generation of postwar women, swathing them in a midcentury cult of domesticity. These disappointed women were met by a second, younger, group, some their daughters, who had already been politically mobilized into the civil rights, student, and antiwar movements and who had also experienced not being taken seriously by men, being asked to suppress their ambitions in order to further the cause, and being made to serve the men who ran the movements. Both groups agreed that traditional notions of femininity submerged women’s abilities and drowned their ambitions.

That critique of what became known as the female sex role, the traditional ideology of femininity, resonated for some men who by the early 1970s took the feminist call for women’s liberation as an opportunity to do some liberating of their own. “Men’s liberation” was born in a parallel critique of the male sex role. If women were imprisoned in the home, all housework and domestic drudgery, men were exiled from the home, turned into soulless robotic workers, in harness to a masculine mystique, so that their only capacity for nurturing was through their wallets. The separation of spheres was disappointing for men, too: women were demoted to the realm of feeling; men were relegated to a public persona where their success depended on the suppression of emotion.
Men’s liberation posited a set of parallelisms. If men had, as writer Sam Keen would put it, “the feeling of power,” then women had “the power of feeling.” These were thought to be equivalent: women and men were equally oppressed by traditional sex roles. The early men’s liberationists even claimed to be inspired by women’s emancipatory efforts. But feminists moved from a critique of those sex roles—abstract ideological constructions—to a critique of the actual behaviors of actual men, corporeal beings who acted in the name of those antiquated roles. And once women began to make it personal, to critique men’s behaviors—by making rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence part of the gender dynamics that were under scrutiny—the men’s libbers departed.

Instead, the men’s liberationists stuck with the analysis of roles, which, they argued, were equally oppressive to men; they shifted their focus to those institutional arenas in which men were, they argued, the victims of a new form of discrimination—gender discrimination against men. Initially, these included the sites of gender discrimination like the military, where only eighteen-year-old males, and not females, were required to register for military service, an indication that men were considered “expendable.” Traditional notions of masculinity were as toxic and outdated to these men as traditional notions of femininity were to feminist women.

For their part, those early feminist women managed to figure out how to be angry about men’s behaviors, furious about their own subordinate position, incendiary about institutional discrimination in the workplace, yet retain their compassion for the not quite comparable, if parallel, experience of men. Here’s Betty Friedan in 1973, in her epilogue to the tenth-anniversary republication of *The Feminine Mystique*:

How could we ever really know or love each other as long as we kept playing those roles that kept us from knowing or being ourselves? Weren’t men as well as women still locked in lonely isolation, alienation, no matter how many sexual acrobatics they put their bodies through? Weren’t men dying too young, suppressing fears and tears and their own tenderness? It seemed to me that men weren’t really the enemy—they were fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill.
By the 1980s, the dissatisfaction with the “male sex role,” as they called it, had reached a crossroads. Yes, they agreed, men were unhappy, their lives impoverished by shallow friendships; fraught relationships with wives, partners, girlfriends, and potential girlfriends; and strained or nonexistent relationships with their children. Books proliferated, consciousness-raising groups formed, and folk songs bid good-bye to John Wayne. The question was why men were so unhappy. What caused the male malaise? The way different groups of men resolved this question provided the origins of the various men’s “movements” currently on offer.

To these questions, there were essentially two answers, though one had two parts. Maybe one could say there were two and a half answers, roughly parallel to the two and a half male characters on the hit TV sitcom Two and a Half Men. The setup story, you’ll recall, pivots on the triangle among Charlie Harper, a drunken skirt chaser with a heart of gold, and his brother, Alan, a divorced dad (his son, Jake, is the “half”), who’s near-hysterically confused and emasculated.

Let’s start with Jake, the pubescent, addled, and socially inept but perpetually wisecracking half man. There’s one thing he knows for sure: the models of masculinity offered by his father and uncle are not for him; they’re negative role models if anything. He’s looking for something new, but he has no idea where to look or how to know he’s found it. Although it’s a bit of a conceptual stretch to link Jake to mythologists and poets like Robert Bly, the search for an authentic masculine identity brings them closer than either would be to traditionalists. Like Jake, a large number of men sustained their critique of traditional notions of masculinity, arguing that the John Wayne model, a sort of “male mystique” that paralleled the equally false “happy housewife” heroine, was ill-suited for today’s men, who wanted emotional sustenance and deeper and more meaningful relationships with their children, their partners, and their friends. And just as countless women had joined the women’s movement in an effort to expand their lives beyond the feminine mystique, many men trooped off to wilderness retreats, stadium rallies, and woody campfires to explore a deeper, more resonant masculinity. Jake, of course, joins the army instead of going to college—where, no doubt, he’ll enjoy all the bonding rituals that will enable him to man up.

What became known as the mythopoetic men’s movement is often attributed to the work of Bly and Michael Meade and writers like Sam
Keen (all of whom had best sellers in the early 1990s), who sought to enable men to search for some “deep” or “essential” masculinity. The movement’s leaders claimed that the authenticity of the male experience had been both diluted and polluted by life in mass-consumer society. Mythopoets were largely gender separatists, neither feminist nor antifeminist in their politics; rather, they said, they were “masculinists”—of men, by men, and for men. And, they claimed, rightly as it turned out, their efforts to enable men to experience that depth would only redound well for the women in their lives: men would be more nurturing, more emotionally responsive, and more reliable as men. (In my research, many mythopoets had far better second marriages than their first and reconnected with their grown children in ways they never did when their children were younger.)

Another group was more like Alan Harper, Jake’s dad, the fey, ingratiating, Goody Two-Shoes, who always wants to do the right thing, but always seems to miss the boat. Utterly contradictory—he’s both a perpetually broke, dependent freeloader and a professional (a chiropractor) who actually has several girlfriends—Alan is still emasculated, hypomasculine, afraid of his own shadow, perpetually anxious, a non-Jewish nebbish.

Like Alan, many men saw in feminism the critique not only of traditional femininity but also of traditional masculinity. Politically, they agreed with Friedan that men were “fellow victims.” Social psychologist Joseph Pleck, for example, offered a scathing empirical critique of the male sex role, revealing its internal contradictions and unrealizable pretensions. Actor Alan Alda was more flippant, but no less perceptive; in an essay in Ms., he quipped that men needed liberation because “a man isn’t someone you’d want to have around in a crisis—like raising children or growing old together.”

To these profeminist men, women’s demands to enter the labor force meant that men did not need to stake their identity solely in their workplace success. Women’s efforts to balance work and family life enabled men to reconnect with their children and their partners. Feminist women’s campaigns against violence, battery, sexual assault, and other harmful expressions of men’s contempt and rage also enabled men to begin to unravel the tightly wound skein of manhood and violence. Feminist women sought solidarity with other women in a collective struggle, inspiring men to break down their own bar-
riers that kept them feeling isolated and alone. It turned out to these “profeminist” men that the feminist vision of full equality and gender justice might not be such a bad thing for men—indeed, it might be the very political theory we (I count myself among them) had been searching for. Like Alan, profeminist men today also want to do the right thing; unlike him, though, we find ourselves grounded in more solid relationships with our friends, our children, and our partners and wives.

Finally, there’s Charlie, the alcoholic, unrepentant womanizer, politically incorrect and loving every minute of it. Charlie simultaneously sees every woman as a potential conquest, but like many sexual predators, he actually holds women in contempt. Charlie thinks the only good thing about feminism is that it gave women permission to put out as a way to express their liberation. That part of women’s lib he likes. But, in general, the source of his malaise is that he blames women for his predicament. So, too, does the men’s rights movement. Like the movement, Charlie cannot figure out if he’s a “liberated man” on the hunt for equally liberated women or a more traditional man looking for a more traditional woman—albeit one who puts out at the drop of a hat. (Of course, as life imitates art, the actor portraying Charlie, Charlie Sheen, whose real-life antics were so over the top, was eventually replaced by the sweetly naive Ashton Kutcher.)

