

## From Pajama Boy to Pepe the Frog

### *Power, Essentialism, and the Nation-State in the Manosphere*

JANET MCINTOSH

Brandeis University

Critical watchers of the manosphere—that digital space devoted to “men’s issues”—have observed its evolution with alarm. Over the last couple of decades, it has morphed from an array of online forums promoting (for instance) father’s rights and gross pick-up techniques, to sites touting a far more aggressive and sometimes downright fascistic stance (Ribeiro et al. 2021). The toxic shift has accompanied the growing alienation of US men, especially White men, as their education outcomes, health, and longevity have plummeted.<sup>1</sup> It has also coincided with the rise of Tea Party politics, Donald Trump, and the normalization of the radical right in halls of power.

As the articles in this special issue attest, the manosphere has established itself as a global force through a semi-ingenuous array of semiotic techniques that often yoke ideal manhood to misogyny and White supremacy. In their introductory remarks, Cat Tebaldi and Scott Burnett summarize a key part of the cultural logic as follows: “They [men] yearn to be main characters: they could be heroes.” Piggybacking on and stoking anxieties about racial replacement is indeed a rewarding way to make (White) masculinity, connected to White reproductive prospects, seem existentially critical and heroic. The calculus is filled out by retrotopian dreams that reach into a mythic past—populated by Vikings, Celts, and other tough guys—for inspiration.<sup>2</sup> I recognize that

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1 Ben Rich and Eva Bujalka, “The Draw of the ‘Manosphere’: Understanding Andrew Tate’s Appeal to Lost Men,” *The Conversation*, February 12, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/the-draw-of-the-manosphere-understanding-andrew-tates-appeal-to-lost-men-199179#:~:text=The%20manosphere%20appeals%20to%20its,dim%20vision%20of%20the%20future>.

2 I cannot resist mentioning too the recent internet trend of (mostly White) women asking their male partners, “How often do you think about the Roman Empire?” The question began to circulate in 2022 through a Swedish influencer, and rapidly went global. The joke is that many men, including liberal men, think about the Roman Empire surprisingly often—presumably because it inspires fantasies of masculine strength, order, and martial power. This trend has an affectionate cast, but it also stimulated the suggestion that the concept of the Roman Empire taps into a collective male unconscious that longs for power and badassery. See, for instance, “How Often Do You Think about the Roman Empire?,” Knowyo-

the manosphere's politics are a product, in part, of feeling shamed and marginalized (however unreasonably: see, for instance, Kimmel 2013; Rosenthal et al. 2023; Schafer 2020). But its misogyny, queer phobia, and racism have deadly potential.

Reading this collection of essays on the semiotics of fascistic digital masculinity gave me a strange cluster of contrasting feelings. Some of the images and statements the authors analyze are so over the top they brought me to laughter, yet I recoil at the cruelties they imply. The pairing of entertainment with menace is no accident, of course. The drama, puffery, and wit on these websites are part of the appeal, just as they have been part of Donald Trump's arsenal of semiotic techniques (Goldstein, Hall, and Ingram 2020; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020). Besides, as Tebaldi and Burnett further explain in their introduction, heroic masculinity is what makes being a White supremacist fun.

The authors in this collection draw on a wide array of tools from semiotic and language studies to make their case. Several offer keen readings of the way language parses the social world or borrows rhetorical moves from other domains for authority. Maureen Kosse, for instance, offers an incisive take on the "referentialist ideology" shared by the alt-right and trans-exclusionary radical feminists, as they presume a neat mapping between lexemes ("man" and "woman") and categories in the natural world. Such appeals to "some immutable Platonic essence," Kosse suggests, offer satisfying cognitive closure while treating deviations from a binary model as "counterfeit." Dominika Baran examines the "anti-genderism register" of an ultraconservative Polish NGO, scrutinizing how it manipulates lexical and grammatical details (such as using quotation marks to trivialize LGBTQ+-preferred terms) and spins terms to impugn progressive policies and practices: "comprehensive sex education" becomes "the sexualization of children," for instance, while "promotion of LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion" becomes "grooming." And Scott Burnett, Rodrigo Borba, and Mie Hiramoto's piece on the global digital sphere of "NoFappers"—men who vow to abstain from masturbation—lays bare the assumptions within their "self-fashioning" talk. One of their rhetorical moves is to borrow from scientific and philosophical registers for credibility, building their case that abstaining will reboot their brains and bodies while revivifying their primal masculinity.

