

Who Am I?

Men, power, and the search for a new self

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For the whole of recorded history, being a man came with power. This paper traces the erosion of that power, and the man's search for a new self.

In western society, men, throughout time, have stood above women, and the substance of that standing was power. A man's power did not issue from a single source. It was assembled from four. He guarded his family against harm, provided for them, judged what was best for them, and was necessary to continue the lineage. In each of these a woman and her children depended upon him. These were privileges society awarded him. They were needs, and he was the one who met them.

No single one of these would have raised men above women. Strength alone commands only where force decides. Earnings alone purchase comfort but not deference. Knowledge alone, without the means to act upon it, persuades no one. What elevated him was not any one advantage but the gathering of all of them in a single person. The four roles did not merely add together, they compounded, each lending the others weight, until what they produced together was greater than their sum. It delivered leverage over the woman and the family that no single role could have yielded alone. That leverage was his position, and it held because she needed him across the whole of life.

No man arrived at this position by earning it. He inherited it, and he inherited it without instruction. He watched his father hold it and his uncles and the men who taught him and the men on the silver screen, and he learned, before he was able to question it, that this was simply how the world was arranged. He stepped into the place prepared for him as into the natural order of things. There was nothing in it to resist, for a position that feels like nature does not announce itself as a claim. That it was agreeable to occupy made it only the more invisible.

The roles were never merely tasks a man performed. Each was a pillar beneath his sense of who he was, his worth in his own eyes, and his rank in the eyes of others, and together they answered a question he was never obliged to ask aloud. He was the leader. What follows traces how each role has been diminished or removed, and what becomes of a man when the structure he upholds comes down. This is an account, not a verdict. It is one reading of how men of a particular time and place arrived at their present unease, offered by someone who has watched the change and lived a part of it, and claims no certainty about where the change will end.

A Limited Scope

What follows is drawn from a particular vantage, the United States, an advanced economy, and the Anglo-Saxon legal and cultural inheritance that shaped it. Its facts are American, its law descends from English common law, and its economy is of the post-industrial kind in which muscle has lost its cachet and credentials rule. The pattern beneath the particulars is likely not uniquely American. It appears wherever women gain schooling, earnings, and command over whether and when they bear a child. But

how that pattern unfolds, how swiftly, how visibly, how peaceably, is shaped by specific culture, religion, tradition, and inheritance, which have arranged the affairs of men and women differently across the centuries. The framework may travel. Its expression is always local.

I. The protector

In a world governed by force, a man's strength was the wall between his family and those who would do them harm. The dangers of that world were settled by the spear and the arm, and no institution stood ready to settle them in his place. A woman could not meet force with equal force, so for her safety, she relied upon a man. This was the oldest of his roles and the plainest. It rested upon nothing more than physical strength, upon the simple fact that in a contest of violence the stronger survives.

Human progress dissolved the need for that strength. Civility, the rule of law, and its enforcement relieved every household of the burden of keeping a man on watch, and physical safety became a general condition of settled society rather than a thing each family secured for itself. A man may still be strong, but his strength no longer stands between anyone and harm. This was the first pillar to fall, and it fell so long ago that few now remark upon it. Yet its fall established a pattern that would repeat. A capacity once decisive was rendered idle, not by any defeat, but because the world reorganized itself until the capacity was no longer required.

II. The provider

Since the industrial age, a family's material support has issued from a single earner, the man of the house. The family lived upon what he earned, and because their sustenance ran through his hands, his hands acquired authority. To provide was to be depended upon, and to be depended upon was to be obeyed. The work a woman performed within the home was indispensable, but it drew no wage and carried no rank. Therefore, it was his earnings that stood as the visible foundation of the household, and his standing rose with it.

A single-earner household was nothing new. What was new, and only for a season, was the abundance a single ordinary wage could purchase. In the two decades after the Second World War, an American man of no wealth and little schooling could own a house and a car and support a family upon one income. That abundance was not the natural order reasserting itself. It was built by policy, by the schooling and low-cost mortgages a grateful government extended to its returning soldiers, by union contracts that lifted the common wage, and by a long expansion the state underwrote.¹ The benefits flowed largely to men, and the arrangement held for a generation.