Out of this amorphous men’s liberation movement emerged a core group in the late 1980s and early 1990s that embraced what they called men’s rights. They may have shared the initial critique of the oppressive male sex role, and the desire to free men from it, but for the men’s rights activists, that critique morphed into a celebration of all things masculine and a near infatuation with the traditional masculine role itself. Men didn’t need liberating from traditional masculinity anymore; now they needed liberating from those who would liberate them! Traditional masculinity was no longer the problem; now its restoration was championed as the solution.

The problem was, in a word, women—or, more accurately, women’s equality, women’s empowerment, and feminism. Feminism, men’s rights activists argued, was both a political strategy to take power and an individual lifestyle that despised and denigrated men. It wasn’t traditional notions of masculinity that made men so miserable;
it was women. Feminism was a hateful ideology; feminists were castrating bitches. (To them, the iconic feminist was more Lorena Bobbitt than Gloria Steinem—this despite the fact that neither Bobbitt nor her followers thought of themselves as feminists at all.) But here, also, that contradiction seemed to prevent the movement from ever articulating any coherent policy ideas. Feminism, they argued, has turned normal, healthy feminine women into a bunch of gold-digging, consumerist harridans; as one antifeminist men’s rights magazine put it:

Unlike Chinese women, for American women “every dollar earned is an opportunity for her to enjoy herself. The fruit of her labor is squandered on eating out, going to a spa, getting her hair done, working out at a gym, dancing or gambling. She goes into marriage without any sense of responsibility or duty to anyone but herself, and our society, based as it is on consumerism, celebrates and encourages this attitude. It is as though the American economy relies upon the production of lousy daughters and wives, good for nothing but selfish expenditures and entirely unable and unwilling to see any purpose to life beyond self indulgence.”

Just how different is this from 1950s guys complaining about their prefeminist wives or traditionalist guys who are seeking Asian mail-order brides on the assumption that they are more docile and obedient, unlike their wastefully spending American cousins? Not very. And, of course, feminism has provided the most coherent critique of consumerist femininity in history; feminists were the ones, you’ll recall, who were shouted at for encouraging women to be productive, go to work, eschew economic dependency.

So men’s rights activists hate those traditional women because they enslave men, gluing them to gold-digger trophy wives, who spend, preen, and otherwise ignore their hardworking husbands. No, wait. Men’s rights activists love traditional women who won’t compete outside the home for scarce jobs that should go to men anyway.

And men’s rights guys are equally confused about their position on masculinity. Some want to embrace traditional masculinity; Alan Baron’s “Men’s Manifesto” (2001) urges men to “vigorously defend the concept that male domination/patriarchy is part of the natural order of things.” Others want to reject the old John Wayne image en-
tirely, casting it as a recipe for an emotionless automaton who slashes and burns his way through life like the Terminator, competitive and unfeeling, until he dies an early death of some stress-related disease, without ever knowing his family—or himself.  

See the confusion? Men’s rights guys don’t know if they want to be restored patriarchs or liberated men. And as a result, their websites and pamphlets are clogged with howls of anguish, confusion, and pain. (That confusion, I believe again, is real, but not necessarily true. These men feel a lot, but their analysis of the cause of their feelings strikes me as decidedly off.) Mostly, though, the men’s rights movement has been an expressive movement, especially in cyberspace—a movement to help men get their balls back. Those howls of pain and anguish that men felt led many to wallow in self-pity before they turned it into rage. The men’s rights movement became a movement of—and for—angry white men.

And angry they are. They are so angry, in fact, that the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors all sorts of “hate groups”—from paramilitary organizations to Klansmen and other neo-Nazi groups—recently started listing men’s rights groups in its annual survey of hate, citing their “virulent misogyny, spreading of false anti-woman propaganda and applauding and even encouraging acts of domestic terrorism and extreme violence against women and children, up to and including murder.”

They are so angry that they’re threatening violence (and cheering for it, as we’ll see when we discuss the men who murder women):

Who said I was interested in proving I wasn’t violent? In point of fact, I continually warn people that if these issues are not meaningfully addressed, and soon, there will be a lot of violence (see: Middle East) that we MRAs [Men’s Rights Activists] won’t be able to stop. And frankly, if it comes to that, society (and all the women in it along with the men) flat out deserves whatever is coming. Your hubris as a movement is causing a lot of men to be angry. You all vastly underestimate both the anger, and the ubiquitous nature of this anger. We MRAs do nothing except act as weather vane and map. That’s why we have no central authority, or funding, or organization of any kind. We are average guys mad enough to stand up like we do. There are a lot more guys that are just as mad, but content to let others lead. And there are a growing number of men that take
Feminist (and “official”) dismissal of men’s issues as indication that only violent revolution will lead to change. And speaking for myself, if it ever comes to violence, I will stand aside, and feel bad while all manner of nasty things are done . . . but I won’t lift a finger to stop it. Just like people like you are doing right now.¹³

Starting in the 1990s, the men’s rights movement got angrier. Asa Baber, who wrote the “men’s” column in Playboy, sounded the clarion call in Naked at Gender Gap, a collection of his columns gathered into a book in 1992. “Men have now had 25 years of sexists calling us sexists,” he wrote about a feminism that was now “out of control” and had become “an attack on masculinity itself.” Baber celebrated manhood. “It’s fine to be male,” he proclaimed, “a glorious, sexual, humorous thing to be male.”¹⁴

Warren Farrell’s career spans the arc from men’s liberation to men’s rights. His turn toward men’s rights—and blaming feminists for men’s problems—wasn’t inevitable. In fact, early in his career as a writer and speaker on gender issues, Farrell’s politics seemed to ally with feminism; he convened the National Organization for Women’s Task Force on the Masculine Mystique and was twice elected to the board of New York’s chapter of NOW. He believed that men could benefit from women’s liberation: if she could refuse to be a “sex object,” he could just as easily refuse to be a “success object.” He sought to be “the liberated man”; he despised traditional masculinity, loathed competitive sports, and advocated sharing housework and child care.¹⁵

His 1993 book, The Myth of Male Power, has become something of the touchstone text to the men’s rights crowd. Some of its inversions are worth noting, because they anticipate many of the more hyperbolic claims made by the MRAs today. According to Farrell, men’s power is, well, a myth. (He prefers to see things as complementary roles.) “Power is not earning money that someone else can spend and dying earlier so they can get the benefits,” he said.¹⁶

He has a point. When white men are cast as the oppressors, normal, everyday middle-class white guys don’t often feel all that power trickling down to them. When informed by some earnest gender studies type of the amount of “privilege” or power they have, white male students often look puzzled. “What are you talking about?” they’ll say. “I have no power!” (And they’re half right, of course. They’re students—
and their parents and professors and friends all tell them what to do. What they miss, on the other hand, are the ways that their race and class and gender confer on them all sorts of benefits that they neither asked for nor recognize.)