Some of the other articles analyze both language and visual semiotics. Gustav Westberg and Henning Årman, for instance, offer a tantalizing close reading of imagery and rhetoric from the Swedish "Nordic Resistance Movement." They observe a sly recruiting tactic: the movement takes seemingly benign images (a woman's pregnant belly, a man holding a young child aloft), and surrounds them with affectively charged word clusters that evoke fascist aspirations. The pregnant belly that might simply imply

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urmeme (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/how-often-do-you-think-about-the-roman-empire>. A comical elaboration on these themes is the Saturday Night Live skit "Rome Song," November 19, 2023, YouTube video, 3:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2nWIXlcO5I>.

“family friendly” in one context becomes an ominous gesture when flanked by words like “ancestors” and “blood,” terms that gesture toward notions of racial purity. As a whole, the combination of such images and words further implies women’s role as reproductive handmaids for a racial cause. Westberg and Årman’s work reminds us of a tenet of semiotic analysis, namely that studying words in isolation ignores the role context plays in the meaning of any given sign. Cultural insiders in the manosphere are always taking meaning from words and images as they are *situated* within force fields of ideology and other surrounding signs, and so, too, should those of us studying them.

Rich discussion of images and language can be found in Cat Tebaldi and Scott Burnett’s perusal of the archconservative *Man’s World* online magazine. The authors explore the enregisterment of the “hot hard hero,” a figure who proudly represents the “superiority of the Aryan race” as he preps for fascist violence. Their analysis draws attention to “rhematization,” a semiotic process in which the qualities of a sign are thought to (iconically) resemble the thing it stands for. Thus, for instance, the “hard” exercise the man does, the “hard” gum he chews, and the hard-to-eat foods such as dried beef liver that he chokes down are taken as iconic of (resembling, and thus bound up ontologically with) his broader qualities of physical strength, toughness of character, and even intellectual fortitude. Meanwhile, rather like the NoFappers’ scientific register, *Man’s World* magazine relies on scientific imagery to display how “genetic wealth”—associated with both masculine strength and White racial purpose—can be maximally expressed. The magazine’s pseudoscience further argues that eating soft, decadent foods (especially soy-based ones) causes muscles and bodies to “degenerate,” thus weakening men and imperiling the competency of their leadership.

While much of the manosphere fixates on embodied physical potency, Joanna Maj Schmidt offers a fascinating, psychodynamically informed analysis of memes produced by alt-righters who align themselves with the physically puny Pepe the Frog, and in so doing, adopt an “ironic approach to their own . . . heroic-masculine fantasies.” I will return to that theme at the end, for it points to a whole other tool kit for archconservative manhood, one that eschews the warrior model but leans into transgression, irony, and trolling as techniques of one-upmanship.

### **Typing, Essentializing, and White Manhood**

Reading these articles together inspires me to pull a few issues to the foreground. One is the thread of compulsive “typing” and essentializing traceable in much manosphere discourse and thought. Although an essentialist model of human difference is a readily available cognitive strategy for our species, conservative political orders tend to encourage and play it up (McIntosh 1998). Typing and essentializing also seem linked to dehumanization and rage, as I will explain. The second issue is a comparison of two distinct archconservative models of manhood circulating in the USA in the past decade. I wish to unpack another example of warrior-masculinity in the USA, one tightly linked to party politics, and then to extend Johanna Maj Schmidt’s compelling arguments

about the Pepe the Frog memes. These examples let me think a little further about these two models of manhood, one physically robust and martial, the other unprepossessing and nihilistic, and how they relate to the right-wing's increasingly complex articulation with the conventional nation-state.

As I have written elsewhere, essentialist ideas are “ontologically deeper than stereotyping, reaching toward the idea that deep, hidden, and fixed qualities make certain things what they are” (McIntosh 2018, 1). Several of the right-wing movements and spheres the authors describe in this collection appear obsessed with pseudoscientific parsing and contrasting of supposed human kinds: male versus female, White versus Other, even distinctive types of men and women. These categories are sometimes framed as if essentially distinct and intrinsically rankable from superior to inferior, while racial and gender essentialisms seem to operate in mutual reinforcement across domains. In several movements analyzed in this issue, for instance, a heteronormative gender binary is taken as God-given bedrock, and twinned with the idea of a Great (racial) Chain of Being. Westberg and Årman, for instance, describe Swedish fascists' assumption that women are biologically destined for breeding, while White women should aspire to breed racially pure children. These essentialisms are linked to Nazi-era “eternal values,” evoked by naturalizing terms like “blood” and reinforced with allusions to “tradition” and “heritage” that imply both a retrotopia and a hermetic sealing of their own kind. In Kosse's work, too, we see how essentialist presumptions about racial difference and wholly natural and oppositional “male” and “female” bodies go together.

