By Lewys Brace

A short introduction to the involuntary celibate sub-culture

WHAT ARE INCELS? AND SHOULD WE CONSIDER THEIR IDEOLOGY AN EXTREMIST ONE RELATED TO THE FAR-RIGHT?

On 12 August 2021, Jake Davison embarked on a killing spree that resulted in the deaths of five people before taking his own life. It has since come to light that Davison was an active participant on several online platforms, including popular ones such as Reddit and YouTube.

At the time of writing, Davison's digital footprint on these platforms contains numerous examples of misogynistic and anti-feminist attitudes, as well as references to the incel subculture. Although some of his more recent posts seem to imply that he was trying to disengage with the incel subculture due to its perceived impact on his mental health, the current evidence indicates that his engagement with this ideology had a significant role in shaping his worldviews.

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The term incel first became well-known following Elliot Rodger's 2014 spree killing in Isla Vista, California.

Before carrying out his attack, Rodger left a video and a manifesto-type autobiographical account detailing his "involuntary celibacy".

Subsequent InCel-related violence was initially distinctly a North American and Canadian issue, with incidents such as Alek Minassian's 2018 Toronto van attack, the 2018 Tallahassee Yoga Studio shooting, the 2020 Toronto erotic spa machete attack, and the 2020 shooting at the Westgate Mall in Arizona, among others; with a combined death toll of nearly 50 people. More recently, however, we have begun to see online engagement with incel ideology from individuals in the UK, with Davison's attack following the recent trials of Gabrielle Friel and Anwar Driouich, both of whom appeared to have some association with incel ideology.

WHAT IS AN INCEL?

The incel worldview is based on the notion that attractiveness is pre-determined by genetic factors, which dictate our physical appearance, and these are the main features that women find attractive in men (Baele et al., 2019; Ging 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). Those who subscribe to the incel ideology believe these physical traits to be substandard in themselves and that they are "doomed to a life of involuntary celibacy". Thus, the portmanteau "InCel".

The empirical evidence indicates that this notion contributes to a sense of being isolated and lonely, which drives individuals to become increasingly frustrated and
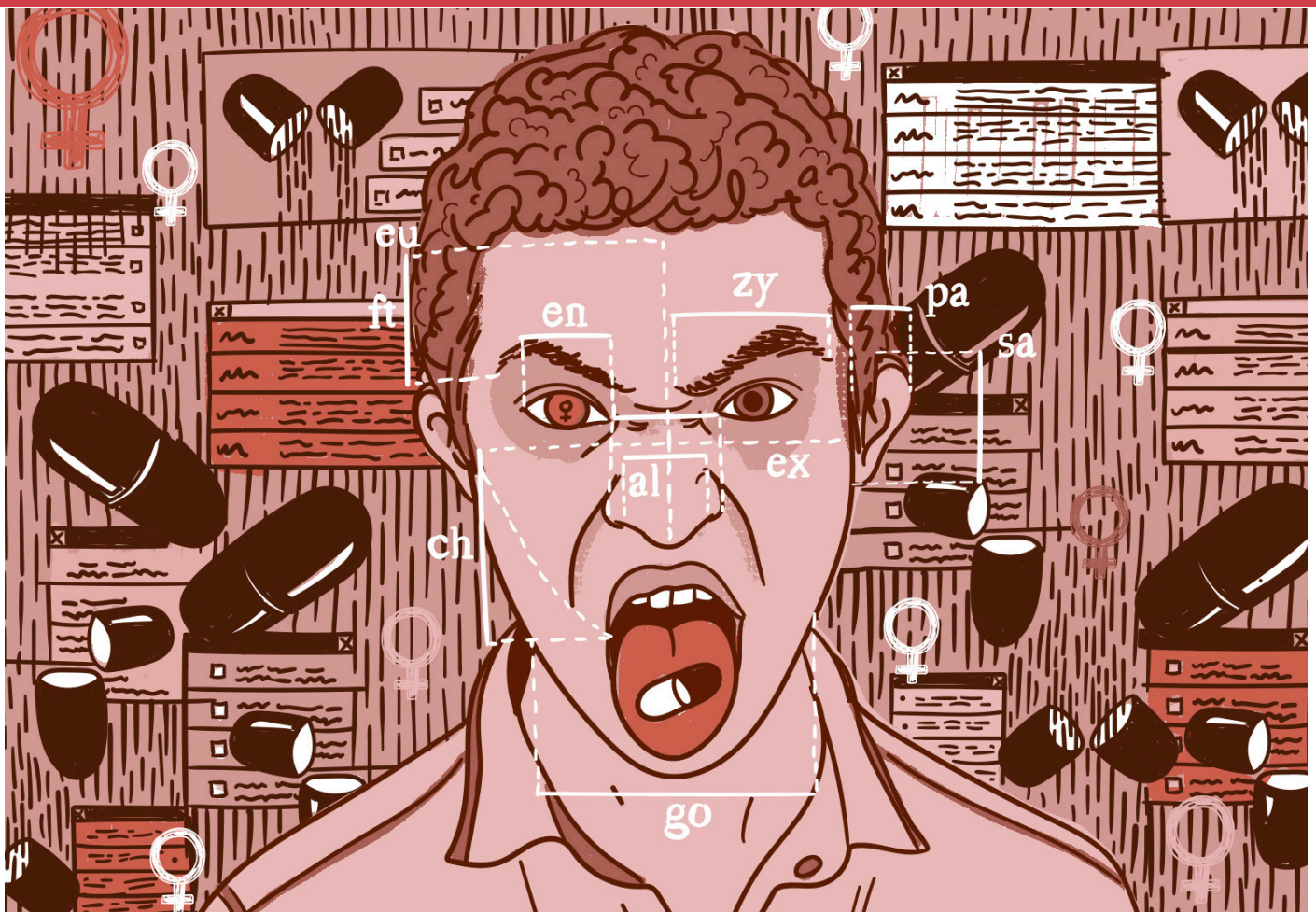
jealous of those around them who they perceive to be in happy sexual relationships (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2021).