You can see where this is going with middle-aged white men. To the MRAs, the real victims in American society are men, and so they built organizations around men’s anxieties and anger at feminism, groups like the Coalition for Free Men, the National Congress for Men, Men Achieving Liberation and Equality (MALE), and Men’s Rights, Inc. (MR, Inc.). These groups proclaim their commitment to equality and to ending sexism—which was why they were compelled to fight against feminism. According to them, feminism actually gave women more freedom than men, while men were still responsible for initiating sexual relationships, fighting in wars, and paying alimony and child support. Feminism, they argued, was the most insidious and vexing form of sexism going. Feminist women were “would be castrators with a knee-jerk, obsessive aversion to anything male,” wrote Richard Doyle, an administrator of the Men’s Rights Association, in his 1986 book *The Rape of the Male*. Fred Hayward, the founder of MR, Inc., claimed that men were the most common victims of violence, rape, abuse, and battery and that “women are privileged because they are more frequently allowed to raise children, while men are being oppressed by denial of access to children”—and it was women who controlled this situation. Another advised men who felt powerless in the face of divorce-court proceedings to “fight dirty and win” by exploiting their wives’ vulnerabilities.17

They may not feel powerful, but they do feel entitled to feel powerful. And it’s this aggrieved entitlement that animates the men’s rights movement. It’s what links them to other angry white men, though they sometimes find themselves on the other side of the political spectrum (or so they’d claim).

At the very least, they argue, they should feel necessary. But with books like *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd’s *Are Men Necessary?* and journalist Hanna Rosin’s *The End of Men*, and seemingly countless others, MRAs are starting to wonder if men’s power is more like the polar ice cap—once solid and fixed and today melting faster than you can say “declining sperm counts.” Men seem to have gone from being “king of the castle,” running virtually every single organization and institution in America, to “the end of men”—in one short
generation! It’s dizzying how quickly male supremacy—which we’d been told was encoded in our genes—has unraveled. Are men necessary? Well, yes. Is it the end of men? Hardly. But do those men who see the world as a global zero-sum game feel resentful, confused, and angry? As Sarah Palin would say, “You betcha!”

Politically, such resentment and anger have fueled a new gender gap, the preponderance of middle-class, middle-aged, straight white males who are now listing constantly to the right. Raised to feel “entitled” themselves, they resented any entitlement program that gave anything to anyone else. “If I can’t have what I’m entitled to,” they seemed to say, “then neither can you”—a new twist on the old exclusionary formula employed to retrieve a sense of manhood. One writer fumed that he “will have none of the nonsense about oppressed and victimized women; no responsibility for the conditions of women, whatever that condition might be; none of the guilt or self-loathing that is traditionally used to keep men functioning in harness.” And another wrote that women “have always dominated me, directed me, intimidated me, loaded me with guilt, sometimes inspired me, oftentimes exploited or shamed me.”

Such sentiments about entitlement reveal a curious characteristic of these new legions of angry white men: although white men still have most of the power and control in the world, these particular white men feel like victims. These ideas also reflect a somewhat nostalgic longing for that past world, when men believed they could simply take their places among the nation’s elite, simply by working hard and applying themselves. Alas, such a world never existed; economic elites have always managed to reproduce themselves despite the ideals of a meritocracy. But that hasn’t stopped men from believing in it. It is the American Dream. And when men fail, they are humiliated, with nowhere to place their anger. Some are looking for answers; others want payback. In that sense, men’s rights activists are True Believers—but they believe in a world that was spectacularly unequal.

MEN’S RIGHTS TODAY

There men’s rights might have remained—a fringe movement of sad and angry middle-class white guys, moaning about how hard they
Three social changes, however, catapulted the movement into a much angrier and more vociferous collection of disgruntled men.

First are the seismic economic shifts that have transformed America, in one short generation, from, say, 1980 to the present, from a nation of middle-class achievers with a small upper and lower class into an utterly bifurcated nation of the superrich and everyone else. Dramatic economic inequality and the redistribution of wealth upward have pulled the rug out from under formerly secure, comfortable middle-class men, whose identity had been tethered to being competent providers for their families, with a possibility of upward mobility in a more open society. The elimination of the middle rungs on the economic ladder, leaving an unbridgeable gulf between the gated communities and the apartments with bars on the windows, actually hit middle-class white men hard—at least psychologically. They believed themselves to be entitled to make a grab for that ring on the merry-go-round. They may not reach it, but they believed in the system enough to try. Many of these middle-class guys—outsourced, downsized, benefits slashed—are bitter and angry to begin with.

This stands next to an important change among the men themselves—one that I think is so politically significant that I’ll discuss it more fully in the next chapter. Most simply put, despite the histrionics and hyperbole, the MRAs were right about one thing: fatherhood. Or at least partly right. Although the story is far more complicated than the fathers’ rights movement would have it, there is some truth to their claims that the reason so many fathers feel utterly screwed by the divorce and custody proceedings is because the laws, and their enforcement, are woefully out of date and evoke a time in American family history that is long past. The story may not be as stark as the MRAs portray it, nor the villains some feminist-inspired cabal, but the fathers’ rights movement does have a legitimate gripe. As long as they have that tenuous hold on credibility, their other, more unhinged, claims get a fuller airing.

The final change is easier to describe. The development of the Internet has fueled websites and blogs that keep the conversation going and the blood boiling. The emergence of what one writer calls the “mansphere” is a loose collection of websites that sustain the rage; even the most casual tourist will happen upon “a torrent of diatribes, invectives, atrocity takes, claims to entitlement, calls to arms,
and prescriptions for change in the service of men, children, families, God, the past, the future, the nation, the planet, and all other things non-feminist." This makes sense; after all, cyberspace is a place of false power—of being able to mouth off and scream at those you don’t like without actually having to hear any response to your ideas or to actually have to make much of a rational case. It’s perfect for the less tethered.\(^{18}\)

There are hundreds of men’s rights sites, many simply consisting of one angry guy sitting in his basement, spewing out vitriolic posts that refuel day after day. Some sites get virtually no traffic and simply repost the day’s supposed outrages from other sites. But a few larger sites get hundreds, if not thousands, of hits a day, aggregating these individual posts into what feels like a social movement.

Most of the excitement comes not from the blog posts, but in the fiery comment sections that follow. There, “commenters” let fly with a spiraling series of accusations, crazed conspiracy theories, and threats to their enemies. “It’s ironic,” says Amanda Marcotte, a feminist blogger, “that the very success of feminism has produced such disfigured spawn. It’s so much less acceptable these days to be openly sexist, that men have been forced to retreat to such virtual havens.”\(^ {19}\)

“You know,” says Jeff, “once upon a time, every fucking place was a locker room, you know?” Jeff is a men’s rights fellow traveler I met at one of my campus lectures—after he followed me back to my hotel, peppering me all the way with questions and challenges.

_I mean, the workplace was a locker room, just us guys. And the corporate boardroom and the law office and the operating room in the hospital, not to mention the foxholes and the police stations and the firehouses. Everywhere you went, there was that easy guy thing—you know, just hanging out, shooting the shit, being guys, and not worrying about being so politically correct all the time. I mean, you could do stupid shit, shit you wouldn’t want the ladies to know about, and say stuff too, without everyone getting all so uptight about it. It was like the whole world was the locker room._

“Well, what happened?” I ask.
Feminism happened! Now the fucking locker room isn’t even a locker room anymore! Women have invaded everywhere! There’s nowhere a guy can go and just chill, you know, like those scenes in Knocked Up where the guys are sitting around, doing bong hits, and talking about porn? It’s like the only place you can go these days is your man cave—and if you don’t have one of those, well, there’s the Internet, those free porn sites, the men-only places, the places where guys can bitch and moan and not get so screamed at by women all the time.