Even the NoFappers entertain a kind of essentialism—in their case, a quasi-scientific construal of semen as a carrier of masculine power that must be either retained or deployed in the masculinizing act of “ramming a woman,” rather than squandered through masturbation. To this anxiety about their male essence, NoFappers add a racist terror of being cuckolded by supposedly racially inferior men—e.g., “ultraphallic Black men,” who momentarily dominate the cuckolded White man, or Jews who are conspiring to “enervate” and thus replace White men (Burnett 2022; see also Beatty 2024). Such narratives stoke the notion of an intrinsically polluting essence in marginalized social groups, while setting up racial masculinity as a zero-sum game.

All these typings and essentialisms seem ideologically yoked to a nostalgic notion of a mythic past in which all the types were in their place, with White men on top. Where social change and progressivism have changed the equation, the manosphere makes elaborate efforts to restore what it construes as the natural order of things. But the manosphere's recognition of social change also suggests an odd contradiction in their essentialist ideologies. On the one hand, participants take it as axiomatic that White men are intrinsically socially superior, but on the other, they go to strenuous lengths to try to reestablish this order precisely because it does not seem so natural or inevitable after all. Such logical tensions, however, do not appear to weaken anyone's convictions.

## Emasculation and Feminization

Now, to explore some articulations between the manosphere and national politics in the USA, I want to examine a moment in meme history from about a decade ago, a moment that ultimately linked “types” of men to pseudo-biological hierarchies while illuminating the articulation between warrior masculinity and the contemporary Republican party. The meme phenomenon, which the manosphere shorthanded as “Pajama Boy,” centered on a 2013 ad designed to encourage young people to enroll in health insurance under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Signed into law in 2010, the ACA required adults to get insurance or pay a penalty, forced insurers to accept applicants no matter their preexisting conditions, and offered federal subsidies to insure America’s poorest families. Republicans quickly named the act “Obamacare,” which sounded derisive coming out of the mouths of those who already hated President Obama. The shorthand stuck, though, and came to be used by people all over the political spectrum. Obama himself posted the ad in question to his Twitter account on December 17, 2013 (see figure 1).

The ad features a young man with pale skin, dark curly hair, and black-rimmed glasses, wearing red and black buffalo-checked pajamas that look like a one-piece with a zipper up the front. He sits on a sofa holding a mug with two hands, glancing to his left with a slight smile. He is ethnically ambiguous, his look plausibly Semitic, though twinkling lights in the background evoke a potential “Christmas decoration” vibe.<sup>3</sup> The ad copy reads: “Wear pajamas. Drink hot chocolate. Talk about getting health insurance. #GetTalking barackobama.com/talk.” The figure seems cozy and cheerful as he contemplates what is presumably his first health insurance policy as a young adult; apparently the ad was intended to appeal to twenty-somethings at a transitional life stage.



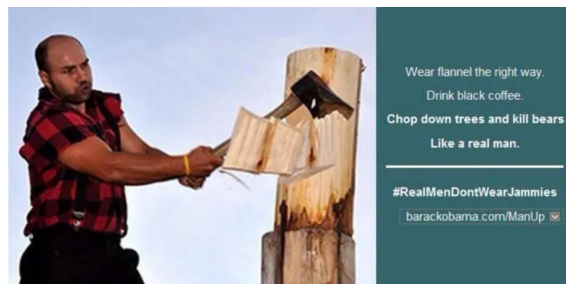
**Figure 1.** The “Pajama Boy” ad posted by President Obama.<sup>4</sup>

3 Pajama Boy’s vaguely ethnic (even Jewish?) appearance may have triggered some of the right-wing scorn. See Jay Michaelson, “Obamacare ‘Pajama Boy’ Controversy Wrapped in Anti-Semitism,” *Forward*, December 28, 2013, <https://forward.com/opinion/190011/obamacare-pajama-boy-controversy-wrapped-in-anti-s/>. On aspects of antisemitism in the manosphere, see Burnett 2022.

4 Barack Obama (@BarackObama), Twitter, December 17, 2013, 5:45 p.m., <https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/413079861922508800>.

Shortly after Obama posted this ad to his Twitter account, the American right wing erupted in rage and scorn toward Pajama Boy. To be sure, the right had scapegoated the ACA from the start. They objected to the higher insurance premiums, deductibles, and taxes necessary to pull it off, and they resented the plan's collectivist spirit, including the subsidies offered to low-income families. Obamacare was "socialist," orchestrating a "government takeover" of the health care system, and of peoples' bodies and lives, no less. (Maybe people would have to be "microchipped" as part of their compliance, or the government would cut costs by sponsoring "death panels" to decide which seniors would have to die on the plan?) And obviously this was another case of "entitlement spending" that gave "handouts" to lazy, unworthy hangers-on. But there was something else about Pajama Boy that encapsulated the right's view of what was going wrong, not only with Obamacare but also with the left more generally.

