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IS THERE ANYTHING GOOD IN THE MEN'S MOVEMENT? A MASCULINITY EXPERT MALIGNS THE MANOSPHERE

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ABSTRACT

*Men's advocates have hammered away at the hypocrisy of an allegedly compassionate society that consistently turns away from blatant evidence of men's pain. When discussing men's issues, feminist-compliant authors typically respond by concealing, misdirecting, cherry-picking, and outright misrepresenting evidence—all to avoid admitting there is anything good in the men's movement. British writer, James Innes-Smith's recent article in *The Spectator* provides a case study in such tactics. In stressing the dangerous anger of the manosphere, he misunderstands that successful MRAs, MGTOW, and other dissident men recognize that anger is destructive only when it is pathologically turned against the self and others.*

Keywords: feminism, men, MGTOW, misandry, MRA

Over the past ten years, thanks in large part to advocates within the dissident men's movement (which is not by any means a single group but rather a divergent, often discordant, mass of individual advocates, YouTubers, online forums, and formal organizations like the National Coalition For Men), it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the popular fiction that all men—even young heterosexual white men—are [“privileged” by their maleness](#) (Whitley, 2021). As men's advocates have been pointing out for years, young white men with enough [annihilating despair to go on shooting rampages](#) that end with their own destruction can only with willful blindness be considered privileged (McKinley, 2019). Research has shown not only that [young men in general are falling behind](#) their female peers in education and the workplace, but also that, as men's issues expert [Warren Farrell](#), among others, has demonstrated, [mass shooters typically suffer from the effects of fatherlessness](#), family abuse, bullying, and social isolation (Autor & Wasserman, 2013; Farrell, 2018; Kao, 2018). [Many boys and men direct their despair inward](#), committing suicide at a rate nearly 4-times that of girls and young women (Groth, 2013). Men's advocates have hammered away at the hypocrisy of an allegedly compassionate society that consistently turns away from blatant evidence of men's pain.

So what's a feminist-compliant author to do when discussing men's issues? The most typical response involves acts of concealment, misdirection, cherry-picking, and outright misrepresentation, all to avoid admitting there is anything good in the men's movement. A recent article in *The Spectator* provides a case study in such tactics. It used the occasion of the mass shooting in Plymouth, England, by [22-year-old Jake Davison](#), who shot his mother and four people near his home, to suggest that the men's movement may bear some of the blame for his violence (Burke, 2021).

In [“There's More to the Men's Movement than Incels,”](#) British writer James Innes-Smith gives readers the lowdown on what he calls “the manosphere” (a term, as he probably isn't aware, that many men's advocates shun) (Innes-Smith, 2021). He tells us that he is as an expert in “modern masculinity,” having published a book called [The Seven Ages of Man—How to Live a Meaningful Life](#) (Innes-Smith, 2020). A cursory glance at his self-denigrating [web essays](#), in which he confesses a need for [female attention and approval](#), may raise doubt about his authority to pontificate on male meaning, or even his competence to tell us about the men's

movement (Innes-Smith, 2017). Still, his title suggests at least an attempt at even-handedness.

What Innes-Smith gives us, alas, in about a dozen paragraphs filled mainly with bigoted generalizations, is a snarky picture of men as their own worst enemies, inevitably making things worse for themselves and for the young men who, in his words, “fall prey” to their palaver. The only specific MRA (men’s rights advocate) mentioned is Paul Elam, who is briefly acknowledged with a backhanded compliment as “something of a father figure to MRA followers” who “struggled with fatherhood.” The implication is that, having failed in his own life, Elam is passing along his dysfunction to vulnerable surrogate sons; and that’s all we learn from Innes-Smith about one of the men’s movement’s most prolific authors and YouTubers, a counselling therapist by training who is a hero to tens of thousands.

