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Abstract

This chapter explores the relationship between toxic masculinity and political populism, using former cage fighter and internet personality Andrew Tate as an example. While the toxic masculinity represented by Tate does not have a straightforward relationship with contemporary strains of populism. Rather, we want to highlight a subtle net of correspondences in which certain forms of masculine performance draw upon and share common political and cultural tropes with populism, such as the popular authoritarianism, anti-elite conspiracy theories, and a free-market based conceit of individualism. The chapter suggests that these representations of masculinity assist in normalising these populist tropes, and helps weave the assumptions of populism into everyday discourse, cultivating a “banal populism”. As a way of starting a more widespread cultural analysis, this chapter looks at the role of toxic masculinity in appealing to discourses of male marginalisation in a manner that reproduces a populist frame.

From populism to banal populism

In this chapter, we explore the relationship between toxic masculinity and political populism. The rise of social media since 2008 has seen people such as Jordan Petersen and Andrew Tate achieve huge popularity with certain groups. Particularly in the case of Tate, the focus of this chapter, toxic masculinity has become part of his branding, with Tate’s controversial views broadcast on social media under punning titles such as “Tate Speech”. The last two decades have also borne witness to a rise in political populism, with a pattern set by Berlusconi in Italy takes form in the US with Donald Trump. In referring to populism, we mean a political grammar that sets the interests of ordinary people against those of an inherently corrupt and self-serving governing elite (Canovan, 1981). However, in a manner that has extended its power and scope, these decades have also seen populism articulated within an environment of almost constant mediation, and the rise of forms of representation geared towards social media representation and comment (Higgins, 2017). The success of characters like Trump has rested on their ability, or shamelessness, in using media to offer themselves as the representatives of this hitherto neglected public interest (Higgins, 2019). The ease with which a succession of political chameleons have been able to slip into populist clothing

should come as little surprise, given that, as Mudde (2004) observes, any political purpose is subsumed by a deeper grammar shared indignance around a “thin centred ideology”.

Higgins (2016), Moffitt (2016) and others have argued that populism has diminished political discussion, and adjusted the calibre and qualifications of those who come to prominence in public life. This goes beyond even the notion that the move to populist politics admits insubstantial political actors, committed solely to a style of rhetoric and performance. Indeed, a populist rhetoric gives an advantage to those most adept in producing the required iterations of authenticity and ordinariness. Moreover, the grammar of populism can be said to infiltrate a variety of realms of popular culture, informing and guiding the articulations of culture and power. However, we want to suggest that this extension of populism into everyday discourse, and their articulation with gendered performance and neo-liberal tropes, has wide-ranging implications. In previous decades, Hall (1988) described these internalised conservative ideals of individual power and judgement as “authoritarian populism”, expressed as a shared commitment to law and order. We suggest that this is now fuelled by the everyday acceptance of a populist grammar into popular culture: the development of a “banal populism”. This is a situation in which the grammar of populism has moved out of the overtly performative and persuasive discourses of politics, and enters into what Gramsci (1971) refers to as the guiding “common sense” of daily life. That is, this refers to a form of a populism that is woven into the everyday expression of power and self worth, in particular in its association with particular assertions of male power.

Gender politics and the rise of divisive masculinity

With few exceptions (cf. Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2014), populist leadership has tended to be animated by particular representations of masculine power. This dominance of the masculine, as it is reasserted against shifts towards gender equality, has implications for the aggressive tenor of politics more broadly. Post’s (2009) taxonomy of “hate speech” is useful here in distinguishing gratuitous political aggression from necessary and mutually-worthwhile political dispute. Whereas political argument assumes a shared commitment to a common good, hate speech denies this “reciprocity between individual identity and the cultural identity of a community” (Post, 2009: 129). If competing material and ideological interests cleave political divisions, performances of masculinity play a substantial part in maintaining them. Within the political realm, a substantial body of scholarship is gathering on the rise and power of the toxic male in political leadership (Smith and Higgins, 2020). While both Trump and, in the UK context, Boris Johnson have departed office, their extreme manner of conduct and capacity to disregard convention and decorousness enables them to continue to project powerful and disruptive political voices from the margins and to influence future political actors.

Despite half a century of campaigns relating to language and gender stereotypes, including increasing equality of legal rights as well as in employment and educational opportunities, the normative expectations around gender stereotypes sustain. Where women are expected to be caring, emotional and passive, men are deemed to be assertive, unemotional, powerful and

competitive. Those failing to meet these stereotypes are open to criticism and, particularly in the case of men, ridicule. However, the rise of Fourth Wave Feminism and the MeToo movement (Banet-Weiser, 2019) has seen renewed calls for action against gender-based violence. Fourth Wave Feminism's foundational motivation was that much sexism remained (Gill, 2011), and in 2011 Laura Bates started the Everyday Sexism blog then Twitter account to collect stories of the everyday forms of sexism and misogyny she and other women experienced, something Cameron (2024) later refers to as "banal sexism". On social media in particular, MeToo started with a blog posting by Tarana Burke in 2006 but only gained global prominence in 2017 when Alyssa Milano deployed the phrase as a hashtag (cf Boyle, 2019).