To begin with, right-wing meme-makers repeatedly set Pajama Boy into binary contrast with appropriately masculine and conservative men. One meme (figure 2) mirrors the format of the original ad, but features an axe-wielding, muscle-bound White man in a similar buffalo-checked flannel shirt, flanked by injunctions to "Wear Flannel the right way. Drink black coffee. Chop down trees and kill bears. Like a real man. #RealMenDontWearJammies barackobama.com/ManUp." As in Tebaldi and Burnett's analysis, "manning up" in the manosphere apparently stems from doing hard, unpleasant, and violent (bear-killing) things.



**Figure 2.** A lumberjack meme parodying the Pajama Boy ad.<sup>5</sup>

The right wing's scorn, though, was not just about soft versus hard men. Through a kind of semiotic creep, Pajama Boy came to stand in for the weak contingent of the body politic and hence the entire nation's problematic manhood. As Tebaldi and Burnett point out, fascism has a history of asking men's bodies to carry immense semiotic weight by "conflating youth, health, and physical strength with the renewal of the nation" (on this kind of bodily synecdoche, see also Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Carole Quattro Levine, "[Meme Mash] Lovin' that Onsie: Obamacare Pajama Boy," *Flyover Culture*, December 19, 2013, <https://flyoverculture.com/2013/12/19/meme-mash-lovin-that-onesie-obamacare-pajama-boy/>.

This scaling up of Pajama Boy’s representational power was achieved verbally and visually. The meme in figure 3, for instance, features Pajama Boy articulating a liberal talking point: “Guns . . . are for insecure people.” With this brief allusion, the meme frames Pajama Boy as standing in for one side of a national political debate about gun control. At the same time, the meme heaps scorn on his perspective by voicing him in a young and possibly feminine teenage register, indexed by the interjection “Eww!” and the statement, “My mommy has always had my back.” Pajama Boy is hopelessly childish, dependent, and naive to imagine his mother could protect him from real harm.



**Figure 3.** Pajama Boy as a helpless mommy’s boy.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Pajama Boy’s reliance on a “mommy” has a wider meaning, for just as Pajama Boy stands in for the nation’s problematic manhood, “mommy” may also represent a broader authority. According to George Lakoff (1996), conceptual imaginings of the nation-state are often structured around an image of a family authority figure. Conservatives tend to favor a “strict father” model of the state, whereas liberals favor a “nurturing parent” model—a formula that has played out in the USA and Europe (for examples from Romania and Sweden, see Norocel 2010a, 2010b). Some American conservatives have reached for the derogatory British phrase “nanny state” to capture the idea that liberals are turning the nation into a nursery, with the government imagined as a cosseting and overbearing woman clucking over her charges.<sup>7</sup> For Republicans, then, Obamacare risked infantilizing and creating dependency among the citizenry, failing to allow boys to grow into men who know how to take care of and defend themselves.

Other chatter surrounding Pajama Boy enhanced associations like these. Consider the derision from Rich Lowrie, editor of the conservative monthly *National Review*, who deemed Pajama Boy “nerdy” and an “insufferable man-child . . . probably reading

<sup>6</sup> Posted by anonymous circa 2016, accessed January 10, 2025, <https://imgflip.com/i/zy164>.

<sup>7</sup> See Alannis Jáquez, “The Nanny State: A Conservative Concern or a Misogynistic Myth?,” *Columbia Political Review*, April 11, 2022, <http://www.cpreview.org/blog/2022/4/the-nanny-state-a-conservative-concern-or-a-misogynistic-myth>.

*The Bell Jar* and looking forward to a hearty Christmas meal of stuffed tofurkey.” These specifics do potent indexical work. Sylvia Plath, author of *The Bell Jar*, has been a heroine to young feminists; Pajama Boy is emasculated by association. Lowrie’s allusion to “tofu” is a masculinist dog-whistle; as we saw in Tebaldi and Burnett’s contribution, all those soft foods, the ones that do not bleed, supposedly change men’s very biology, rendering them less manly. Lowrie’s prose sidles into grudges against liberal demographics as he goes on—Pajama Boy could “guest-host on an unwatched MSNBC show,” and “If [Pajama Boy] has anything to say about it, Obamacare enrollments will spike in the next few weeks in Williamsburg and Ann Arbor.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, Lowrie castigates Pajama Boy’s apparent immaturity, which renders him “an ideal consumer of government,” including its “infantilizing” Affordable Care Act. If men are to harden themselves by doing hard things, perhaps in Lowrie’s reasoning it would be more grown-up and masculine to deal with cancer without medical insurance.