As the cost of a decent middle-class life climbed, the telephone, the television, the second car, the annual holiday, the whole of it outran what one wage could carry. A second earner was drawn in, first for advantage and then from necessity. And once most households ran upon two incomes, the price of a settled life rose to meet what two could pay. The single provider did not fail. He was priced out of a standard of living that had climbed beyond the reach of one wage.

Then, the job itself began to disappear. Part of the intent of the trade policy the United States championed was to send its low-skill manufacturing abroad while the nation ascended into advanced manufacturing, technology, and design. The factories that had

paid an ordinary man a solid union wage departed, first to Japan, then to South Korea, then to China, and the work that remained rewarded an education he did not possess.² The strategy enriched the country in the aggregate, but nothing was built to catch the men it stranded. What they lost was not only the wage but the embedded identity the job had carried, and a familiar pattern followed, idleness, addiction, and early death.³ The provider role, the core of an ordinary man's worth, was hollowed out, and nothing arrived to take its place.

Women, in the same span, entered the workforce. Their share of the labor force rose from roughly a third at mid-century to nearly six in ten by its close.⁴ For many the second income was a necessity, and where a husband's work had vanished, it became the primary income or the only one. For many others it was also a liberation, into independence, into purpose, into a standing earned rather than married into. She was no longer provided for. She provided. And a man whose authority had rested upon being the one who earned now stood beside a woman who earned as well and at times earned more.

III. The thinker

Beyond strength and earning, a man possessed a quieter advantage. He knew the world. He moved through it, transacted in it, and gathered from it a practical knowledge the woman kept to the home could not acquire. Because he knew more, he decided more. What was prudent, what was safe, what was to be done, these fell to his judgment, and his judgment governed because it drew upon a knowledge no one near him could contest.

That advantage was no gift of nature. Her reliance upon him rested upon a vacuum of knowledge that society had created and enforced. Kept from schooling and from the world beyond the household, she had little independent means by which to judge, and so she looked to him to do the judging. Through much of English law and the customs it shaped, a woman was barred from the classroom, and a mind kept from learning cannot readily contest one that has been schooled. The gap was real, and it was made, not born. When schooling was at last opened to her, the gap began to close, and then it reversed. In 1972, the year American law forbade schools to discriminate by gender, men were markedly the likelier to hold a degree. Within two generations the advantage had not merely evened but inverted, and women now take the majority of degrees at every level.⁵ Men no longer hold a monopoly on knowledge. The ground in which their authority to decide was rooted is now democratized.

For women, education closed the knowledge gap that had made men the deciders. Schooled as well as any man, a woman could weigh the world for herself, and the reliance that had placed every decision in a man's hands fell away.

IV. The procreator

The last of his roles was the one nature herself appeared to guarantee. A woman who desired a child required a man, present and taking part, for there was no other way. Whatever else he was, able or idle, gentle or cruel, at that single moment he was necessary, and that necessity lay beneath all the others as their foundation. His other roles made him dominant. This one made him, in the plainest sense, irreplaceable. The

other three roles a woman might in time assume herself, but this she could not accomplish in his absence.

Now even that foundation has been lifted away. A woman who wants a child no longer needs a man in the room, nor a man she has ever met. She needs a sample, chosen from a catalogue by height and coloring and schooling, supplied by a donor.⁶ Medicine has gone further still. She may freeze her eggs and carry the child in later years herself, or entrust it to a surrogate, drawing upon the sperm of a partner or of a donor. She no longer needs to secure a man before her fertility fades, and that vanished deadline was itself among the deepest sources of his necessity. The one role nature had reserved to him, the last that made him necessary rather than merely welcome, has become a thing a woman may obtain without him. What once ran through him now runs around him. She is mistress of her own body and her own succession, and the power he held over both is ended.

She may still want a man, for love, for companionship, for the raising of the child, but based on the defined roles, she does not need one, and in that distinction lies much of what has changed. The two were never wholly separate. Many a marriage began as a need-match, a daughter joined to the ablest provider her class afforded, and grew into genuine want over the years that followed. What has changed is the starting point. Where need once compelled the union and want might or might not follow, need no longer compels it, so want must now be present, or must come, for the union to form and hold at all. He has passed from a place secured by necessity to one that rests, more than before, on being chosen.