But while social media's positive impact on feminism has been substantial, there has been a corresponding rise of an online "manosphere" (Chambers and Smith, 2023). This comprises a cluster of websites and forums that offer men a refuge from gender equality. They tend to be populated by men defining themselves variously as "men's rights activists" (MRAs); "incels" (involuntary celibates, men deprived of ready access to sex because of women's rights); "pick-up artists" (PUAs). Across all, an "anti-establishment" thread is revealed in their claimed moniker "red pillers" (taken from the film *The Matrix*, where those who take the red pill are able to see the world as it really is) (Bates, 2020; Cameron, 2024). This manosphere is frequently a gateway to online radicalisation, geared towards re-establishing the so-called rightful dominance of men. Often too, there are links and common cause with white supremacists and neo-Nazism, as well as extreme acts of real world violence, such as in 2018 in Toronto where Alec Minassian drove a van into a group of (predominantly young female) pedestrians in a self-declared act of war against feminists.

Toxic masculinity and keeping it real

Throughout the chapter, we return to the term "toxic masculinity" as a means of describing these particular ways of framing and enacting contemporary manhood. The term is not without its problems, and Harrington (2021) argues that toxic masculinity has been used to target and define marginalised groups of men in particular. Accordingly, Harrington (2021) suggests, forms of male misbehaviour are more prone to identification and stigmatisation when they are associated with working class and ethnic minority cultures. Thus, while toxic masculinity may succeed in identifying problematic behaviour and attitudes, its uneven application stresses these behaviours lower on the socio-economic scale, leaving similar male conduct amongst establishment and elite groups remains unremarked.

Yet, as we will go on to see, these are the very associations that make toxic masculinity a useful performative resource for populist actors, marking the ordinariness and non-political "bad behaviour" (Moffitt, 2016) that establishes non-conformity from the political elite. These marginalised associations of toxic masculinity lend the associated forms of behaviour a particular discursive purchase. While many have looked at aggressive masculinity at the top of the political elites, these forms of behaviour are often a tactic for elite figures to present themselves as edgy, marginal and relatable. Thus, when Donald Trump was required to defend off-script boasts of "grabbing [women] by the pussy", this was excused as "locker room talk" undertaken amongst men

in the private realm. Toxicity is thereby represented as a glimpse of manhood in its authentic and unvarnished form, evidencing what Adorno (1973: 64) describes as the “man who is said to be wonderful because he is nothing but man”. Crucially, similar associations are available to those wishing to assert marginal, even renegade, identities from across the political and social spectrum. The example we go on to look at offers an assertion of masculine power from a working-class position, articulated with political claims similar to those of the populist right: suspicion of legal authority, individual power measured by access to material wealth and women.

Power through misogyny

We have remarked that one of the performative markers of these forms of masculinity is an overt antipathy for women. In Trump’s case, this extends even beyond the backstage “locker room” talk referred to above, to include an added gendered twist to the former US president’s repertoire of insulting nicknames for rivals, including using his Twitter account to call a former woman employee a “dog” (Isfahani-Hammond, 2019).

However, while the concept of misogyny is often characterised as “hating women”, it is much more nuanced and far more complicated than this. The definition here calls on the work of Manne (2018), who describes misogyny as the “enforcement arm” of patriarchy, and suggests that its defining feature is not hatred of women but rather the punishment of women who deviate from perceived patriarchal norms. Cameron (2024: 126) suggests this allows for a more inclusive application, seeing “discourse as misogynist if it displays any of the central features mentioned in any current definition (i.e., if it expresses strong prejudice, contempt, hatred, or the desire/intention to punish)”.

This is the form of misogyny that prevails in the manosphere: where the toxic masculinity of the online communities and forums challenges the equalities seen elsewhere. In turn, the attempts to ban the misogyny and hate speech of Tate (see below) and other influencers from various social media channels is largely unsuccessful, as the content they generate elsewhere on the web is shared and amplified by their followers.

Andrew Tate: a moral panic for contemporary masculinity

We now look at the example of Andrew Tate in detail. Tate originally enjoyed some measure of prominence as a professional kickboxer, winning several titles and adopting the nickname “King Cobra”. Further public prominence came with his appearance on the seventeenth edition of the reality TV show *Big Brother* in 2016. While the ratings and popularity of the *Big Brother* franchise were on the wane by this point, Tate’s participation excited controversy when news outlets obtained pornographic footage that included him beating a woman with a belt. Even while claiming the encounter to be “consensual”, Tate’s self-presentation in the programme publicity, allied with the footage and response, was extreme enough to warrant tabloid notoriety and expulsion from the *Big Brother* production.