This sounded familiar to me, this idea that women’s increased equality was experienced as an invasion of a previously pristine all-male turf. While researching my previous book Guyland, I happened on a Brooklyn bar that has been home to generations of firefighters and their pals. There’s an easy ambience about the place, the comfort of younger and older guys (all white) sharing a beer and shooting the breeze—until I happen to ask one guy about female firefighters. The atmosphere turns menacing, and a defensive anger spills out of the guys near me. “Those bitches have taken over,” says Patrick. “They’re everywhere. You know that ad ‘It’s everywhere you want to be?’ That’s like women. They’re everywhere they want to be! There’s nowhere you can go anymore—factories, beer joints, military, even the god-damned firehouse! [Raucous agreement all around.] We working guys are just fucked.”

The Internet provides just such a man cave, a politically incorrect locker room, where you can say whatever you feel like saying without having to back it up with something as inconvenient as evidence and still hide behind a screen of anonymity so that no one knows that you’re the jerk you secretly think you might just be. That’s a recipe for rage.

Yet there’s even more. Some years ago, I was doing some research with a graduate student on the levels of violence in various pornographic media. We found—no big surprise—that videos were more violent than magazines and that the Internet chat rooms were more violent still. (This “some years ago” was the era of chat rooms and alt sites, the birth of the web era.) My colleague and I postulated that the chat rooms were increasingly violent because of an element of homosocial competition, a competition among the guys. One guy would
claim he did such and such to some “bitch,” and another would comment, “Oh, yeah? That’s nothing. I did this and that to some slut—twice!” And then a third would chime in, “Oh, yeah? Well, I did so and so to this bitch and that slut and those whores . . .” And suddenly, the atmosphere got every violent, very dark—and all because the guys were competing with each other about how powerful and sexually aggressive they were.

The Internet has such a disinhibiting effect in many arenas that it’s become a mini research area among psychologists. Researchers have especially noticed a dramatic and rapid escalation of both the romantic and the hostile—flirtations become steamily sexual, and arguments become murderously rancorous within minutes. You can say all kinds of stuff you’d never say in public; indeed, sometimes you wouldn’t even think of the things you say until you read someone else saying something similar, and it triggers some emotion for you and you can instantly and aggressively reply. Instant, aggressive—and safe. You can scream all you want at people, call them all sorts of names, but no one ever shows up at your workplace or knocks on your door and calls you to account, calls you to demonstrate the validity of the assertion you made or challenges you in any way, except virtually. It’s street noise, background rage, preserved forever in the ether.20

So what are they saying? Here’s just a little sample. A recent column on the Men’s News Daily site, an activist clearinghouse, captures both the rage and the rationale of these defenders of men’s rights. It’s a movement, says Paul Elam (the editor of the site), as he described the mounting pressure on men brought about by the waves upon waves of “misandrous” culture, generating a nation of ticking time bombs:

*The misandric Zeitgeist, the system of feminist governance that most are still loath to acknowledge is about to head toward its inevitable and ugly conclusion, and the results of that will inflict another deep wound on the psyche of the western world.*

*In the men’s rights community, a minority in its own right, we have long lamented the cruel and destructive war that has been waged against men and boys for the past half century. We’ve shouted endlessly at a deaf world that we were on the path to destruction, and we have*
watched our predictions of men being reduced to indentured servants to a malicious matriarchy come true, even as society continues to dismiss and humiliate us for speaking

The comments came fast and predictably furious. Here’s one guy: “We may well get to see how well the feminists fare when faced eyeball to eyeball with mobs of pissed off men.”

And here’s another:

Lets have 10 Million Man March! Lets Stand up to those feminist Natzis [sic] like Hillary Clinton!! Lets have it brothers I’m ready!!!! Lets go to Washington DC and stay there for a month let them know we mean it. We are not going back to our jobs till you don’t change those nasty laws in this country. Lets see what they are going to do?? Arrest us all?? I don’t think so. . . . there’s no room in the jails for all of us. let’s have a showdown. lets see what women are going to do with no cops, no electricians, no soldiers to go to stupid wars, with no mechanics to fix their cars, no cooks, no farmers ect., ect lets see!!!! Im ready! It’s going to be lots of fun. We bring tents and barbys.

to all man from usa and canada! unite brothers! lets end the male-bashing culture!

And a third:

The Federal government is feminist. Our laws are feminist. Our educational institutions are feminist. There is a coordinated effort driving this and this ugly monster lives in the ivory towers of academia where this beast thrives in an environment separated from fiscal realities and peer reviewed accuracy. It is a giant, networked monster deeply embedded within the infrastructure of this country and it is spreading out into the rest of the world, and it is continuously at work rigging society against men and in favor of women on all levels of society.21

Sometimes the rhetoric gets violent, even if the men advocating it would never actually do the things they advocate. Here’s Elam again, advocating violence against women:
There are women, and plenty of them, for which [sic] a solid ass kicking would be the least they deserve. The real question here is not whether these women deserve the business end of a right hook, they obviously do, and some of them deserve one hard enough to leave them in an unconscious, innocuous pile on the ground if it serves to protect the innocent from imminent harm. The real question is whether men deserve to be able to physically defend themselves from assault . . . from a woman.22

When a men's rights blogger wrote to me, asking what I thought of the "manosphere" that was developing, I replied that I was curious about why the guys he was writing about seemed so angry. Here's what he said:

Men are angry at losing their kids in the divorce and taking their dream of raising them and reducing it to a child support payment and every-other weekend. Men are angry that they are forced to compete at a handicap with women for the same jobs, and then get penalized for their success (I've seen that happen repeatedly). Men are angry that they have a higher chance of being audited than they do of finding a successful long-term relationship. Men are angry . . . and our anger is justified. It's not all directed towards women nor even at feminism, but we are angry nonetheless, and when men are angry things happen.23

Most of what constitutes men's rights activism is this sort of recitation, supported by a few anecdotes, and the occasional series of empirical inversions that usually leave the rational mind reeling. To hear them tell it, white men in America are steamrollered into submission, utterly helpless and powerless. They're failed patriarchs, deposed kings, and not only the “biggest losers” but also the sorest.

Women complaining about sexual harassment? Actually, it’s men who are the victims of harassment. “The way young women dress in the spring constitutes a sexual assault upon every male within eyesight of them,” writes William Muehl, a retired professor at the Yale Divinity School. Warren Farrell argues that “consensual sex among employees,” as he euphemistically calls it, is “courtship” when it works and “harassment” when it doesn’t. If there is a problem with employer-employee sex, Farrell argues, it’s because it “undermines the ability of
the employer to establish boundaries because the employer often feels needy of the employee.” See, the employee, the beneficiary of the sexual attention, is actually the one with the power.

It’s the same with sexual harassment on campus and even at home. Sexual contact between professor and student may confer on the young woman “potential academic advantages over other students,” Farrell writes. She’s the one with the power, not him! And what he calls “workplace incest” is similar to at-home incest, which reverses family-authority dynamics, since “parental authority becomes undermined because the child senses it has leverage over the parent.” What a novel theory—incest afforded undue power to the young girl over her father’s actions! Does this mean that those altar boys and other children abused by all those Catholic priests were the ones actually with all the power, able to get the priest to do such un-Christian things at their, the boys’, whim?

How about rape and sexual assault? Rape, Farrell argues, is not, as feminists have argued, simply a crime of violence. It’s about sex. Younger, more attractive women are 8,400 percent more likely to be raped than older women, we’re told. The general point that rape has a sexual component is, of course, not entirely wrong, despite the hyperbolic statistics. But to suggest that rape is a crime of sexual frustration implies that if only women would put out a little more often, rape rates would go down. (The reason younger women are more likely to be raped is also because they are more likely to be unmarried and out in the public sphere “unescorted,” going to parties and on dates—and, of course, because the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by a boyfriend, date, or someone the young woman knows.)