V. The reaction

Consider now what has happened in the aggregate, for that is where the true injury lies. A man's power was never located in any single role. It lived in their concentration, in the fact that strength and earning and knowledge and necessity were gathered in one person and compounded there into leverage. Remove one, and the others still bore weight. Remove them all together, and there is nothing left to bear it. The protector was retired by the settled state. The provider was undone by the departure of his work. The thinker was overtaken in the schools. The procreator was rendered optional by medicine. Four roles and the compound they had formed has come apart and with it the leverage that only the compound could produce. This is why the loss is felt not as a diminishment but as a collapse. He has not been lowered by a degree. The floor beneath him has been removed.

A man so situated might be expected to adapt. Most have not. Resistance has come more readily than adaptation, and the reasons are worth setting down. The first is that the position was an entitlement, and an entitlement is not easily surrendered. A man raised to expect deference does not welcome its withdrawal, and he need be neither cruel nor scheming to resent it. He prefers the arrangement that favored him, as most people would. A loss, moreover, is felt about twice as heavily as an equivalent gain,⁷ so a man's decline weighs on him more than a woman's gain pleases her.

The deeper reason is a misreading. The whole of the power between a man and a woman is a fixed sum, and as his share of it has fallen, hers has grown to meet it. But

she did not take it from him. She was not reaching for power over him at all. She was reaching for herself, for the skills and knowledge to protect and provide and think for her own sake, to author her own life and to enter a union, if she chose one, as a whole person rather than a dependent. That she wanted this took nothing from her wish for a partner, for love, for a shared life. It meant only that she would have them on her own terms. And his share fell not because she seized it but because the world moved, because strength lost its use, because a rising cost of living required two earners, because the barriers to education were torn down. No one took his power from him. A woman became herself, and his standing had only ever reflected her dependence.

This is hard to see from inside the loss and harder to accept, for it leaves him no one to blame and no room to reclaim. Had his power been stolen, he could set out to recover it. But it was not stolen, and so there is no enemy to face and no ground to retake. It is easier to invent a thief. To name the woman as the one who took what was his restores, for a moment, a world that makes sense, a wrong with a doer, and a loss that might be reversed. So a man may reach backward, toward the old dominance that once came to him by right. That dominance no longer has a foundation beneath it, for the law protects her, she earns, and she knows as much as he does. What survives is only the appearance of superiority, with no support beneath it.

Power that is secure has no need to announce itself, and the need for announcement is the evidence of its absence. The power he held fell as society and technology changed, and what was once conferred he must now demand. To declare that a woman is lesser, that she belongs beneath him, that she should return to the place the old order kept her is easy. It costs nothing and may be done tonight, in a barroom, upon a screen, in the forums where aggrieved men gather. And it rewards him, returning for a moment the feeling of the power.

The injury beneath it is real. The policy that sent his work abroad disregarded him and did little to support him, and those who governed found it easier to point him toward a foreign culprit, the factory gone to Asia, the wage taken by a distant hand, than to own the choice and its neglect. But blame laid abroad changes nothing at home, and the woman he turns upon did not take his work and carries losses of her own. She is simply the nearest figure to a power he has lost. What moves him is not, at its root, a hatred of women. It is fear.

Picture him plainly. His work is gone, and with it the wage, and he feels wounded, less of a provider, less of a protector, less, he fears, of a man. He is frightened, and he is ashamed. And his wife rises each morning and goes to work, shouldering a greater part of the load he used to carry. In his house, the role and power balance did not shift slowly. The trend tipped within a few years, but when it happened to him, it was sudden. The wife he was raised to provide for now provides for much of what he cannot, and she is there each day to be seen in the provider role. His resentment, when it comes, is not aimed at a stranger. It is aimed at the nearest evidence of what he has lost, which happens to be a woman.

The manosphere, and the forums like it, offer more than the sensation of power. They offer belonging. These are men who feel unseen, and the forum returns to them a place,

a fellowship of others who carry the same grievance. Among their own, they are understood, and they need not perform the restraint the wider world demands. What must be swallowed elsewhere can here be spoken and answered and approved. There is strength in numbers, and the very weakness that isolated each becomes, among them, the bond that makes them a company. It is the oldest arithmetic of grievance, the pooling of private powerlessness into the feeling of collective strength, and it holds them more surely.