Innes-Smith also makes no mention of the six international conferences on men’s issues, organized mainly by Elam himself and political activist and author Mike Buchanan, that have been held since 2014 with hundreds of featured speakers, including academics, authors, journalists, artists, politicians, and victims of domestic violence. He is also completely silent about the many women who regularly voice their public opposition to feminist attacks on men, including Bettina Arndt, Erin Pizzey, Diana Davison, Karen Straughan, and the women of Honey Badger Radio. And despite ending his snooty survey with a warning that more acts of mass violence may be on their way “if marginalised young men continue to feel that society is weighted against them,” Innes-Smith leaves no doubt that the *last place* any troubled young man should turn is to any branch of men’s advocacy or self-help. His essay is thus a good illustration of the dead end mainstream pundits often create for men in crisis: acknowledging their problems, but warning against avenues by which they might name and overcome them.

One might hope from Innes-Smith’s title that he would focus on the tens of thousands of men, including [self-described incels](#) (involuntary celibates), whose [online discussions don’t lead to violence or even verbal unpleasantness](#) (worth viewing, in this regard, is a much-watched [Middle Ground episode](#), a recorded discussion in which the intelligence, reasonableness, and good nature of three dissenting young men stand in contrast to the petulance and ignorance of three over-confident feminist women) (Speckhard, 2021; Whitley & Zhou, 2020; *Men’s*, 2019). Completely missing from Innes-Smith’s overview are the multitude of compassionate male voices seeking to end the gender war by highlighting male goodness and by proposing

productive ways forward (in addition to those already named, see also, for starters, published work by Roy Baumeister, Robert Bly, Tom Golden, Tim Goldich, Peter Lloyd, and David Shackleton).

Instead, the essay bogs down about halfway through in the predictable recital of the very few cases of incel violence with which most readers are already all-too familiar: Toronto's van killer [Alek Minassian](#), who infamously proclaimed "The Incel Rebellion has already begun" on the morning of his vehicular killing spree in 2018, and Isla Vista gunman Elliot Rodger, whose manifesto [My Twisted World](#) first brought incel rage to public notice in 2014 (*Toronto*, 2021; Rodger). We learn nothing about them not already well chewed over by feminist commentators, including a tone-deaf howler of a comment on their alleged motives, which Innes-Smith seizes on in order to blame "men's unrealistic expectations," purportedly caused by "a raft of movies featuring obnoxious overweight stoners winning the hearts and bodies of inordinately beautiful, underwritten female protagonists." His implication—in addition to his point about female protagonist deserving better scripts!—would seem to be that the "obnoxious" uglies amongst us would be far better off accepting that they're *never* going to be loved. That would calm their despair, indeed.

Innes-Smith's naked contempt for incels is matched by his disdain for men who refuse to make female approval the center of their lives; he refers without apology or qualification to MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way, some of whom avoid contact with women altogether) as "a controversial online community of sexual misfits." Even men who agreed to speak to him for his book on masculinity don't escape his jeering guffaws. He comments of 36-year-old Phil, for example—who has done nothing worse than opt out of traditional relationships with women, with a clearly articulated rationale for doing so—that he is a "true believer" who is "convinced that there is a 'covert move against men'" in society. It's hard to imagine Innes-Smith deriding a woman as a deluded "true believer" because she decided against relationships with men and judged her society misogynistic. But double standards are part of this writer's stock in trade.

Innes-Smith makes clear that there is nothing in the men's movement that should be accepted as honest appraisal or useful life strategy, and never concedes a single factual claim made by men's issues activist, though most MRAs online are nothing if not fervently and sometimes formidably fact-based. He refers, for example, to men who "complain about the

prison sentencing gap” (the gap in criminal punishments between female and male offenders) but he doesn’t indicate whether such a gap actually exists (it definitely does: see the research of [Sonja Starr](#)) (Starr, 2012). He mentions with skepticism “an allegedly unfair justice system” but makes no mention of the research of [Stephen Baskerville](#) into the denial through the family court system of millions of fathers’ right to parent their own children (Baskerville, 2003). He notes that MGTOW believe “romantic relationships pose too much of a risk both emotionally and financially” but carefully refrains from mentioning objective risks such as false allegations of sexual assault or abuse, neatly sidestepping the findings of Helen Smith, in *Men on Strike*, about why so many men are reluctant to marry or procreate (Smith, 2013).

