

# 'Angry white men': the sociologist who studied Trump's base before Trump

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During the Obama years, various commentators made wild predictions about the death of the white male as a politically relevant demographic. Then came Trump, propelled to power by a wave of angry white men.

The sociologist Michael Kimmel is one of the world's foremost experts on the phenomenon. As the director of Stony Brook University's Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities, he's a leader in the emerging field of masculinity studies. His recent research has looked at topics including spree killers (who are overwhelmingly male and white), as well as the relationship between masculinity and political extremism. He's also just wrapped up a new book studying why men join hate groups – and how they leave.



## Republicans condemn university's masculinity program as a 'war on men'



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In a recent interview, Kimmel discussed the election of Trump, domestic terrorism, the men's rights movement, and the "alt-right".

**Your book [Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era](#) will be republished this April, is that right?**

Yes. Since you've read it, you'll know that the book doesn't include the name "Trump" anywhere in it. So my publisher thought it would be a good idea if they reprinted it with a new preface by me that talks about him. Essentially, I wrote a book about his followers – for whom the leader hadn't showed up yet.

**Can you tell me more about your new book? When is it coming out?**

It's slated for 2018 . It's based on interviews with four different groups around the world. One of them is an organization in Sweden which helps young neo-Nazis and skinheads get out of the movement. Another is [Exit](#), in Germany, which does the same with German neo-Nazis and white supremacists, and [Life After Hate](#) , a US group created by former members of the far-right extremist movement. The fourth group, called [Quilliam](#), is a foundation based in London that helps ex-jihadists get out of the movement.

My book is really about masculinity and how men get into these movements and how they get out – how masculinity is entirely wrapped up with this. These are guys that really think that they don't matter in the world and have been tossed aside.

Participation in the movement gives them validation of their masculinity. There are some differences, of course. The ex-neo-Nazis who go through the program in Sweden are on average 16 or 17 years old. The German guys are a lot older and have a different trajectory. They come in largely through connections they make in prison. They are burglars and petty criminals who are radicalized there.

I also wrote a lot about the power of music. Neo-Nazi rap is big in Sweden, Germany, the United States, alongside hatecore music.

Policymakers and researchers typically ignore masculinity when they try to understand how people get into these movements. My challenge to them is: if you ignore masculinity in understanding how these guys get into these movements, you will not be able to help them get out.

**In 2009, the homeland security intelligence analyst Daryl Johnson wrote a report arguing that rightwing extremist movements were on the rise. The report [became an unexpected political football](#): Republicans were enraged at what they saw as politically motivated alarmism conflating nonviolent conservative and libertarian groups with terrorists.**

**What most angered conservative critics of the report, however, was Johnson's prediction that returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan would be prime targets for recruitment to the far right. Has any of your research touched on that issue?**

I think this is one of those problems in logic that we call the "compositional fallacy". Just because a lot of recruits for white nationalist movements are veterans does not in any way imply that all veterans are going to become recruits.

What we do know to be true is that our military exercises in Iraq and Afghanistan have left veterans coming home with serious PTSD. I mean, think of the types of terror that they've lived with – that any time you get into a car could be your last time on earth. That can't help but shake you up. Couple that with racism towards your enemy – one of the ways you convince yourself to kill an enemy is to hate them; think about what we used to say about the Vietnamese, or what my father's generation used to say about the Japanese. I think that is an equation that might make some people susceptible to far-right ideology.

And it is also true that a large number of guys enter the military precisely because they want to fight. Timothy McVeigh signed up for the military during the first Gulf war and when he came back he wanted to join the special forces and they told him no, that psychologically he wasn't suited. He was angry about that and that is where he started to drift towards extremism.

So I would never say that veterans are more susceptible to far-right ideology. But I would say that a large number of veterans have been seriously affected by their experiences. We do them no good if we pretend this isn't true, and we do American citizens no good if we pretend that we are more likely to be attacked from outside rather than within. Far more likely is [Wade Michael Page](#) [identified in a [shooting at a Wisconsin Sikh temple](#)], not some jihadist group.

**One of the major points you make in *Angry White Men* is that the notions of masculinity which drive men to join far-right groups or go on shooting sprees are deeply rooted in humiliation.**

**In [The Looming Tower](#), Lawrence Wright discusses how a similar sense of humiliation in the Arab world informed the line of thinking that eventually became al-Qaida (and Isis). So I wonder, how much of this is about "angry white men" and how much is about "angry men", full stop?**

One of the most prescient observers of violence I've ever read, James Gilligan, wrote a book called [Violence](#). He argued that shame and humiliation underlie basically all violence: "Because I feel small, I will make you feel smaller."

In my interviews with extremists, both "actives" and "formers", I have found time and time again that they have experienced that sense of humiliation and shame.