IS THE INCEL IDEOLOGY AN EXTREMIST ONE?

The incel ideology stems from a loose conglomerate of online anti-woman communities known as the "manosphere". Over time, the manosphere has come to exhibit increasingly violent and hostile views towards women and other groups (Farrell et al., 2019). Users have migrated from older, milder manosphere categories such as Pick-Up Artists and Men's Rights Activists to the more extremist Incel category. The latter involving increased amounts of hate speech and discussions of violence (Baele et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Papadamou et al., 2020), with incel discourse scoring similar levels of "toxicity of discussion" measures as well-known far-right platforms like Gab (Ribeiro et al., 2020).

The incel ideology exhibits all of the hallmarks of an extremist ideology, such as in-groups/out-groups and crisis/solution narratives (see Berger, 2018ab); traits we see in nearly all extremist ideologies, whether it be Salafi jihadism, white nationalism, etc.

Specifically, the incel community shares a misogynistic ideology of women as being genetically inferior to men, driven by their sexual desire to reproduce with genetically superior males, thereby excluding unattractive men such as themselves (Baele et al., 2019).

Research has shown that the categorical structure of the incel worldview is a rigid three-tier, immutable, social hierarchy exclusively based on physical appearance. Here, a minority of alpha males (Chads) and females (Stacys) are at the top; a majority of average-looking betas (Normies) in the middle; and the exclusively male and minority group of incels at the bottom (Baele et al., 2019).

In this hierarchy, the out-groups (featuring women as well as alphas and betas) are depicted in an extremely negative way and dehumanised through the use of negative adjectives and specific terms, such as "femoids"

or "roasties", in the case of women. Women are also portrayed as only capable of simple emotions (chiefly sexual desire) and guided by anti-social values, i.e. cheating on their partners or manipulating men for sex or money (Baele et al., 2019). Ironically, while incels view themselves at the bottom of their hierarchy, they consider all men, including themselves, as superior to women.

This leads to a central tenet of the incel worldview; the notion of "pilling". This is a concept that also features in some elements of far-right ideology and is borrowed from the 1999 film, The Matrix. The idea is that an individual can either take the "blue pill" and remain detached from reality and live life in ignorance, or they can take the "red pill" and "wake up" to the true nature of the world and accept that social structures like those above exist. Incels have added a third option to this, the "black pill", which builds on the red pill by adding a nihilistic element to it in stating that these social hierarchies are immutable and that nothing can be done about them.

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The incel worldview's crisis/solution narratives draw on the "politics of profound nostalgia" that characterises the broader men's rights movement (Menzies, 2007) in the form of a mythical past golden age of a patriarchal society (Baele et al., 2019; O'Malley et al. 2020) characterised by traditional gender roles, where women married young and monogamy was the rule. In

this society, all men were entitled to sex with women, which was never denied, and romantic practices guided interactions, thus rendering looks and pleasure largely irrelevant (Baele et al., 2019)

This is linked to the concept of "female hypergamy" in incel discussions – a form of biological determinism that posits that women only want to reproduce with Chads to pass on their "good genes". These tendencies, they believe, were tamed during the golden age due to laws and social norms/conventions that, therefore, ensured a "fair" distribution of relationships (Baele et al., 2019). Over time, this worldview has integrated with several beliefs about the nature of society and politics, such as how we now live in a "lookist" society based on the aforementioned hierarchy, and that feminism, liberalism, and technological progress are to blame for these developments (see Baele, Brace & Coan 2019; Ging 2019; O'Malley 2020; Papadamou et al. 2020; Scaptura & Boyle 2020), all of which are oppressive to men such as themselves.