Within just a few weeks of the “Pajama Boy” ad’s release, spin-off memes were copious. They likened him to queer or feminine figures in popular culture (Rachel Maddow, My Little Pony), alluded to his “full diaper,” and implied he lives with his parents and cannot do his own laundry. Pajama Boy’s girlfriend was framed as make-believe; apparently he’s not man enough to have actual (or heterosexual) sex.<sup>9</sup> Other memes mapped these denigrating qualities onto liberals and progressives by suggesting Pajama Boy “went to Oberlin,” or aligning him visually with President Obama and then–Vice President Joe Biden.<sup>10</sup> Pajama Boy stood in for a liberal “type” that in the right-wing imagination is not only annoying but also a pernicious threat, representing the specter of trust in and dependence on “big government,” in conjunction with the Democrats’ perilous feminizing of the nation. After all, as Tebaldi and Burnett put it in “The Science of Desire” in this issue, “Women are the soft places in the nation where enemies can get in.”

### Degeneration and Decline

Still other Pajama Boy memes and discourse suggested a Great Chain of Masculine Being. The manosphere is full of classifications; consider, for instance, taxonomies circulating among self-identified “incels” that distinguish between such masculine types as “Chads,” viewed as ideal alpha males, and “cucks,” seen as subordinate men who are likely to be cuckolded (Lawson 2023; see also Kosse 2022). While some in

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8 Rich Lowry, “Pajama Boy: An Insufferable Man-Child,” *Politico*, December 18, 2013, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/opinion-rich-lowry-obamacare-affordable-care-act-pajama-boy-an-insufferable-man-child-101304/>.

9 Levine, “[Meme Mash] Lovin’ that Onsie.”

10 “Pajama Boy,” *National Review*, December 18, 2013, <https://www.nationalreview.com/photos/pajama-boy/>.

the proto-fascist manosphere celebrate the potential for a triumphant return to an idealized past, where superior masculine types would dominate the weak, Pajama Boy discourse laments an ongoing biological and political degeneration, characterized by a withering of both men and nation. Consider, for instance, a 2017 article on a website about strength training that opens with this statement about evolutionary decline: “The route from *Beowulf* to Pajama Boy has been a very long downhill slide.” The writer complains that Pajama Boy is “the current archetype of a new style of male that is “fragile, in more than a physical sense.” By contrast, “our man” (the man who values strength training and frequents the website, presumably) cares about “rational analysis” and “strength,” which amounts to “the ability to act.”<sup>11</sup> And again, the strength-training website disdains Pajama Boy for being not only “popular-culture-validated” but also “government-approved.”

Several Pajama Boy memes set him in opposition to a military masculine foil, with pseudo-evolutionary implications. The pattern resonates with other typifications described in these articles. One meme (figure 4) contrasts two images of the “Iconic American Male”: 2013’s Pajama Boy, and a 1943 representative of the US Army Air Forces. The Air Force man clearly hails from a halcyon mid-twentieth-century era, as he proves his mettle in the Second World War. Pictured like a giant amid clouds and fighter planes, he casts an awed glance upward, as if inspired by the heavens or looking for new foes to conquer. He also clutches his signature instrument: a large aerial bomb of the kind Allied powers dropped on their enemies. By contrast, Pajama Boy could not seem any lowlier, enswathed in his onesie and warming his hands on a mug of comforting cocoa. How can such a figure possibly protect the nation from enemies? Pajama Boy’s domestic comfort seems to imperil national security. The devolutionary theme from ideal mid-century military man to Pajama Boy continues in several other memes, such as the one in figure 5 that features a 1944 *Life* magazine cover featuring a rifle-bearing soldier. The caption reads, “American symbols of manhood: From G.I. Joe to Pajama Boy in just a few generations.”

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11 Mark Rippetoe, “Pajama Boy Redux: The Male in Modern Society,” *Starting Strength*, May 26, 2017, <https://startingstrength.com/article/pajama-boy-redux-the-male-in-modern-society>.



Figure 4. Picturing the decline of the “Iconic American Male.”<sup>12</sup>



Figure 5. From heroic World War II soldier to Pajama Boy.<sup>13</sup>

### Warrior Masculinity

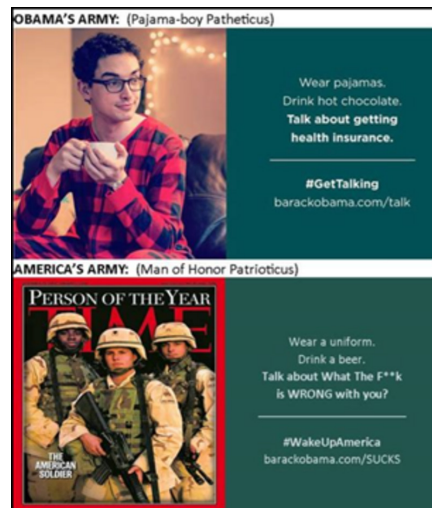
The relationship of each symbolic type of man to the state presents something of a puzzle. Pajama Boy has been typed by the right as feminine and infantile, with his implied “nurturing parent” ambiguously suspended between his mother and the big (socialist) government on which he depends. Yet the military men contrasted with Pajama Boy are also in close relationship with the government, since the armed forces operate under the authority of the state. In fact, looked at one way, service members are in a condition of remarkable compliance and dependence, expected to venerate their superior officers and obey orders without question while enjoying astounding levels of governmental support (including school tuition, health care, retirement benefits, reduced-cost housing, paid vacation, and more). But right-wing portrayals present service members’ relationship with the state as appropriately masculine. They