Tate subsequently developed a celebrity persona that exploited the outwardly negative associations of the *Big Brother* removal. Using access to social media platforms, Tate grew a substantial online following where he built a highly lucrative business from generating engagement and attracting

advertising revenue. This has included comment on politics and current affairs. This following extract from Tate's webcast demonstrates a naïvely expressed populism, combining claims that power rests above democratic accountability with a reading of political power as raw machismo:

Extract 1. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/ApCofAx8Xlo>

Putin (.) said (.) himself (.) the President has people above him telling what to do (.) Putin said this in an interview (.) they said what do you think of Trump (..) he said I've been through three US presidents (.) and they all have amazing ideas (.) the ideas don't get implemented because people don't understand how strong the bureaucracy of America is (.) when the people with the dark suits arrive (.) and explain to him how things are really done (.) his ideas will not come to fruition

The first remarkable aspect of this extract is the distribution of voice and credibility, and its associations with hyper-masculine leadership and hints towards the world of *The Matrix* in his reference to "the dark suits". The figure accorded the greatest amount of credibility is Russian president Vladimir Putin. That Tate values Putin as an arbiter of the worth of political leaders was also apparent in his response to a clip purporting to show Putin snubbing French president Macron's handshake "in front of his wife". While the clip was quickly found to be edited (Putin, in fact, shook Macron's hand first), Tate's "Top P" response leaps on and sustains discourses of symbolic male exchange over any subtleties of statecraft.

Although we will discuss some prevailing assumptions later, the content Tate generated and encouraged his followers to emulate was largely a rehearsal of violent, hateful and dehumanising material, often highlighting his self-proclaimed misogyny. For example, in one much-discussed clip Tate appears holding a machete and boasts of what he would do if a woman accused him of cheating: "It's bang out the machete, boom in her face and grip her by the neck. Shut up bitch. That's how it goes. Slap slap, grab, choke, shut up". The violence, both physical and verbal, shows Tate's toxic masculinity in the extreme. Using its weapons, physical power and dehumanising of the woman in question as "bitch", he is both performing his own hypermasculinity and repositioning women in their traditional stereotypical role as passive and silent. Tate, however is not alone in promoting this vision of misogyny in the manosphere, as Cameron has pointed out:

The popular narrative of "radicalization" implies that the activities of influencers like Tate are the root of the current problem: either they are turning "normal" boys and young men into raging misogynists, or they are deliberately targeting a subset of men who are vulnerable to being radicalized because of their personal insecurities (incels) or their immaturity and gullibility (Andrew Tate's teenage fans). But while there may be some truth in these observations, it's hard to believe they are the whole story. They imply that misogyny itself is an extreme attitude, as obscure and alien to most people as conspiracy theories which posit that the world is ruled by giant lizards. But in fact the misogynist ideologies promoted in the manosphere build on attitudes, beliefs and practices which are

not obscure and alien, but on the contrary, ordinary and unremarkable. (Cameron, 2024: 133)

In Cameron’s view, it is the ordinariness of misogyny that draws young men into the expressive universe of men such as Tate. From Tate’s perspective, maintaining this involves the sustained performance of a particular kind of public face: in his own webcasts, in media interviews and media talk. Reviewing a documentary by former Vice Media journalist Matt Shea, from which extracts are given below, Dawson (2023) describes Tate as a messianic figure, training impressionable young men to pick up women and groom them into “online sex work”. In 2023, the activities that Tate had become associated with and the forms of masculinity he projected took a more disturbing turn when he was arrested and detained on suspicion of human trafficking in Romania, with accusations centring on the treatment of young women.

The neo-liberalisation of the relationship

We saw from his reaction to Macron’s “refused” handshake that Tate presents interpersonal exchange as a battleground for masculine dominance. An important basis for this treatment of women, one that feeds into a broader neo-liberal narrative around individual male accomplishment, is the monetisation of women and relationships. We begin with an extract from this documentary where Tate (AT) and Shea (MS) discuss the basis for the allegation while apparently playing chess.

Extract 2

MS	Did you at one time say that the girls who start as your girlfriend and then work for the webcam industry (.) one hundred per cent of the profits go to you?	1 2 3
AT	I think in a lot of households in the world today (.) the man is in charge of the investments (.) that’s not an uncommon thing (.) tell me a view you have that you think is genuinely insulting or destructive to society (.) I would like to hear it	4 5 6 7
MS	You prefer y. younger women who are eighteen or nineteen (.) because you can leave an imprint on them	8 9
AT	N. no what I say when I leave an imprint I mean that (1) th. Hhhh I understand what you are trying to say (.) like (.) if I get her I can kinda brainwash her I’m not trying to say that (.) if you meet a girl who’s twenty two and you are her second boyfriend (.) she’s probably like a nicer person (.) less jaded (.) less upset (.) less suspicious	10 11 12 13 14
MS	So you like to be in a position of power	15
AT	It’s not being in a position of power (.) it’s about I enjoy to show her amazing things (.) you’re trying to attach things to the situation which which aren’t true	16 17 18
MS	Five years ago you said rape is a terrible thing but if you put yourself in a position to be raped (.) then (.) you should bear some responsibility for that	19 20
AT	Okay so first (.) we agree that rape is a terrible thing (.) the point I am trying to make is that the best way to prevent yourself from being raped is to have a	21 22

