

# The Misdirected Sovereign: How Incel Anger Is Redirected Within Contemporary Socioeconomic Systems

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**Author:** David Humble

**Affiliation:** Sovereign Integrity Institute (SII)

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## Abstract

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The “incel” (involuntary celibate) phenomenon has been widely analyzed as a misogynistic online subculture associated with harassment and, in extreme cases, real-world violence (Aiolfi et al., 2024). This paper advances a complementary interpretation: that incel anger can be understood as a form of *partially grounded but misdirected grievance*. Drawing on philosophical work on misdirected anger (Emerick & Yap, 2023), sociological research on the manosphere (Ging, 2017; Bratich, 2019), and literature on gender norms and social isolation (Mwatsiya et al., 2025; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), the paper argues that some incel grievances—particularly those related to loneliness, rigid masculinity norms, and the perceived commodification of intimacy—reflect identifiable structural pressures. However, these grievances are frequently redirected toward women rather than toward broader socioeconomic systems (Halpin, 2022). The paper further examines MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) as a related withdrawal strategy (Journal of Right-Wing Studies, 2025). It concludes that redirecting grievance toward structural analysis—combined with evidence-based psychological and social interventions—may offer more constructive pathways for engagement and deradicalization.

**Keywords:** incel, MGTOW, misdirected anger, masculinity, loneliness, social isolation, commodification, manosphere, gender norms

## 1. Introduction

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The incel subculture has become a focus of academic and public concern due to its association with misogynistic ideology and, in some cases, acts of violence (Aiolfi et al., 2024). Existing research has primarily emphasized radicalization pathways, harmful belief systems, and risk factors associated with incel communities (Papandreou et al., 2025).

While this focus is necessary, it may obscure an additional analytical dimension: that some incel grievances originate in **recognizable structural and social conditions**, even if their interpretation is distorted (Emerick & Yap, 2023). The concept of *justified-but-misdirected anger* provides a useful framework for analyzing this distinction (Emerick & Yap, 2023).

This paper does not validate misogyny. Instead, it distinguishes between:

- (1) underlying structural grievances,
- (2) ideological interpretation, and
- (3) targets of blame.

This tripartite distinction aligns with research suggesting that incel ideology reflects both psychological distress and sociocultural conditioning (Fontanesi et al., 2024).

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Justified-but-Misdirected Anger

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Emerick and Yap (2023) define misdirected anger as anger grounded in a genuine perceived injustice but directed toward an inappropriate target. Such misdirection can reinforce existing systems by obscuring structural causes (Emerick & Yap, 2023).

They explicitly identify incels as an example: individuals may be justified in feeling anger toward unrealistic standards of masculinity, yet misdirect that anger toward women rather than toward systemic conditions (Emerick & Yap, 2023).

This framework enables analytical separation between:

- **Structural conditions** (e.g., inequality, isolation)
- **Interpretation** (e.g., misogynistic ideology)
- **Expression** (e.g., harassment, withdrawal, radicalization)

## 3. Structural Conditions Underlying Incel Grievances

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### 3.1 Social Isolation and Loneliness

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Loneliness is a major predictor of negative health outcomes, including increased mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that men may experience stronger effects due to weaker social support networks and lower rates of emotional disclosure (Mwatsiya et al., 2025).

Norms of masculinity emphasizing stoicism and self-reliance are associated with reduced help-seeking behavior and increased disconnection (Mwatsiya et al., 2025). These patterns reflect structural vulnerability rather than purely individual failure.

## 3.2 Normative Masculinity and Status Pressure

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Masculinity research highlights strong cultural expectations linking male identity to status, sexual success, and emotional control (Ging, 2017). Failure to meet these expectations can produce:

- Shame and perceived inadequacy (Fontanesi et al., 2024)
- Status anxiety (Bratich, 2019)
- Social withdrawal (Papandreou et al., 2025)

These expectations are historically constructed rather than biologically fixed (Lerner, 1986).

## 3.3 Perceived Commodification of Intimacy

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Scholars have identified increasing perceptions of dating as competitive and transactional, particularly in digitally mediated environments (Bratich, 2019). Rebecca Solnit (2018) argues that incel ideology reflects a view of sex as a commodity tied to status.

While such perceptions may be exaggerated, they are not entirely detached from broader neoliberal dynamics emphasizing competition, visibility, and social ranking (Bratich, 2019).

## 4. Misdirection of Grievance

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Despite structural contributors, incel discourse frequently attributes blame to women rather than systems. This reflects classic misdirection dynamics (Emerick & Yap, 2023).

Contributing mechanisms include:

1. **Visibility:** women are immediate and tangible targets
2. **Cultural scripts:** women framed as gatekeepers of intimacy
3. **Ideological reinforcement:** online echo chambers normalize grievance narratives (Ging, 2017)

Research indicates that incel misogyny reflects broader patriarchal and heteronormative structures rather than isolated pathology (Halpin, 2022).

## 5. MGTOW as Withdrawal Strategy

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### 5.1 Definition

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MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) promotes disengagement from heterosexual relationships as a response to perceived structural inequities (Journal of Right-Wing Studies, 2025).

## 5.2 Interpretation

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MGTOW can be interpreted as:

- A rejection of perceived relational asymmetry
- A response to dissatisfaction with gender norms
- An attempt to regain autonomy (Journal of Right-Wing Studies, 2025)

However, research suggests that withdrawal often coexists with persistent resentment, limiting adaptive outcomes (Journal of Right-Wing Studies, 2025).

## 6. Implications for Intervention

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### 6.1 Limits of Moral Condemnation

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While misogyny must be addressed, purely punitive approaches often fail to engage underlying drivers such as loneliness, depression, and identity instability (Bachaud et al., 2025).

### 6.2 Redirection of Grievance

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Interventions may benefit from helping individuals:

- Identify structural contributors
- Reframe causal explanations
- Reduce adversarial gender narratives

This aligns with deradicalization frameworks emphasizing cognitive restructuring (Papandreou et al., 2025).

### 6.3 Psychological and Social Approaches

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Evidence-based approaches include:

- Mental health interventions targeting depression and anxiety (Fontanesi et al., 2024)
- Social reintegration strategies (Mwatsiya et al., 2025)
- Addressing restrictive masculinity norms (Ging, 2017)

These approaches address root conditions rather than solely ideological outputs.

## 7. Discussion

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This analysis suggests that incel anger may arise from identifiable structural conditions but is frequently misdirected through ideological framing (Emerick & Yap, 2023). This dual structure complicates both interpretation and intervention.

The observed pattern aligns with broader sociological findings: when individuals cannot identify systemic causes, they often target more visible groups (Emerick & Yap, 2023).

Understanding this dynamic enables more precise interventions addressing both structural drivers and ideological distortions.

## 8. Limitations

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- Reliance on secondary literature
- Heterogeneity of incel communities (Aiolfi et al., 2024)
- Limited causal evidence linking structure to ideology
- Lack of longitudinal intervention data

Future research should prioritize mixed-method and longitudinal designs.

## 9. Conclusion

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The incel phenomenon reflects an interaction between structural pressures, psychological distress, and ideological framing. While expressions of incel anger are often harmful, some underlying grievances correspond to identifiable social conditions.

Effective responses require:

- Rejecting harmful ideologies
- Recognizing structural contributors
- Developing integrated psychological and social interventions

A clearer understanding of misdirected anger improves both academic analysis and practical response.

## 10. References

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## Institutional Note

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## Comments

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