12 Levine, “[Meme Mash] Lovin’ that Onsie.”

13 Political Humor (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://www.political-humor.org/american-symbols-of-manhood-from-gi-joe-to-pajama-boy-in-just-a-few-generations/>.

are depicted as outward-facing protectors, unlike the domesticated Pajama Boy. Their physical strength, weaponry, and power to destroy enemy lives combine to convey an image of independence and agency that belies their role as cogs in the state's military machine.

Other memes develop a further contrast between Pajama Boy and military men by way of a coeval and quasi-biological contrast between varieties of masculinity. Consider the following meme (figure 6), which gives each “type” of man a “Latin” name as if each were a scientifically recognized species: “Pajama-boy Patheticus” versus “Man of Honor Patrioticus,” illustrated by the American soldiers featured as Time Magazine’s 2003 “Person of the Year.” As in the other military Pajama Boy memes, the soldiers hold weapons as indexes of masculine power, expressing their frustration with Pajama Boy and liberal politicians in a hypermasculine, profane register—“What the F\*\*k is WRONG with you? Barackobama.com/SUCKS.”



**Figure 6.** Pajama Boy as a lower kind of man.<sup>14</sup>

To be clear, I am not suggesting these meme makers believe in a literal species-like difference between types of men. However, the “as if” quality of their essentialist rhetoric implies a firm line between an in-group and a morally deplorable, somewhat dehumanized political out-group. This ineluctable distinction erases common ground and curtails empathy for the out-group while arguably enhancing the potential for violence against it, as most othering and dehumanizing rhetoric does. There is no room

<sup>14</sup> Memes Monkey (website), accessed January 12, 2025, <https://www.memesmonkey.com/topic/pajama+boy>.

to construe a spectrum of difference in this binary—only a gulf between types. Political antipathy reinforces the manosphere’s impulse to essentialize, and vice versa.<sup>15</sup>

The imagery contrasting Pajama Boy with warrior masculinity informed Sebastian Gorka’s December 2016 appearance on Fox News as he slammed what he described as President Obama’s soft approach to ISIS. “He drew the red line again and again,” complained Gorka. He went on to celebrate the change augured by Trump’s election:

The fact is, this is all going to end on January the 21st [when Trump is sworn in as President]. Our foreign policy has been a disaster. . . . We’ve emboldened our enemies. The message I have, it’s a very simple one. . . . The era of the Pajama Boy is over January 20th, and the alpha males are back.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, when Trump was elected, supporters leaned into the idea that he was an emblem of heroic warrior masculinity, despite his considerable girth and draft-dodging past. Their online and commercial effusions repeatedly grafted Trump into military imagery, as on the flag in figure 7, where he is pictured perched on a tank, wearing his signature suit and red tie while gripping an assault rifle. The magnitude of his patriotism is reflected by the magnitude of the American flag flapping behind him.



**Figure 7.** Donald Trump as an alpha male military leader.<sup>17</sup>

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15 There may be some corresponding typing and essentializing in rhetoric from the left, but essentialist models of the social world seem especially friendly to conservative thinking. A thorough comparative exploration of essentialisms across the political spectrum would of course require a different study.

16 John Hayward, “Gorka: ‘The Era of the Pajama Boy Is Over January 20th, and the Alpha Males Are Back,’” *Breitbart*, December 18, 2016, <https://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/12/18/gorka-era-pajama-boy-january-20th-alpha-males-back/>.

17 “Trump Tank American Flag—Donald Trump Flag,” product description, DP Company, accessed January 10, 2025, [acchttps://www.dpciwholesale.com/3-x-5-trump-tank-american-flag-donald-trump-flag-70683.html](https://www.dpciwholesale.com/3-x-5-trump-tank-american-flag-donald-trump-flag-70683.html).