	degree of personal responsibility and not put yourself in positions to be raped	23
	(.) as opposed to standing there saying that (.) rape shouldn't happen	24
	because (.) or men (.) raise our boys better (.) you know what else shouldn't	25
	happen (.) robbery (.) I want the freedom to walk down the street with a	26
	million dollars in cash	27
MS	Is it fair to compare the desire to walk around with a million dollars in cash to	28
	(.) someone wanting to just walk around their own city at night	29
AT	Well (.) f. female beauty is extremely valuable	30
MS	[voice over] Of course female beauty is extremely valuable (.) in the eyes of	31
	men who seek to exploit it	32
AT	[cut to video of Tate in a car talking to camera]	33
	I don't give a shit about having sex with beautiful women (.) I fuck them so	34
	they listen to me (.) so I can get what I actually want (.) which is not them (.)	35
	it's a means to an end (.) every single Bond girl was exploited (.) that's exactly	36
	what I do	37
MS	Have you heard the term (.) lover boy before	38
AT	The lover boy method?	39
MS	Yeah (.) romantically involving yourself with a woman and then making	40
	money off of her in some sort of (.) sex-adjacent industry	41
AT	Firstly I would call the webcam industry far closer to (.) psychology than to sex	42
	(.) the webcam industry has prevented more male suicides than any group f.	43
	of therapists (.) or charity ever would (.) right?	44
	Is that true (.) h. how can you measure that?	45
MS	Well i. it's not about measuring it's about my personal experience	46
AT	One of the concerns that people have about the method	47
MS	Okay let me let me correct you (.) because I'm a professional	48
AT	Is that it's similar to (.) or people might consider that a form of grooming	49
	Okay so I'm a professional (.) so I have to conf conf I have to change what you	50
	just said (.) I have to at least I have to I have to challenge you on it (.)	51
	nobody's concerned by anything that happened ten years ago when a bunch	52
	of girls got rich (.) there's not a single female complaining	53
MS	Do you think there's not a single female complaining	54
AT	No no have you seen one (.) tell me	55

The discussion in this extract begins with Shea offering to outline Tate's behaviour: the basis of charges against him for sex trafficking. Tate's response is to reframe this exploitation as an issue of gender-based power, articulated in a register of finance and global social benefit. Of course, such gender-based power places men in a more dominant position. That is what Shea picks up on, particularly in relation to Tate's predilection for younger women, which again Tate reframes as behaviour that benefits the wider social realm (implicitly men), through his moulding of young women into compliant and submissive girlfriends (line 13).

Shea then shifts to an accusatory footing, using the strategy of ventriloquising Tate's seeming viewpoint (line 19). Tate's response once more is not to deny this, but to draw on the victim-blaming narrative. He explicitly relates this to a need for women to change behaviour in order to avoid rape, rather than making any intervention to prevent men from becoming the potential

rapists. Tate retreats to a metaphor citing the supposed foolishness of walking down a street carrying a huge amount of cash. Shea immediately picks up on a metaphor that again equates women with finance, which Tate doubles down on with the claimed truism that “female beauty is extremely valuable” (line 30).

As this point, the documentary cuts to a self-filmed video of Tate sitting in a luxurious car and talking to camera. Here, Shea’s allegations are lent substance by Tate, where he explicitly states that he uses women and sex as status symbols, with women as commodities to be used to enhance the particular brand of toxic masculinity that he aspires to (and here he draws on the outdated, sexist ‘Bond girl’ trope that the Bond franchise has sought to move away from since the 1980s).

This short video section shows us a contrast between Tate’s apparently more rational, if misogynistic, approach when talking to Shea, and the more overt, aggressive approach he has when addressing his followers on social media. This exemplifies a shift from what Goffman (1967) would refer to as the “frontstage” performance of the interview itself to a performed version of the “backstage” that is his social media face. Yet, this is arguably a subversion of the frontstage/backstage dichotomy, as what Tate’s tailored “backstage” performance lends authenticity his “frontstage” public persona, with none of the amelioration that the “frontstage” interview with Shea exhibits. Conduct appropriate to each “stage”, dependent on context and audience and whether there is a requirement to defend or merely exhibit toxicity.

The documentary then cuts back to the conversation between Tate and Shea, gilded with the intellectual pretences of the chess board. Shea refers to “lover boys” (line 38), which is a development of the pick-up artist (PUAs), where included is the intent to exploit a woman sexually for financial gain. Tate’s response is again to reframe this as less about female exploitation than the needs of men, in this instance the prevention of male suicide. In a hint of the neo-liberal obligation to succeed we will discuss more below, Tate responds to a subsequent challenge by Shea by reengaging the monetisation lexicon, claiming the obligations of the “professional” (line 48).