By now nearly everyone’s heard the canard that men are battered and abused by their wives and female partners at least as much—if not much more—than women are by their husbands. It turns out, by the way, that this “gender symmetry” in domestic violence is empirically true—but only if you ask women and men if, during the past year, they ever used any one of a set of physically violent “tactics.” But if you ask questions like “How often? How severe? Who initiated? Did you use violence to protect yourself? Were you protecting your kids?” then the rates of domestic violence come to resemble what we’ve known all along: that the overwhelming majority of violence is used by men—against both women and against other men.
Of course, it’s preposterous to suggest gender symmetry in rates of violence—especially when these same men argue that women and men are so fundamentally, biologically different and that men, propelled by testosterone, are driven to greater aggression. Even one of the two researchers on whose work the MRAs rely disavows their claims: “It is categorically false to imply that there are the same number of ‘battered’ men as there are battered women,” writes Richard Gelles, careful even to put the word in quotations when discussing men but not when discussing women.28

If you argue for biological difference, it’s pretty hard to claim also that women are equally violent. In fact, in the real world of empirical research, gender differences are few, and those small mean differences that one typically finds in, say, fourth-grade math scores are highly variable (girls score higher than boys in some countries, not in others). But the one single intractable gender difference that holds across virtually all societies is that the overwhelming majority—in the range of 90 percent—of the world’s violence is committed by men. Except, of course, if you believe the MRAs that it’s in a man’s home, where somehow he becomes the victim.

But what if we take such ridiculous claims on their face? Here’s a question I often ask MRAs about the claims they make about domestic violence. They claim that women hit men as often as men hit women, not that men don’t hit women as often as feminist women claim they do. That is, their claim of “gender symmetry” is that women’s rates of violence are equal to men’s rates. What if we were to assume their claims are true? Then they should be advocating for more shelters for battered men—but not challenging the number of shelters for battered women. That is, domestic violence, by their logic, is not a zero-sum game. If these guys were really interested in serving these legions of battered men, they would ally themselves with feminist women in the antiviolence movement and advocate for greater funding for men’s shelters in addition to maintaining the funding for women’s shelters.

They’re actually not interested in those legions of battered men, only in discrediting feminist women’s efforts to protect women who have been battered. In 2000 eighteen men sued the State of Minnesota’s commissioners of the Departments of Corrections, Human Services, Public Safety, and Children, Families, and Learning to end the granting
of state money to shelters for battered women. Their lawsuit, *Booth v. Hvass*, argues that these shelters “publish fanatical, irrational, hysterical, sexist literature which maliciously and falsely defames and seeks to generate social and political hatred against men in general, portraying them as the basic cause of all domestic violence and associated acts of cruelty in American society.”29 (This is an example of what logicians call the “compositional fallacy”: just because all As are Bs does not mean that all Bs are As. In this case, virtually all of those who commit acts of violence are men. Therefore, the fallacy would hold, virtually all men commit acts of violence. Of course, no sensible person, feminist or not, would make such a ludicrous claim.)30 In case you’re curious, the US District Court dismissed the case in 2001. The US Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit upheld the dismissal in 2002. The US Supreme Court refused to hear the case.31

MRAs also claim that men are discriminated against in the workplace—and in their efforts to balance work and family life. Women have far more choices than men do. Warren Farrell observes that women have three choices: they can work full-time, stay home full-time, or balance work and family. Men, he says, also have three options: they can work full-time, work full-time, or work full-time. See how oppressed men are?32 But for the most part, it is other men who have outsourced the jobs, cut wages and benefits, and so corrupted the industry that so many men, firm believers in their role as family providers, are losing their homes to foreclosure, sinking underwater on their home values, and struggling to keep their jobs. (In fact, the financial meltdown of 2008 was a dramatically “gendered” crisis, engineered entirely by guys being guys.) Yet, to the MRAs, it’s “a black woman stole my job.”

Finally, there’s sex. Although some women may complain that predatory men are constantly hitting on them, the power dynamics are really the other way around. Tom Martin, a British former PhD student, channeled his inner Roy Den Hollander in 2011 and sued the London School of Economics because, he claimed, their women’s and gender studies program “discriminated” against him as a man. Sex, he claims, is a women’s domain: “Since the pill, women have been told they can and should be having orgasms. And because they haven’t been, they categorise that as men’s fault. . . . [I]t’s women’s job to make themselves sexually happy, it’s not a man’s burden.”33
Well, okay. But isn’t that idea—that women’s pleasure was, and could be, women’s responsibility—a **feminist** claim? Is it not, in fact, one of the basic tenets of that feminist classic *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (1971)? On the other side, a lot of MRAs complain that since feminism, women have gotten so good at pleasuring themselves they don’t even really need men!

In a sense, this is the contradiction at the heart of the men’s rights movement: women, especially feminist women, must be seen as to blame for every problem men seem to be having. If she wants a career, she’s abandoning her traditionally feminine role and is probably overly sexually adventurous as well. If she doesn’t, she’s some gold-digger layabout who is too passive in bed. It’s what I called earlier the “Goldilocks Dilemma”—like the porridge in the bears’ house, contemporary American women are either “too hot” or “too cold” but never “just right.” They’re too sexually demanding, career driven (i.e., “masculinized”), or manipulative, money-hungry schemers who will rob a guy blind and take him to the cleaners.

### WHAT DOES THE MEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT WANT?

What else do the MRAs really want? Is there a method to this madness, some coherent set of policy issues, changes in relationships, shifts in gender roles that the men’s rights movement wants?

The “Good Men Project”—a website that purports to be for such self-described “good men” but shows remarkable sympathy for anti-feminist diatribes (alongside some pro-equality content)—recently conducted a survey of its readers to find out the top-ten issues that incite MRA passion. The top issue was fathers’ rights (with 20 percent of the total votes), which I will discuss in the next chapter. This was followed by

2. “Feminism,” which has “harmed men.”
3. “Anti-Male Double Standards” like this one: “An adult man has a relationship with a younger teenage girl? He’s a disgusting pedophile. A teenage guy with an adult woman? She’s lauded and called a cougar—it’s considered hot.”
4. “Removing the Notion That All Men Are Potential Rapists/Pedophiles”—reminding the public that rapists are few, and bad, and do not represent the entire male gender.

5. “Reproductive Rights”—complaints that there is no male pill or that men have no “right to choose.” “There are countless options for women, and none for men.”

6. “Better Treatment of Men Regarding False Accusations”—expanding anonymity for men accused of sexual assault and insistence that false accusations be prosecuted as a serious crime.

7. “Making Government Programs Gender Neutral”—since, MRAs claim, “tremendous amounts of government money goes to women’s aid,” men should have a right to equal amounts.

8. “Educating Boys”—helping boys improve their achievement and attendance in school.

9. “Negative Portrayal in the Media”—MRAs are tired of “seeing dumb and deadbeat dads,” of “every man on TV being a sex-obsessed womanizer,” as “incompetent, misogynistic, brutish slobs with few redeeming qualities.”

10. “The Male Gender Role”—The complaint here is that the traditional male role, that is, honor, chivalry, and the like, “has got to go.” “No longer should men be expected to be the providers and protectors of society.” Men should be free to express their feelings. “Just because we have penises doesn’t mean we should be forced to abide by additional societal expectations, especially when those lead to an early grave.”