Now, military men have long appealed to traditional conservatives, being rugged and willing to inflict violence or lay down their lives for the nation, but as I have implied, they could also pose something of a dilemma for some members of today's radical right. Looked at one way, soldiers seem a bit overly *governable*, as they capitulate to the state's orders, and as we have seen in several of the articles in this issue, recent decades have seen not just conservative hesitancy about "big government" but the outright disintegration of state allegiance among many on the radical right. Consider that, to *Man's World* aficionados, as Tebaldi and Burnett make clear, developing one's own body is semiotically bound up with seizing autonomy and evading state control, favoring instead the "tribe." The popularity of Donald Trump, with his disdain for democratic institutions and his predilection for rallying supporters to flout law and order, is a symptom of this antipathy toward politics as usual. Accordingly, some Trump enthusiasts on the alt-right, such as followers of QAnon, have expressed open preference for the death of our current democracy in favor of a White supremacist totalitarian state in the hypothetical future (exactly how much agency they would retain is unclear, but they do not seem troubled by this; see McIntosh 2022b). Alt-right militias, some working in tandem with the QAnon movement, saw their numbers rise in the run-up to the Trump-encouraged insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. This is the new American "patriot," who not only despises most of what we associate with "the government" but also might be willing to violently dispatch the current nation-state to improve on it.

### **Antiheroic Masculinity**

The far-right hallmark of professed ungovernability seems to be stoking new developments in archconservative masculinity. As an alternative to the earnest warrior masculinity described in many of these articles, we have seen the rise of a bitter, sardonic, antiheroic masculine option. Incels, for one, who regard themselves as hopeless cases in the genetic lottery of physical masculinity, resign themselves to a nihilistic and destructive existence from a locus of undesirability. In a related vein, some right-wing radicals began circulating the antiheroic figure known as Pepe the Frog around 2015, in tandem with Trump's rise (Jones 2020). This bug-eyed, scrawny-limbed cartoon amphibian began as a benign slacker-stoner in artist Matt Furie's comic strip about a harmless "boy's club," but it was adopted by the alt-right as an infinitely meme-able mascot who became a canvas for White supremacist and other radical-right attitudes and aspirations. While Pepe images have been posted by people across the gender spectrum (Jones 2020), Pepe himself is clearly gendered as masculine, and he became popular on transgressive male-dominant web forums such as 4chan.

As Johanna Maj Schmidt discusses in this issue, Pepe stands in contrast to the self-serious masculine heroes other contributors here describe. His body has no apparent strength, and his statements about, for instance, fighting in the "Great Meme War" can only be what Schmidt calls "partly (self-)ironic" given his unprepossessing physique. In fact, some Pepe the Frog memers freely admit that they are unemployed and (quite

literally) live in their parents' basement (Jones 2020), but they celebrate this refusal of what they disparagingly call “normie” life. Pepe thus offers a weak-bodied yet ungovernable alternative to conventional warrior masculinity.

Some Pepe memes lean into the pattern of contrastive typologizing we have seen in other parts of the manosphere. The meme in figure 8, for instance, celebrates the Pepe wielders who have checked out of the middle-class grind. Two contrasting worlds are signified by the division of the image into two colors: a dull beige-brown on the left, and a golden yellow on the right. In that golden space, we see a slightly elevated, almost floating Pepe, draped in a monk-like version of a blanket (the appearance of this blanket in “comfy Pepe” memes is discussed below). He is reaching out a hand to a downtrodden, exhausted-looking man in the left-hand brown area, a man whose ragged clothing and apparent body odor suggest his impoverishment. Visually, Pepe comes across as a vaguely religious figure of salvation—but this implication is surely ironic, given how many Pepe supporters opt out of conventional moral notions of piety or conscience.



**Figure 8.** An enlightened Pepe the Frog in contrast to the slaves of “normie” life.<sup>18</sup>

The word clusters in this meme clarify some of Pepe’s value system. On the golden, desirable side of Pepe, for instance, we have “NEETS,” an acronym for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training,” which broadcasts the memers’ self-deprecating pride in evading the world of institutions, paychecks, and bosses. Their “freedom” (another key term) spares them the perils of the capitalist grind listed on the brown and undesirable side, including “income tax,” “materialism,” and the metaphorical “slavery” that presumably comes with opting into the workplace. On the same side, we also find the word “Wagecucks,” a mocking term that in alt-right slang refers to those who work dead-end jobs for a meager wage (as mentioned, “cuck,” short for cuckold, is a popular

18 Katie Notopoulos and Ryan Broderick, “A Glossary of Far-Right Terms and Memes,” *Buzzfeed News*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katienotopoulos/a-normal-persons-guide-to-how-far-right-trolls-talk-to-each>.

alt-right term to denigrate a man's power; see Kosse 2022, as well as her article in this issue). The meme also draws a contrast between the kinds of sexual access available to each male type. On Pepe's side, we see the word "waifus": internet slang for a fantasized online girlfriend, often from anime or manga. Such virtual girlfriends do not offer the fleshy sex available to warrior men, but at least Pepe is not a "cuck" and can dissociate himself from the "roasties" available on the brown side. Roasties are nominally impure, used-up women who have had sex with multiple men, and Pepe, isolated in his basement, is untouched by such contamination.