This section of the documentary finishes with Tate volunteering more details of an implied specific case “ten years ago”, challenging Shea to find any women has complained about this misogynistic treatment since. There have been several cases of investigative journalism which have explored Tate’s controversial behaviour, most of which include evidence from his female victims (such as BBC Radio 4’s File on Four report, “Living with Andrew Tate”, broadcast in February 2023). Tate, however, refuses to accept that any woman could have cause to complain, again using a financial reframing (“a bunch of girls got rich”) to mask this exploitation.

Foregrounding misogyny as performance

Our discussion of front and back stage reveals the care with which Tate manages his persona, and the role of performance in this. The following extract is again revealing in the manner that Tate sets out the terms of his public persona, using recognisable misogynistic tropes and a particular uses and appropriations of hate speech. This extract is from Shea’s recording of Tate’s “Emergency Meeting

Live” podcast, a videoed talk show that would be broadcast live on Facebook then made available to view on Tate’s YouTube channel. The extract includes with occasional interventions from Tate’s brother Tristan (TT). The episode title of the podcast – Emergency Meeting – adds to the drama and exceptionality of Tate’s persona, rising above the “normal” world. The extract is taken from a break in the podcast, where the recording continues for the purpose of Shea’s documentary:

Extract 3.

VO	During an ad break (.) Andrew breaks character	1
AT	[quiet and calm] thirty second break (.) chatting shit (.) another five minutes	2
	and we’ll get you out (.) you can talk shit back (.) you can annoy us if you	3
	want	4
MS	Don’t worry I know (.) I’m just not very good at talking shit	5
AT	[laughs] we’ve had a long career to do our normal broadcasting	6
MS	Okay	7
AT	Kick him off the pod	8
MS	Cool man (.) have fun you guys yeah [MS leaves studio with his camera	9
	crew]	10
TT	[back on air] Bro this is going to be the worst documentary (.) about us ever	11
		12

Here, the shift from the “frontstage” performance of the podcast itself to the “backstage” informal meta-chat on the norms of the podcast are marked by the transitional phrase from Tate “thirty second break” (line 3), and accompanied by a loosening of the frenetic tone of the podcast itself. This meta-chat foregrounds the performative quality of the podcast, with repeated formulations of the requirement to “talk shit” (lines 2 and 3). This draws upon the popular lexicon of “shit talking”, in producing offensive talk for banter and spectacle. To this, Shea offers the mock concession that he is unpractised in these performative arts (“I’m just not very good at talking shit”). As well as a declaration of offensive intent, this also offers a particular relationship with truth – “talking shit” also means to lie – which at once emphasises the pretence behind the podcast’s style, and challenges journalist Shea to disavow his professional commitment to truth.

In this following extract, we see that Shea temporarily concedes the “talking shit” request and playing along with a frivolous conceit of Andrew and Tristan Tate’s that Shea used the guise of being a folk singer to inveigle his way onto the podcast. The extract starts with Tate apparently accepting Shea’s true identity as that of an investigative reporter for Vice magazine:

Extract 4.

AT	Right let’s be nice to our Vice friend (.) Let’s be nice to him before he does a	1
	hit piece on me	2
MS	Is this ***	3
TT	This is definitely a hit piece (.) I warned my brother that this is is a set-	4
	up but I **	5

AT	I DON'T CARE! I'M UNINTERESTED	6
MS	***	7
AT	I've clearly conquered the internet (.) I am clearly unstoppable (.) I'm like the Borg	8 9
TT	You invited the liberal news media to come in **	10
AT	They can all come (.) just because I'm wearing a gun [stands up to show gun in shorts] I'm violent (.) is that how it is (.) just cause I've got knives all over the table [close-up of knife] and I'm a world champion I'm violent	11 12 13
MS	If you are wearing a gun and you have knives (.) that does make you a little bit violent	14 15
AT	It makes no it doesn't no it doesn't	16
MS	Is security aware	17
AT	SING A SONG	18

This turn upsets the convivial tone that had prevailed to that point. The investigative journalist necessitates a change of footing on the part of Tate (AT) from the position of host to a stance that is defensive and hostile to the interloper. This occasions a spell of management of self from Tate. The first part of this is to re-establish his dominance in the exchange by expressing his contentment that a hostile member of the media – characterised by TT as “the liberal news media” – is a participant in the discussion. This begins with a seeming refusal to alter his conduct to account for the oversight of a mainstream journalist (“I don't care, I'm not interested”). This disavowal of accountability is followed by a rhetorically exaggerated description of his media influence (“I've clearly conquered the internet I am clearly unstoppable I'm like the Borg”), offering an intertextual reference to cult Star Trek characters that share Tate's preferred traits of emotionless villainy.