From such discussions, we can see that the incel ideology is a supremacist one. As Miller-Idriss (2020) observes, while white supremacy is the most common and lethal example of this mindset, the logic and hierarchies present there are common in all forms of supremacist ideology, particularly how they dehumanise the "other" while simultaneously arguing that they cause suffering to the in-group.

ARE INCELS TERRORISTS?

The above features are seen in nearly all extremist ideologies and often lead to the view that violence is a legitimate course of action. While these views may be related to increased aggression in members of the incel community, their views towards violence are notably unusual among extremist movements.

Indeed, research has shown there are incel discussions concerning how the attacks committed by Rodgers and Minassian might lead to an incel uprising, a change

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in society's attitudes towards feminism, or policies that would result in women being forced to have sex with men (Baele et al., 2019). However, the prevailing attitude among the community appears to be that such acts of violence will not change the social order in any significant way, a view that extends from the nihilistic "black pill" attitude. As such, acts of incel-related violence tend to be seen by the community as a form of liberating action that constitutes an act of revenge, and not as a way of achieving change.

This point is an important one when debating the nature of the incel movement. While researchers have notoriously struggled to produce a definition of terrorism that all parties agree on, most of them would concur that one of the defining features of violent terrorist acts is to advance some ideological cause, with the ultimate aim of bringing about some form of social or political change. Following this logic, the fact that Rodger and Minassian stated in a manifesto and police interviews, respectively, that they aimed to encourage others to start a rebellion would qualify their actions as terrorist incidents.

However, in most other cases of incel-related violence, we have not seen any such claim being made by the perpetrators, whose actions appear to fall into the latter category of violence being committed as a form of "release", with sparse elements of the incel ideology mixed up with various social/mental health issues. As the UK's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Jonathan Hall, observes, the challenge for prosecutors in terrorism cases is to "establish

beyond reasonable doubt that the action was done to advance an ideological cause rather than for some purely personal or emotional reason" (Hall, 2021:31). However, Hall (2021) does go on to point out that personal motivations, unrelated to ideology, in cases of violence do not automatically exclude such an act from being considered terrorism.

Indeed, the emerging consensus among researchers is similar, that even in cases where the perpetrator is confirmed to have mental health issues, ideology does still play a role (Berger, 2018b) and acts committed by those in the more extreme fringes of this community should be considered acts of terrorism due to the aforementioned narrative structure and in-group/out-group supremacy (Hoffman & Ware, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020).

The investigation into the Plymouth incident is still ongoing and it is, therefore, too early to speculate if it will be reclassified as an act of terrorism and if this growing threat of gender-based extremism will come to be labelled as a terrorist threat in the UK. However, the fact that Canada's Security Intelligence Service (one of the countries to have been most impacted by this movement) labelled inceldom as a form of violent misogynistic ideological extremism in 2019, is perhaps indicative.

IS INCELDOM RELATED TO THE FAR-RIGHT?

There does appear to be some link between the incel movement and the broader far-right but the exact nature of this relationship is yet to be examined empirically.

Firstly, we have seen that there are ideological overlaps between some aspects of far-right ideology and that of incels, particularly in their use of hateful language (Hoffman & Ware 2020). For example, Rodgers' manifesto made ample use of racially charged language, and the far-right inspired 2020 Hanau attacker left

behind messages with misogynistic content (Baele et al., 2020).

Second, both communities often exhibit similar online sensibilities regarding their use of memes and the notion of pilling, etc.

Third, some have even posited that parts of the far-right are praying on the insecurities of some of these young men and using their anti-female supremacist views as a gateway to lure them into forms of white supremacy (Romano, 2018; Hoffman & Ware 2019), but again, this is yet to be tested empirically.

In short, given the evidence currently available, it is perhaps best to view the contemporary far-right not as one coherent ideology but one that is made up of several different "flavours" that share different aspects in their worldview.

Perhaps the best way to describe this is as a series of overlapping Venn diagrams, whereby each set is a specific category of the far-right, i.e. white nationalist, neo-Nazi, militia groups, alt-right, etc. Each set features different aspects of far-right ideology, but not all of them.

The incel ideology is one of these sets.

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