I have listed all of the top ten because I didn’t want to cherry-pick only the more egregious reversals. Obviously, there are several issues with which feminists would agree—negative portrayals of men and women are harmful; sexual predation, especially toward children, is a bad thing no matter which sex is doing it; school reforms that pay attention to different learning styles, initially a feminist reform, are obviously good for both girls and boys.

And several rest on those tired and misplaced reversals—men’s right to choose, the disparate public spending, the problem of false accusations that dissolve when contextualized. Men’s right to choose, of course, needs to be coupled with men’s increased responsibility for
caring for children they father and for ensuring that women have access to safe and reliable birth control, for both their sakes.

It’s interesting that discomfort with the “male gender role” came in last and that it expresses that same contradiction in the men’s rights cosmology: men don’t want to be saddled with those traditional expectations of robotic stoicism, but they also are tired of being nice to women, who should be pulling their own weight in the workplace.

It’s also interesting that fathers’ rights tops the list but that fatherhood is utterly absent. Men’s rights activists are furious about having burdensome responsibilities, like child support, but rarely, if ever, wax rhapsodic about the joys of fatherhood or the loving connections that fathers are capable of having with their children.

That right to be a dad, to be a devoted and loving parent, doesn’t actually fall on the men’s rights radar. That’s probably because to be that kind of dad, you’d need to balance work and family responsibilities and work with your wife or partner to support their efforts to balance work and family, too. Involved fatherhood—a fatherhood based on shared family responsibilities as a foundation for the rights to experience the transcendent joys of parenthood—has actually always been a feminist issue. Feminist women have urged, pleaded, insisted, and demanded that men share housework and child care, because they know that women can’t “have it all” as long as men do—that is, as long as women alone are responsible for the second shift, the housework, and the child care. It turns out that the only way women can have it all is if men and women halve it all. You want your rights to be a father? It’s simple: take your share of the responsibility.

However, perhaps most revealing is what—or, rather, who—is missing from the men’s rights top ten. There’s not a word about the especially dismal plight of African American men, or Latino men, or working-class men—the types of racial and ethnic and class discrimination they experience, as men, the stereotypes of their masculinity they are forced to endure, all of which deprives them of the “rights” claimed by other men. Nor is there a word about gay men and the ways in which they suffer discrimination in employment, housing, or their ability to marry the person they love or the terrible violence that gay, bisexual, and transgender men suffer every day at the hands of other men (just who do we think commits virtually every single act of gay bashing?).
Where are the legions of men’s rights guys when it comes to “other” men? Men’s rights is almost entirely a movement of angry straight white men. Gay men, black men, Asian men, Latino men, and other racial and ethnic minority men feel no such sense of entitlement to power that these middle-class white men feel has been unceremoniously and illegitimately snatched from them. That’s not to say that in their personal relationships they don’t feel entitled to unfettered obedience from their children, subservience from women, and a drive to find their place in the hierarchical pecking order. Many do. They just don’t make a federal case out of their sense of entitlement. They don’t take it to court or demand legislation. It’s personal, not political.

Are there some arenas in which men are disadvantaged—in which it’s actually “better” to be a woman? Sure. It’s here that the familiar litany of the MRAs makes some sense: men have to register for the draft; women don’t. Men are more likely to be denied joint custody, no matter how much time and energy they spend with their children.

But there is a major difference between being disadvantaged and being discriminated against. The former suggests that there are areas of public policy that still rely on outdated stereotypes, paternalistic policies designed to “protect” helpless, fragile, vulnerable women from the predations of men and the privations of individual freedom. The latter, being the victim of discrimination, relies on policies implemented to single out certain groups for unequal treatment. For example, men are dramatically overrepresented in all those hazardous occupations—but every time women have sought entry into those occupations, men have vigorously opposed their entry. Once again, that contradiction: on the one hand, MRAs believe men shouldn’t be “forced” to do all the dangerous jobs; on the other hand, they also believe that women shouldn’t (and are probably ill qualified to) invade men’s territory. Although it’s true that there remain some areas in which being a man is a disadvantage, there is no evidence that white men are the victims of discrimination.

One more example should suffice. As Roy Den Hollander was suing Columbia for its discriminatory exclusion of men from its women’s and gender studies curriculum and promoting the religion of feminism, a new academic “movement” was being created. This new group is notable, if only because it again captures the contradictions at the heart of the entire movement.
IN SEARCH OF MALE STUDIES

Academia has long been a bastion of untrammeled, if genteel, masculinity. So manly, in fact, was the college classroom, the chemistry lab, the frat house, the locker room that women were excluded from its hallowed halls for centuries. In the United States, women were excluded from higher education until the Civil War, but even after, for more than a century, women had to continue their campaign for admission to institutions of higher learning. Finally, in 1996, the Supreme Court ordered the Virginia Military Institute (and the Citadel), the last public universities to deny admission to women, to finally open their doors. And once there, they’ve had to fight these seemingly genteel institutions for institutional equality (equal access to hiring, tenure, promotion, and salary) and equal treatment in class (campaigning against sexual harassment and the use of pornographic slides to illustrate biological processes) as well as curricular visibility, in including women in the traditional liberal arts canon of great thinkers and writers. It’s a struggle that continues to this day: although women outnumber men on campus as students, men are dramatically overrepresented the higher up the professorial and administrative ladders one looks.

Arguments justifying women’s exclusion have nearly always rested on biological or biblical claims. Either biological or divinely created differences between women and men required the separation of spheres: “Man for the field, woman for the hearth,” as Tennyson put it in 1849. “All else confusion.” Whenever women have sought to enter some public arena—whether the voting booth or the jury box, the corporate boardroom or the union hall, the foxhole or the firehouse—men have argued that women’s physical inequality would prevent them from succeeding and that God had ordained women and men to separate spheres. (Actually, God never weighs in on this; only the interpreters do. The most we get is “Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother,” which seems pretty egalitarian to me.)

Women’s entry into higher education was met with derision and dismissal. In the late nineteenth century, Edward H. Clarke, a Harvard University professor (and the very first professor of education in the country), authored a book about women’s education. Sex in Education (1873) was a runaway best seller; it went through seventeen editions.
and defined a field. In it, Clarke argued vigorously against women’s access to higher education on biological and psychological grounds. First, he argued that if women went to college, their brains would grow heavier and their wombs would atrophy. Second, he argued that the intellectual demands of collegiate education would drive women mad.

What was the empirical evidence for these ridiculous claims? Clarke found that college-educated women had fewer children than noncollege women. See? After examining the records of Massachusetts mental hospitals, Clarke noticed that more college-educated women were institutionalized than non-college-educated women, but, on the other side, more non-college-educated men were institutionalized than college men. His conclusion was that college education so dramatically overtaxed the fragile and feeble female brain that the effort drove the women mad.

Today, of course, we’d recognize a correlation is not necessarily a cause, and we’d be more likely to attribute these statistical findings to expanding opportunities, not shrinking wombs, and to stymied and thwarted ambitions, rather than intellectual overtaxing. But women are still subject to that knee-jerk teleology, observing some empirical fact and reasoning backward to some putative cause. More than a century after Edward H. Clarke disgraced the Harvard brand, school president Lawrence Summers repeated the calumny. In January 2005, he offered some hypotheses about the dramatic underrepresentation of women as top-level professors in top-level science and math departments, and perhaps the most compelling one, in his view, was that women were biologically unsuited for the eighty-hour weeks that were required to become top scientists at top schools. (Given what an eighty-hour workweek entails, and what it means for one’s family life, not to mention anything resembling a social life or relaxation, the only response was not to go out and find some women who were willing to do it, but to ask who in their right mind would put up with this requirement to succeed in their jobs. Moreover, what kind of insanity is it to think that such overidentification with the job is a marker of capacity to succeed? What gender thought this up? Obviously, not the one that cares for children.)