This is immediately followed by a moment of seeming image repair, where Tate draws attention to component of himself that would encourage the documentary maker's negative perception (Tate's possession of a gun and knife) to offer an alternative gloss of non-violence (“no it doesn't”). Although clearly an opportunity for Tate to draw attention to his armoury, even in Shea's documentary, editing at this point shows knives and swords strewn on tables in various locations around the Tate mansion, highlighting the hints of excessive violence that Tate is demonstrating here in his own personal attire. It is interesting here too that Shea joins in, rearticulating the overt violence of Tate's image as being “security aware”, a comment that shows his own lack of engagement with violence and confrontation. Tate's response is to change topic, issuing the bald, on-record directive “sing a song” to reinstate the initial pretence of Shea's folk singer “disguise”.

However, this combination of the nuancing and mitigation of image, and the rehearsal of a front stage demeanour of overt masculinity reaches its expressive culmination in this following extract:

Extract 5.

TT	[back on air] Bro this is going to be the worst documentary (.) about us ever	1
AT	What are they going to say	2
TT	I don't know	3

AT	He has lots of cars and money (.) all the women love him (.) he's sexist (.)	4
	[mock horror] oh no (.) please don't put that on the internet (.) who cares	5
	right (.) whatever	6
VO	[MS in dressing room looking at phone] Within minutes of being on their	7
	show (.) the Tate content machine snaps into action	8
MS	Oh yeah (.) wow (1) [scrolls through social media] already? [extracts of	9
	Tate's podcast with MS play] [reads] Tate brothers embarrass Vice reporter	10
	[audio] I take that back (.) I want to make sure that my army is fighting (.)	11
	you know (.) ethically and [reads] eighteen thousand likes (.) two hundred	12
	and forty six comments (.) sixty six re-shares (.) oh I accidentally liked it (1)	13
	let's see what people are saying [reads] Tate win as always (.) I'm impressed	14
	how easily he runs over weak men's arguments (.)	15
VO	It isn't Tate posting all these videos (.) so who are all these people	16
MS	[reads] Tate brothers embarrass Vice reporter (.) was posted by a fan	17
	account that has fifty eight thousand followers and three point nine million	18
	likes (.) and it's just posting loads of videos every single day (.) right in the	19
	description of his account it says (.) looking to level up your life? (.) start	20
	here (.) it's a sign-up link to the Hustler's University (.) another account (.)	21
	and again (.) a link to the Hustler's University (.) he's got a clever formula	22
	here	23

Here, we see Tate continue to externalise his front stage image, by ventriloquising the imagined line of the documentary: a preposterously sympathetic account of Tate's wealth and attractiveness, which then produces a gesture of mock horror. With the mainstream media's portrayal of Tate as being sexist, we see him here directly addressing that, by collocating it with the "all the women love him", ventriloquising the voices of his followers – "who cares, right".

Freed from the confines of the interview studio, Shea is seen scrolling through the social media relating to Tate. We see extracts of the show have already been edited and uploaded to YouTube, Facebook and other forms of social media, where they have garnered thousands of comments in a short space of time that Shea articulates as being "within minutes" of him leaving the studio. We see the fruits of Tate's weaponisation of the unexpected provision of an interloper, as Tate's social media followers set about giving dominance to the interpretation that Tate emerges from the exchange triumphant. Shea is represented as a "weak man" who has not stood up to the argumentative Tate brothers, who has been "embarrassed" by the hypermasculinity of the brothers, and who has lost a battle of wits against them. Thus, we see the comments are entirely in keeping with the persona of toxic masculinity that Tate has fostered, where his confrontational persona is held up as a model of ideal manhood.

Two men outside the Matrix: politicising toxic masculinity

We have so far established that Tate cultivates and projects a hyper-masculine image, and that even his management of front and back stage personas are designed to protect his self-perceived aura of wealth and sexual success. In this section and the next, we want to explore the political component

of this image, with particular reference to neo-liberalism and populism. These sections draw mainly on an interview Tate conducted with Tucker Carlson in July 2023, in which Tate is offered the chance to account for his arrest and his behaviour. In contrast to the example above, Carlson is a commentator and presenter associated with the right wing of US politics, and is broadly in sympathy with Tate's politics and persona. The interview also appears on Carlson's social media based production *Tucker on Twitter/X*, after Carlson had been dismissed by broadcaster Fox News in April 2023.

Extract 6.