The private grievance has found a public voice. Across the developed world the young have begun to divide, the women moving left, and the men, feeling the ground shift beneath them, are drawn toward whatever promises to hold it still.⁸ A type of politics has risen that names the loss, laments the older order slipping away, and pledges its restoration. It draws its power less from any program than from the expression of a shared grievance. In some quarters, it enlists tradition, and in others, it enlists faith to sanctify the return to the old order. Its adherents are told that their decline is someone's doing and their former standing worth reclaiming, and the message travels because it asks of them nothing but their resentment.

The old order is not upheld by men alone. A considerable number of women prefer it and sustain it, not from any failure to perceive their own interest but from a clear reckoning of it.⁹ For a woman who would rather be provided for than shoulder the labor of earning, the traditional settlement is a reasonable bargain - security and a settled place in exchange for a ceiling upon her formal power. The fault line does not run between men and women. It runs between those whom the old order still serves and those whom it does not, and each camp holds women and men alike.

That the same divergence has surfaced across many nations at once, in economies and cultures far removed from one another, argues that its cause is structural and not the work of any single figure or movement. In South Korea, where the divide runs sharpest, the birth rate has fallen to the lowest on earth. In Japan, where marriage kept longest to its old form, men and women alike have quietly withdrawn from it.¹⁰ The particulars differ from place to place. The force beneath them does not.

VI. A different order

To illustrate how the loss of these roles impacts a man, it helps to observe one who loses a lesser thing, the man who retires. Consider him near the close of a long career, known as an expert in his field, his counsel sought, his name familiar beyond his own firm. His worth, his standing, and his sense of his own relevance rest on one thing, his work, which fixes his place in society, in his community, and in his home. On an ordinary morning, he retires, and it closes. The title, the deference, the daily proof that he matters, all of it is extinguished at once. His social circle is drawn largely from work, colleagues, contacts, and others tied to his business. After he retires, the calls, the messages, the invitations, the conferences, and the business travel all cease. His online life moves from LinkedIn to Facebook. What ends is not only the work, the position, the career. What ends is the self he built through them, through the human connections he created and the reflection of his own worth. He arrived at that identity through the feedback of forty years, and it secured his place in the world. Unless he foresaw the day and built something else to stand upon, he is, for a time, lost.

And yet the retiree, for all this, has long anticipated it. He saved against it, timed it, and arrives at it with his life's work behind him, his family raised and provided for and guided into their own lives. Many look forward to retirement as the next phase, and likely a happier one. The man these pages have followed loses his work and his standing too, but with none of that cushioning, involuntarily, without warning, with nothing saved and nothing finished. For him, the roles had converged onto his earning, so that losing his work took the provider, the protector, and the thinker all at once. That is the shape of what has occurred. The four roles that once compounded into a man's position have, one by one, been equaled by women or made obsolete, and the ground beneath him has shifted, moved in no small part by an economic order that no longer seats a household's security in a man alone.

The roles were never merely tasks he performed. They were the whole of what the world understood him to be. A man's worth and his identity are not made in a vacuum. They come from other people, from how he is seen and needed and treated. But the meaning of those signals is his own, read through a lens his particular life has ground, his upbringing and schooling and the home that made him, so that the same signal shapes one man differently than another. He chooses, through his interpretation, how to react, respond, and act. From that reading, he builds both the self he shows and the self he believes himself to be. So when the roles dissolved, it was not only his usefulness that fell away, it was the answer to who he was. He was not merely devalued. He was undefined.

His physical presence, once indispensable, has become a choice. He may still be wanted, as a husband, a companion, a friend, a father, but that is a different thing than being needed for the four roles he once filled exclusively. He is wanted now for who he is, not for what he does, and the whole of the change lies in that gap.