In his famous statement, Osama bin Laden talked about how the west had humiliated the Muslim world ... that conservative Muslims have been humiliated by hyper-modern society and the cosmopolitan McDonaldization of the world. For them, restoring the seventh-century caliphate is their way of reinstating traditional masculinity.

I call this “aggrieved entitlement”. If you feel entitled and you have not gotten what you expected, that is a recipe for humiliation.

At least in the case of the German, Swedish and American guys that I interviewed, sometimes it is not really political at all. Many of them, especially the American guys, were sexually abused, beat up, bullied as children. Some of them have basically the same sort of profile as the victims of the Catholic priests. Growing up they were deeply ashamed of themselves; they didn't do well in school, they didn't have friends, they were sad, miserable, and they escaped into themselves. That just made them better targets, and the far right drew them in.

The camaraderie of the community validates their masculinity, and – even more importantly than that – gives them a sacred mission. That is really powerful for these guys.

**Angry White Men talks at length about the “manosphere” on the internet, and the rise of the men’s rights movement. Men’s rights activists have long complained of the ways that government policies penalize men – divorce and alimony laws, for example, or benefits designed for single mothers but not single fathers. Do you think with Trump in office, the MRAs may actually influence change in legislation and policy?**

The group that I think has a point is the fathers, or some of the fathers. Some of the fathers' rights groups who blame women, blame feminism – I don't have much sympathy for them. But I do think that the courts have not kept pace with changes in society. Fathers have changed. Far more men now are involved in childcare. But our laws were really designed for the Don Draper era, when men were absentee landlords at home. So in some respects, some of these guys really have gotten a bad deal.

On the other hand, let's be clear what we're talking about: a [Californian study](#) found that 80% of divorcing couples got the custody arrangement that they wanted. Both of them. So we're really only talking about 20% of cases, and of those 20% of cases only a fraction of them are like the cases that the men's rights activists describe: he wants joint custody, she wants sole custody. The reasons for this problem are usually the circumstances for why she wants sole custody: she wants to leave the state, she wants to move for a job or a relationship.

So you have to calculate that. There are legitimate cases, I grant that, but I don't think we should make it sound like the entire American court system is slanted against men.

**What do you make of Milo Yiannopoulos? He is gay; he has dated black men. Does someone like him complicate the narrative of masculinity and the conservative right?**

Do you remember Phyllis Schlafly, who made a career out of telling women they shouldn't have careers? Milo Yiannopoulos is basically a provocateur. He wants to provoke a reaction so that he can claim victim status. “Oh my God, they won't let me speak. These people on college campuses are whining all the time.” Meanwhile, he is doing most of the whining. He is very like Trump: “Everybody hates me, I'm a victim of the bad media, I got more votes than she did.”

Yiannopoulos may be gay but he is also white and upper-class. He is hardly underprivileged. What he wants to do is provoke a censorious reaction so he can say the left is equally censorious as the right. But in this country, that has not been the case. We have a long history of censoring free speech and that history has always come from the right. And this notion that the left is all so angry and censorious ... it depends on ignoring one small technical detail: the left is not in power right now. The left does not have the power to be censorious.

**What are your thoughts about the age-old debate about men being violent? Is it purely social – a product of culture – or are there biological factors at work? Is it nature or nurture or both?**

I think it's a false debate. I think nature and nurture are intimately linked. What we know is that testosterone as a hormone both thrives in aggression and responds to aggression. It is a really malleable hormone. And I think that you can't understand the natural biological conditions of violence without understanding the social conditions, and I think you can't understand the social conditions without understanding the biological conditions.

Let me give you two examples. The first: how come men use a biological argument when they are angry and they beat up someone smaller or older than they are or they beat their wives – yet they don't beat their bosses? I mean, my boss would likely piss me off more than my wife would, right? Why don't I beat him up? Because you have to feel like you have permission. You have to believe that the target of your violence is "legitimate".

There is a [famous experiment](#) by a primatologist at Stanford. He takes five monkeys and measures their testosterone. Then he puts the five monkeys in a cage. The monkeys immediately establish a hierarchy of violence – number one beats number two, number two beats number three, number three beats number four, number four beats number five. Of course, number one has the highest testosterone, and so on.

So the experiment is: he takes monkey three out of the cage and he shoots him up with testosterone, off the scale, and puts him back in. What do you think happens? When I tell this story my students always guess that he immediately becomes number-one monkey. But that's not true. What happens is that when he goes back in the cage he still avoids monkeys number one and two – but he beats the shit out of numbers four and five.

So what any reasonable biological researcher would conclude is that testosterone does not cause aggression, it enables it. The target of the violence must already be seen as legitimate. You have a biological argument and a sociological argument. So the answer to your question is that it is never either/or. It is always both. Always.

*This transcript has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity*

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