AT	And another thing I also preach and this is another thing that's very important (..) I also think as a man (..) cos life as a man is pain and suffering and when I say that cos (..) you're never gonna be a good man or good at being a man <u>without</u> the pain and suffering (..) you're gonna have to go through a bunch of cr of shit (..) and have a terrible life to become a good man (..) I think you should embrace that and <u>accept</u> it (..) an I think that the c the correct mental model for men to have is a degree of stoicism and not to be too <u>concerned</u> with even how <u>they feel</u> (..) if I woke up today happy (..) if I woke up today <u>happy</u> I would have done this interview with you (..) if I woke up today <u>sad</u> (..) I would've done this interview with you (...) what's the difference? (..) why put so much importance on my emotions if it certain things must be done? (..) I must work I must train (..) I must see Tucker Carlson	
TC	(.) I must resist the matrix	
AT	=You've got duties	
	=I'VE GOT THINGS TO DO (..) SO WHY ARE WE GONNA SIT AROUND AND TALK ABOUT HOW I FEEL IF IT DOESN'T EVEN EFFECT HOW I ACT? (...) AND AS A MAN IT SHOULDN'T (..) BECAUSE THERE'S TOO MUCH TO DO (..) AND UH THE MASCULINE WORLD IS HYPER-COMPETITIVE (..) this is another thing most people don't understand	
TC	=they don't believe you	
AT	It's hyper-competitive out here (..) all the women want few men at the top (..) the Ferrari (..) you don't want the Ferrari to drive fast (..) you want the Ferrari because other men want the Ferrari and can't have one (...) it's hyper competitive so if you're competing against every other man for every dollar you make (..) every girl you see the house you live in the car you drive the life you live (...) you're not gonna be (..) able to compete with the person who performs regardless of how they <i>feel</i> (..) if you <u>only</u> compete when you feel like competing (..) right? Cos there's men like me out there (..) who will be sad every day and outcompete you regardless (..) I don't care how I feel (..) I will still win (...) and that's the kind of mindset you need to adopt (..) so I don't c when a man comes	
TC	=You've got a job to do stop whining (..) go to work	
AT	COMPLETELY	
TC	I agree	
AT	COMPLETELY	
TC	Yeah	
AT		

	So when men say oh but I don't I feel sad (.) WHO CARES? (..) THE WORLD DOESN'T CARE (..) ALL THE MEN WHO'RE OUT HERE TO DESTROY YOU AND TAKE YOUR GIRL DON'T CARE (.) SO WHY DO WHY DO YOU CARE?	
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1.07

In this extract we can begin to see the articulation of Tate's performance of masculinity with neo-liberal individualism. This has two main qualities. The first is the masculine obligation to work and to provide. This is expressed, first of all, as an expression of individual responsibility ("you're gonna have to go through a bunch of cr of shit (.) and have a terrible life to become a good man (..) I think you should embrace that and accept it"). It is also interesting to note here that Tate's self-correction ("a bunch of cr of shit") would appear to be a shift from "crap" to a more taboo scatological term, an act that would enhance his rebellious persona. Second, this is situated with a competitive realm, in which success and possession of women is under constant threat from other men ("It's hyper-competitive out here (.) all the women want few men at the top (..) the Ferrari (.) you don't want the Ferrari to drive fast (.) you want the Ferrari because other men want the Ferrari and can't have one"). The second is the refusal of emotionality as a mitigating factor against success or achievement ("So when men say oh but I don't I feel sad (.) WHO CARES? (..) THE WORLD DOESN'T CARE (..) ALL THE MEN WHO'RE OUT HERE TO DESTROY YOU AND TAKE YOUR GIRL DON'T CARE (.) SO WHY DO WHY DO YOU CARE?"). As with the image of the Borg in the Shea documentary, the ideal male figure is one who does not express emotion, which would be seen as a female and therefore weak aspect of someone's personality. The male stereotype of competitiveness that we also saw in the Shea documentary is more clearly articulated here, with the material attributes of male success being listed as cars, houses, and women. Women are seen as possessions, something that very clearly links to Tate's objectification of women we see elsewhere: one of a number of assets necessary to display masculine success and prowess.

Henderson (2023) argues that this political dimension and focus on individualist values positions Tate as a creature of "conservative" rather than toxic masculinity. The rationale for this is primarily that Tate displays qualities and offers a cultural contribution that is coincidental with the beliefs and mores of the political right. In broad terms, Tate contributes to a division of knowledge and practice, loosely based on a traditional perspective of gender relations and an unabashed emphasis on the power of wealth. However, our analysis shows that these political ends are pursued using a repertoire informed by misogyny and the refusal of emotional empathy and those notions of common cause that underpin conventional notions of conservatism.

Indeed, Tate's derogation of emotion can be seen in parallel with the inflation of emotionality in formal political discourse (Richards, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). From this perspective, this amounts to a refusal of contemporary institutional politics, with all of its sensitivities and nuances. While it is not until later in the interview that the political establishment is singled out, the extract ends with a shouted reminder that this individual responsibility is obliged to engage with the contrary and competing interests of others. We can also see Carlson playing along with this, "a job to do to stop whining", whilst also resisting the dominant strategies of authority, glossed here as "the matrix" (whilst also reflecting the cult film *The Matrix*, which we established earlier as being integral to certain constructions of masculinity in the manosphere).