For most of our history, whatever the justification, campus life looked pretty much like this: men taught men about the great achievements of men. By the 1960s, women sought entry into the classroom
and the curriculum and to be treated fairly once they got there. They sought equality in hiring and promotion in what had formerly been a man’s world. And they campaigned not only for affirmative action hiring and promotion criteria, but also for integrating women into the curriculum. That was the original mission of women’s studies: to remedy the historical exclusion of women from the traditional canon (a myopia that rendered the canon not politically incorrect, but historically inaccurate) and to provide a place where students could explore the centrality and significance of gender in their lives today.

Women’s studies was remedial, designed to remedy previous inequality. So it’s a bit ironic that today the men’s rights groups are campaigning against their exclusion. “Where are men’s studies?” they ask.

Seriously, though, pretty much every course that doesn’t have the word women in the title is a course in “men’s studies.” It might even seem akin to former Louisiana state senator and imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan David Duke’s calls for white studies on campuses—the cries of the formerly privileged railing against the loss of monopoly status. When you’ve commanded 100 percent of the oxygen, I guess having your share reduced to three-fourths must make you feel like you’re suffocating.

Actually, the men’s rights campaigners don’t want anything to do with “men’s studies.” As far as they’re concerned, men’s studies already exists, and it’s an outpost of the enemy.

There are several different headings under which men and masculinity are studied on campus today. For one thing, one of women’s studies’ more successful academic interventions was not only to make women visible, but also to make gender visible—both as one of the central elements by which one constructs one’s identity and also as one of the axes along which society divides resources and power. Gender is central individually and socially. Before women’s studies, we didn’t really know that.

And as women’s studies made gender visible, it meant that we could actually apply the insights of women’s studies to men’s lives: how is masculinity one of the constituent elements of men’s identity? How do different groups of men understand the meanings of masculinity? And how do men experience the hierarchies and inequalities based on gender? Just as we might inquire how white people experience racial inequality, women’s studies began to integrate men and
masculinity into their courses and their analysis. That integration, in fact, has been so successful that about half of all women’s studies programs have now changed their names to women’s and gender studies, both to ensure that women’s invisibility is not somehow magically restored but also to ensure that gender as both identity and inequality could be discussed and analyzed.

You’d think that men would be thrilled with this—finally, we could study men as men, understand how the dynamics of masculinity shape and distort our relationships with women, with other men, with our children, with our own sense of ourselves as men. (I know I was thrilled, anyway; my work has been within the women’s studies framework because I’ve found that its analytic perspectives offer a compelling set of critical lenses through which to view men’s lives.) Today, a dynamic subfield of gender studies, masculinity studies, is thriving on campuses—there are dozens of books series, scholarly journals, conferences, all the institutional trappings of the successful emergence of an academic subfield.

But Angry White Men are anything but happy about this state of affairs. As far as they’re concerned, “men’s studies”—or, as I like to call it, “masculinity studies”—is no friend to men, beholden as it is to feminist perspectives on gender inequality. In the past two years, a new group of disgruntled men has proposed a new field called “male studies,” which is explicitly concerned with promoting the interests of men. “What are the ethical concerns of devoting 90 percent of resources to one gender?” asked Edward Stephens, chair of the On Step Institute for Mental Health Research and founder of the Institute for Male Studies and financial backer of the initiative. (No evidence is provided for the 90 percent figure.)

At their inaugural conference at a hotel in New York in 2010, attended by a few dozen scholars and activists, male studies activists made clear that they see, rightly in my view, women’s studies and men’s studies as allies in understanding gender dynamics. And they want nothing to do with it. (Like the rest of the men’s rights movement, male studies exists almost entirely on the Internet; they have no meetings, and their single sparsely attended “conference” was beamed all over the world as a podcast that few, if any, actually watched.) According to Lionel Tiger, a retired professor of anthropology at Rutgers University, male studies was conceived as a riposte to feminism, which
he characterized as “a well-meaning, highly successful, very colorful
denigration of maleness as a force, as a phenomenon.”

Tiger is the author of the 1969 chestnut Men in Groups, which be-
moaned the loss of all-male spaces in the public arena (because of
women’s invasion) and urged city planners to include ceremonial
men’s huts in their urban plans. His more recent works offer even
more stunning formulations. In The Decline of Males (1999), Tiger ar-
gues that “the male and female sexes in industrial societies are slowly
but inexorably moving apart”—this just at the moment of the greatest
empirical convergence in men’s and women’s behaviors and attitudes
in our history. This is due, he argues, to women’s control over birth
control, a force that gives them virtually all social power.

In a new twist, Tiger “explains” the cause of the visibility of gay
men in social life as—actually, it’s more accurate to say he “blames”
it on—you guessed it, women. Not the old “my mother made me a
homosexual” slogan of 1950s psychoanalysis, this view contends
that homosexuality is “caused” by overdominant mothers and absent
fathers. After all, that formulation might be seen as blaming the fa-
thers for their absence. Instead, Tiger has devised an explanation that
leaves men entirely out of the equation and thus entirely off the hook.
Women did this all by themselves. Here’s how: by taking drugs.

I know it’s startling, so hear him out: Tiger argues that women’s
use of barbiturates during pregnancy in the 1950s and 1960s caused
the spike of male homosexuality in the 1960s and 1970s. “The sons
of women using barbiturates are much more likely to be ‘feminized,’
to display bodies and behavior more typically female than male. Mil-
lions of American mothers of boys, an estimated eleven million in the
1950s and 60s, used barbiturates, and millions still do. A compelling
thought is that this may have something to do with the evident in-
crease in the number, or at least prominence, of male homosexuals,”
he writes. Now remember that there is not a scintilla of evidence that
those same women who took barbiturates had gay sons, nor that there
is even a correlation between barbiturate use and having a gay son. But
Tiger goes even further than a simple “correlation implies causation”
fallacy. He thinks barbiturates explain not only the cause but also the
prominence of gay men. One can only imagine that causal reasoning:
gay sons of barbiturate-using mothers support liberalized drug laws
that bring them into public-policy arenas and make them more prom-
inent.\textsuperscript{37} It’s hard to imagine male studies getting any loopier than these dicta from their éminence grise.

Perhaps the most prolific writers in the male studies canon are Paul Nathanson and Katherine Young, a researcher and a professor, respectively, in religious studies at McGill University, coauthors of a series of books on “misandry”—the hatred of men and boys. Misandry, they argue, is a most pernicious ideology that is “being generated by feminists,” a pervasive cultural trope that has infected every aspect of cultural life in North America.

Misandry is, of course, intended as a parallel to misogyny, the widespread fear and loathing of women, the institutional denigration and discrimination of that hatred, and the recourse to violence to enforce it. Misogyny assumes a set of attitudes, yes, but also the political ability to institutionalize and legitimate it and the repressive apparatus to enforce it. Claiming some sort of equivalent parallel is, of course, utterly tendentious, but Nathanson and Young have made a cottage industry out of trying. Over a decade, they’ve coauthored four large tomes (made much larger by padding them with everything from reviews to e-mails about the books).

It is one thing—silly and untrue, to be sure—to argue that feminists hate men or that feminism presents a sustained and consistent ideological rant against men, the definition of that facile neologism. But it is truly ridiculous to argue that feminists have managed to infiltrate America’s political and cultural capitals to such an extent that they now have the political capacity to institutionalize misandry.