But beyond their performance of disdain for conventional education and employment, Pepe memers enact several kinds of strength. For one thing, they have relished their power to sway the electorate from their laptops, as when they whipped up enthusiasm for Trump before the 2016 election (Jones 2020). For another, they display a kind of fortitude—masculine power from the neck up, as it were—with their ostentatiously casual stance toward human suffering. Sometimes, for instance, Pepe appears in Hitler guise or smiles at graphic violence against racial or ethnic minorities. "Breaking the rules and making it fun" has become part of the enticement for the radical right (McIntosh 2022a).

In a related vein, consider the "comfy/coze Pepe" images in figures 9 and 10, featuring Pepe wrapped in a blanket, looking comfortable and (in figure 9) a little smug. Regarded in isolation, Pepe's cozy garb and doughy body might conjure similarities with Pajama Boy or other "soyboys" hated by the right. But again, context makes all the difference to the meaning of the signifier. For if the right portrays Pajama Boy as a naive simp, comfy/cozy Pepe delivers a sinister vibe when his image appears as a sardonic onlooker in contexts of suffering. During the first wave of protests after George Floyd's murder, a 4chan user posted an image of comfy Pepe flanked by the gleeful statement "Everything is burning! :D," as if Pepe were enjoying watching the destruction unfold. And at the start of pandemic lockdowns in 2020, when so many Americans were anxiously rushing around to stockpile and look for masks, comfy Pepe appeared with the caption "This will be quite the show" (Keen, Crawford, and Suarez-Tangil 2020, 17). Pepe's cozy cool in the face of others' chaos and pain is one of his power moves, coming across as sociopathic and thus menacing.



**Figure 9.** A smug “comfy/cozy Pepe.”<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 10.** A reclining “comfy/cozy Pepe,” wrapped in a blanket.<sup>20</sup>

Thinking in terms of participation frameworks (Goffman 1981), Pepe’s intended audience is not only fellow right-wing radicals but also the digital sphere of aghast leftists. Upsetting them, twisting the knife in “the wounds of liberal society,” as Schmidt puts it, is part of the point. Such performances seem part of this political group’s mockery of leftist moralizing and general refusal to be shamed (Shaefer 2020; see also McIntosh 2022a on the related “Let’s Go Brandon” phenomenon).

Finally, it must be said that Pepe’s sheer irony is also part of his power. I do not disagree with Schmidt, who suggests Pepe’s “ironic denial” of bodily heroism engages in some self-“immunization” against male insecurity about the “shrinking relevance of the male warrior body” in times of automated warfare. But I also think that, beyond these psychodynamics, Pepe’s irony envisions, in part, a liberal audience, and furnishes a semiotic means of enacting power before them. The goofy memes sometimes elude

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19 “Pepe the Frog—Pepe comfy and smug,” Knowyourmeme (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2139877-pepe-the-frog>.

20 “Pepe Cozy Sticker,” Tenor (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://tenor.com/view/pepe-cozy-gif-26320870>.

clear interpretation.<sup>21</sup> Do NEETS *really* not care about conventional social rewards? Do Pepe memers really have murderous fantasies or are they sometimes just posting for “lulz” (kicks)?<sup>22</sup> A final meaning is elusive, and the winks and nudges madden the critics, broadcasting a “can’t catch me” vibe before the memer slithers away. Surely it feels like comeuppance for those liberal elites with their know-it-all attitude (McIntosh 2020). Pepe is both post-heroic *and* a new kind of hateful hero.

The radical-right warrior man is earnest and mighty, gnawing on red meat to build up his strength. The Pepe memer refuses both sincerity and muscle tone but says: I am nobody’s fool. The first type of man offers an invitation to a martial form of masculinity, while the second is too unfit and ungovernable to entertain enlisting. Between them, they offer two primary entry points to radical right-wing politics, for both delightedly parse the world into in-groups and debased, dehumanized out-groups. It is unnerving to see a proliferation of such invitations, but no doubt more options await in the seething future of the manosphere.

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21 In the world of internet analysis, the inability to tell whether someone is joking because of the widespread use of deliberate ambiguity has been dubbed “Poe’s Law.” See Emma Grey Ellis, “Can’t Take a Joke? That’s Just Poe’s Law, 2017’s Most Important Internet Phenomenon,” *Wired*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/06/poses-law-troll-cultures-central-rule/>.

22 Jordan Hoffman, “Duo behind Pepe the Frog Film Warns against Writing Off Goofy Hate Propaganda,” *Times of Israel*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/duo-behind-pepe-the-frog-film-warn-against-writing-off-goofy-hate-propaganda/>.

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