Political affiliation and redefining hate

While Tate represents a form of defensive individualism, and entangles this with his notion of masculinity, we have yet to establish this within an explicitly political setting that links with Tate’s pronouncements on the manly merits of politicians. In this extract, Tate refers to the contribution of Trump to his proposed developments in masculine attitudes. As the extract concludes, we can see the innate hostility that informs Tate’s use of hate speech, and its articulation with the grammar of populism:

Extract 7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6uLkUnEvNM> 1.42

AT	I <u>do like</u> to believe though we are entering a new stage of consciousness (.) I do like to believe at least from ten to fifteen years ago more people are s (.) I think COVID woke <u>some</u> people up (..) I do like to believe that MSM credibility is tanking in real time (..) Trump helped massively (..) <u>fake</u> news (...) two words (..) <u>before Trump</u> when did you ever hear fake news? (.) I didn’t really hear it that often	
TC		= Nah
AT	Fake news (.) fake news (.) fake news (...) and he did a fantastic job in that he’s starting to wake people up (.) so (..) I’d like to believe there’s a degree of us winning but (..) I just wanna make it very clear to the people who <u>attack me</u> and the people who attack anybody who stands up for what they believe in (.) a lot of their virtue [enacts scare quotes] <u>their virtue</u> (.) their virtue signalling is just hate peddling (..) and when they <u>can’t</u> call you unsuccessful and they can’t call you stupid (.) they have to find a way to hurt you and the only way they can do that is to say you’re a bad person	
TC	I’ve noticed (..) I’ve noticed	
AT	Inaudible	
TC	Yes <u>YES I HAVE</u>	

This passage establishes the political common ground to define those sympathetic with Tate and Carlson’s world. Items from the lexicon of contemporary populist conspiracy advocates are here in quantity: from the pseudo-mysticism of “a new state of consciousness” to the hostile acronym “MSM” for mainstream, established media institutions and platforms. And significant former-US president Donald Trump is cited as an agent of this new popular enlightenment. Indeed, so significant is the in-language that Tate makes the claim that Trump initiated the term “fake news”, when the more informed analysis would be that Trump has misused and redefined an existing term for his own purposes. Tate’s repetition of this phrase as a three-part list ensures it anchors his subsequent utterance as standing for truth. The sardonic reference to “virtue” is amplified through repetition and the gesturing of scare quotes, before its modification to the in-group phrase “virtue signalling”. “Virtue signalling” is Tate’s gloss for anti-racist, anti-sexist sentiments. This asserts a contradiction between performative display and intention in the part of Tate’s enemies, such that

the appearance of common regard is presented in bad faith. This immediately develops into a far more significant form of hypocrisy, where their expression of this virtue is converted into the currency of “hate”. As we have seen in the other transcripts here, there is an underlying sense of masculine competitiveness, with Tate representing himself as being under attack. These activities of hatefulness are externalised through repeated references to “them” – defined at one point as “the people who attack me” – though their opposition to Tate’s political in-group is emphasised in Carlson’s response “I’ve noticed, I’ve noticed” and exclamation “YES I HAVE” in a knowing and echo-chamber tailored reference to his own perceived “cancellation” from his show on Fox News. Thus, both collude in a shared idea of a political culture based on antagonism and confrontation, and exploit this as a media spectacle (Higgins and Smith, 2016), but present themselves and other ambitious men as the victims of this aggression.

Conclusion

In a telling remark, Rodger (1981) points out that as soon as popular political tropes gather a recognisable association with mainstream political culture, they become unusable “debased currency”. This is a particular challenge for populist rhetoric, defined by its distance from political norms. On the one hand, this presents an obligation to populism to remain one step ahead of the representational norms of the political culture it pretends to attack, leading to an inflation of non-conventionality and outrage. This goes some way to explaining the sustained attention gathered by populist figures such as Trump, and places their apparent unabashed shamelessness in a pragmatic context. On the other hand, the norms of populism might be integrated into and sustain in the discursive norms of everyday culture and judgement. This second possibility is what we refer to as “banal populism”. This speaks to an everyday culture that has internalised the confrontational, anti-elite instincts of populism, and potentially elevates populism beyond the formal political sphere to the lifeworld within which politics is considered and interpreted.

The potential of toxic masculinity for party politics has already excited attention. Grant and MacDonald (2019) describe the prominence of toxic masculinity amongst the “alt right” as a vehicle for expressing exclusionary political views and mitigating the individual “insecurities” of disenfranchised political activists (Grant and MacDonald, 2019: 378). Even in institutional politics, Daddow and Hertner (2019) find that parties of the populist right exploit the exclusionary grammar of toxic masculinity, and direct it to the contours of their own political agendas, inflaming racial as well as gendered divisions. We want to argue that Tate is more complex than this and want to show that a populist reading of Tate reveals his representativeness of masculinity as a means to establish a marketable persona, as well as his foregrounding of a form of language that appeals to non-institutional forms of power and wealth. Tate inhabits a world where women are mute possessions to be won, punished, or exploited, in a manner that has become articulated with a populist grammar. This not only diminishes the standing of public discourse and women with that, but joins this with a political attitude that undermines the institutional and cultural power of progressive government.

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