But wait! Like a TV infomercial, there’s more! In Nathanson’s and Young’s fevered imaginations, it’s not feminist activists who have managed to pull off this coup without anyone noticing. It turns out that it was actually the handiwork of a few academic feminist film critics, who seem to have been both so well positioned and so powerful that they poisoned the cultural well and turned Hollywood against both men and masculinity. This tiny academic feminist cabal—I think it’s probably only Pauline Kael—has so successfully infected popular media that it is men who are the object of contempt, scorn, and derision.

Based on astonishingly selective, simplistic, and shallow readings of several films from the 1990s, one of their books claims that we have witnessed, in the space of a decade, “gynocentrism’s” complete triumph and the insinuation of misandrous ideas into mainstream
American culture, so that now all its products tell us that “there is nothing about men as such that is good or even acceptable.”  

To Nathanson and Young, misandry has insinuated itself so insidiously that we’ve barely been aware of the how the process works. Misandry, they argue, proceeds from benign laughter to contemptuous sneering to bypassing men altogether in a far more pleasant “gurls club” (Fried Green Tomatoes, The Color Purple, Thelma and Louise). And the attitudes of the films proceed from blaming men (Handmaid’s Tale, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge) to dehumanizing them (Beauty and the Beast) and ultimately demonizing men (Wolf, Sleeping with the Enemy), declaring men, themselves, to be devils incarnate.

This is, of course, appallingly bad history. Yet their analysis is instructive, I think, because it exposes the various misreadings that form the recipe of the male studies enterprise: a heaping dose of dramatic misreading of texts, with no foundational understanding of how texts are actually experienced by consumers, and more than a pinch of conspiratorial hysteria. These cultural products actually don’t make fun of men at all; they make fun of patriarchy—and the inflated sense of entitlement, the arrogant bluster, and the silly prerogatives than any illegitimate form of power would confer on the powerful.

The word misandry itself is a neologism—my spell-check program consistently underlines it as unrecognizable. As anthropologist David Gilmore writes, in his masterful psychoanalytically informed treatise on misogyny, there is no parallel of misandry at all; it’s a false equivalence. Misandry refers, Gilmore writes, “not to the hatred of men as men, but to the hatred of men’s traditional male role, the obnoxious manly pose, a culture of machismo; that is, to an adopted sexual ideology,” but not to some form of hatred of men or the establishment of the institutional apparatus by which to oppress them.

Like medieval carnival—indeed, like most comedy in general—TV sitcoms turn reality upside down, providing momentary solace and a few laughs and ultimately reinforcing the powers that be. Indeed, among our greatest pleasures is the fantasy of turning the tables on those who make us miserable, encouraging illusions that the last shall be first. Any system that can provide such fantasies can’t be half bad, can it? Imagine these erstwhile cultural guides in late-sixteenth-century Europe. After witnessing carnival, seeing Shakespeare’s comedies, and hearing a spate of popular bawdy songs, Nathanson and Young would
no doubt conclude that the nobility was under siege from “ideological serfs” who controlled all popular media and propounded “aristophobia.” No doubt their colleagues would declare that quietly and deftly, feudalism had been utterly dismantled by a peasant rebellion that would usher in the bloodiest tyranny in history. Madame Defarge as feminist icon? In truth, of course, such cultural inversions are more compensations for power that some groups do not have, rather than literal expressions of power they do have.

Male studies reminds me of the right wing of the Republican Party, those who have been engaged in a long-standing class war against the 99 percent in favor of the 1 percent who write their checks, declaring that any form of “fair-share” taxation of the wealthy amounts to class warfare from below. The denizens of the male studies world howl because they feel ignored in the academic world, but they are ignored not because they are male, but because their scholarship is so shoddy and their theories so hysterical. Male studies has about as much chance of catching on in academia as would ruling-class studies. It’s not because the powerful don’t still maintain most of the world’s power or the institutional apparatus to legitimate and enforce it. Frankly, I think it’s more because they just don’t want to draw any more attention to it.

**WHY MEN’S RIGHTS IS WRONG (FOR THE RIGHT REASONS)**

It might be easy, if facile, to simply demonstrate empirically that MRAs are “wrong” in their claims. I’ve indulged in a bit of that here. But I think it’s important to acknowledge the authenticity of the pain and anguish that propel their misguided empirical analysis. That’s real and important. Many men do not feel very good about their lives. They’re casting about for someone to blame, some explanation for their anguish, confusion, malaise. In a sense, I think some of the original men’s liberation rhetoric hit closer to the mark. Traditional masculinity can be a fool’s errand, an effort to live up to standards set by others that leave you feeling empty, friendless, a Willy Loman surrounded by Mitt Romneys—shallow, happy cartoon characters. They feel themselves to be the “hollow men” in the T. S. Eliot poem. They’re scared their lives are going to amount to little. That malaise is real and important—and
able to be politically manipulated and mobilized. Failure to hear that pain means that rational assessments of these men’s plights will never be heard.

As the country was being founded, Thomas Jefferson envisioned a democracy as a mix of rights and responsibilities—the rights to which we are endowed by our Creator are always set against the responsibilities to the community, to the other people’s ability to pursue those same rights with the same freedoms. A focus on responsibilities alone dissolves the individual into simply a drone, a worker bee, part of the mass, indistinguishable from the rest. But a focus on rights only, as in men’s rights rhetoric, aggrandizes into narcissistic solipsism, a competitive me-firstism that can only take without giving anything back.

In 1848, nearly a century after the nation embraced Jefferson’s vision, American women realized they’d sort of been left out of the “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” equation. They had few rights, and those they had still excluded them from having a public voice or presence. The motto of the woman suffrage movement, proclaimed by Susan B. Anthony in a slogan that formed the banner of the movement’s newspaper, the Revolution, was simple: “Men, their rights and nothing more! Women, their rights and nothing less!” Still seems an apt framing.
27. Ames, *Virginia Tech*.
29. Ibid., 17, 119, 53, 61, 60.
33. The case against the State of Virginia was eventually settled out of court, and the Supreme Court eventually ruled that Congress had overreached its authority by basing the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) on the Commerce Clause of the US Constitution, thus rendering moot Brzonkala’s federal case against the university.
34. Christy Brzonkala v. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 132 F.3d 949 (4th Cir. 1997).

Chapter 3 White Men as Victims

4. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 310.
27. I have reviewed all the empirical studies that claim to show this “gender symmetry” in my article “Gender Symmetry” in Domestic Violence, Violence Against Women 8, no. 11 (2002). There is a lot less there than meets the eye.
29. The National Coalition for Free Men, Minnesota chapter, has this on their website: www.ncfm.org/chapters/tc.
30. Actually, that’s not true. There is a whole legion of male-bashing academics who argue that males are biologically hardwired for rape and pillage. They’re called evolutionary psychologists, and they consider themselves anti-feminist. See my chapter “Who Are the Real Male Bashers?,” in Misframing Men (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).
32. Farrell, workshop at the First International Men’s Conference, notes by the author.
34. Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Princess” (1849).
37. Tiger, The Decline of Males, 95.

Chapter 4 Anger White Dads

1. See, for example, www.fathers-4-justice.org/4j/ and www.fathers-4-justice.us/. The protest at the Lincoln Memorial drew only a handful of superhero dads.
4. Ibid., 243.
5. For this chapter, I interviewed several leaders of the movement by e-mail and telephone and attended meetings of two different fathers’ rights groups, one in Long Island and one in the Los Angeles area. I’ve changed the attendees’ names to preserve anonymity, but I’ve identified the leaders by name.

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