Innes-Smith paraphrases MGTOW as believing that “authorities have consistently refused to acknowledge where real inequality lies,” but doesn’t tell readers what these “real inequalities” might be (inequalities in legal rights, schooling, health outcomes, access to services, life expectancy, treatment under the law, abundantly documented by [William Collins](#)) (Collins). Innes-Smith mentions “a consensus across the manosphere” that the MeToo movement “has managed to widen the divide between the sexes by pathologizing masculinity” but steers clear of any examples of such pathologizing (see Paul Nathanson and Katharine Young’s voluminous *Legalizing Misandry* for many blood-curdling examples) (Nathanson & Young, 2006). His covert dishonesty on this score means that any reader who hasn’t already looked into anti-feminist claims—but who has a hunch that the deck is stacked against men—will come away from this faux-informative essay with the uneasy impression that men’s advocates are mired in self-pitying fantasies.

Innes-Smith also frequently repeats feminist claims about dissident men as if they were true. He accepts that men’s rights activists exhibit an “anti-female stance” (rather than an anti-feminist one) and have “ideological links to neo-conservatism.” In fact, as any honest researcher would acknowledge, MRAs occupy the full ideological spectrum, from the dissident right to the dissident left and everything in between; many such men openly avow their love and respect for women and their commitment to equality before the law. Innes-Smith accepts without feeling the need to provide any evidence that Plymouth killer Jake Davison was inspired by incel discussion groups, never mentioning what else is known about the triggers in Davison’s life, particularly his strained relationship with his mother, whom he called “vile, dysfunctional, and

‘chaotic.’” Innes-Smith also alleges with oblivious feminist confidence that “Inceldom’ grew out of a sense of male entitlement and a belief that having sex with women is a right of all males regardless of circumstances.” No link is provided for this typical feminist smear, and Innes-Smith clearly regards it so highly that he has to say it twice for its atrocity to register. In fact, as the vast majority of incel posts make clear, [“entitlement” is the last thing most incels have experienced](#) in lives often barren of love, sexual touch, intimacy, or even friendship (Sweeney, 2021).

In a surprising twist, Innes-Smith ends his article by quoting from two academic researchers who express more empathy for male experience in a few sentences than Innes Smith has done (or dared) in his thousand-plus words. Psychologist Brenda Todd argues that “there has been too much criticism of men as a class” which has “tainted male identity, giving young men the impression that there is something problematic about being a man” while anthropologist Samuel Veissiere condemns the “growing tendency to label all masculinity as toxic.” Both offer unambiguous indictments of modern culture’s demonization of masculinity—somewhat surprising (and refreshing) from professionals in an academic milieu long in thrall to anti-male ideology. It’s unfortunate that their sensible comments come after so many dismissive slurs that it is likely most troubled men will have stopped reading before reaching them.

Yet the irony is striking: these authority figures are saying what men’s advocates have been saying for decades, and what Innes-Smith had pooh-poohed earlier in the article, when he scoffed at MRA allegations of an “anti-male world.” It’s highly unlikely that these few academics today would have been able to articulate their insights without the ground having been laid by decades of male-positive activism.

Innes-Smith would have us believe that dissident men are dangerous, and provoke violence, because they give themselves and other men permission to be angry. What he misunderstands, perhaps because he has spent his life self-confessedly courting female approval, is that successful MRAs, MGTOW, and other dissident men understand that anger is destructive only when it is pathologically turned against the self and others. The men’s movement at its best—I’ve mentioned only a few of its many leading lights (apologies to those I’ve unjustly neglected)—is about focusing justified anger on men’s problems in order to find creative ways to oppose, solve, lighten, or live with them. That’s what good men have always done with problems. The fact that Innes-Smith couldn’t find a single positive thing to say about this eclectic and vibrant

group of thinkers and doers makes me doubt his declared concern about “marginalised young men.”

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