This is why marriage itself has thinned and comes later. For most of history, the relationship was based on need, with want suppressed beneath it. Neither a man nor a woman could accomplish the whole of life alone, so they joined and necessity held them together whether or not want was ever present. A woman wanted warmth and partnership as she always had, but need was so strong that she took a man for his position and settled for whatever else came with him. That necessity is gone. A woman today can earn her own living, keep her own home, stand under the protection of the law, decide her own course, and bear a child without a husband. She can accomplish alone what once required a man, and, in his own way, so can he. Marriage is no longer compelled. It is entered now from want, though need has not vanished from it, for she still wants a capable man beside her, not one to carry, and still less a house to keep in his stead.

The traits a man is wanted for are not the ones that made him needed. His four roles were, in a sense, hard skills, competence at protecting, providing, deciding, and fathering, capabilities the world could measure and rank. He must have them still, for a man without direction or the means to stand on his own is no one's idea of a partner. But hard skills no longer set him apart, because she has her own, and much of what once made him necessary she can now manage for herself. They have become more the price

of entry than the prize. What distinguishes him now lies in the soft skills, warmth, attention, the patient labor of understanding, and empathetic support, the qualities she always valued and could not before insist upon. These the old order never required him to develop, for a needed man could skip them. A wanted one cannot. A man raised to deliver competence more than care finds the ground shifting beneath him once more, asked now to be not only capable but good to be with.

Beneath all of it lies a common want, which is respect. Every person is owed the basic regard due any human being. But, in addition, the old order gave a man the deference that came with his position, while it often denied a woman even the little that was hers by right. A gentle man extended respect freely. Another dispensed it as reward and drew it back as punishment, a quiet instrument of control. And some did not grant it at all, holding the woman as a possession, a thing to be kept or discarded rather than a person owed regard. Her dignity depended wholly on the character of the man she was bound to, for she could not demand what the order left to his choosing. Nor is this safely in the past. The reduction of a woman to a thing to be handled without her leave survives in plain sight and is rehearsed daily in the forums where aggrieved men gather. The old contempt did not die with the old order. It reaches into the present and grows louder as it is challenged.

Equality does not take respect from the man. It takes away only the respect associated with his old position, the deference his rank commanded whether or not he had earned it. Between two people who stand level, respect is owed both ways and may be expected rather than hoped for, no longer a gift, nor a tool, nor a thing withheld, but a floor beneath which neither may fall. Mutual respect is the foundation of every bond that lasts, and it is the one thing a hierarchy can never guarantee, for respect that runs only upward and is optional coming down is not respect but its performance. What the man is offered, in exchange for the deference he has lost, is the possibility of being respected for who he is rather than obeyed for what he held, and to be known truly is worth more than to be feared.

Here the fear turns over on itself. A man dreads the passage from needed to wanted because need felt like solid ground and want feels like sand. But it was need that stood on sand. A woman could not defend herself, could not earn, could not know the world, and could not be impregnated without a man. Setting aside any emotional or romantic aspects to a relationship, the need was never about the man. It was about a set of conditions. And the moment those conditions fell away, the need dissolved. Need was always contingent, always resting on external circumstances. It felt permanent, but it was the most brittle kind of bond because it depended entirely on factors outside the relationship.

Want is not automatic, and it is mutually earned. Each must go on being worth wanting to the other. A bond that must be renewed is a bond that is tended, and a thing tended through hardship grows stronger rather than breaks. Want, earned by both and re-earned through time, is antifragile.

If there is a way through, it is not a smaller version of the old position but a different settlement altogether. The old order stood vertical, the man above and the woman

below. What might replace it is level, two people dividing the work of a life between them, not by the assignment of custom but by their own aptitudes and desires. Each holds strengths the other wants. A couple left to arrange themselves, released from the roles their genders once fixed for them, will arrive at a division fitted to the two people within it rather than the two categories they were born to. Such a bond is entered by choice rather than need and rests on a respect that runs in both directions.

In such a union, two partners build something sturdier than a bond, which alone is a brittle thing. They build a life that gains from adversity, antifragile in the sense Nassim Taleb gave the word. Meeting a hardship, they resolve it together, remake the arrangement between them where it must be remade, and carry the new understanding forward, so that the next hardship finds them better fitted than the last. Such a life does not merely endure difficulty. It is strengthened by it.

The change is not finished, and its end cannot be seen. It moves slowly and is easily missed from one year to the next, but its direction is not in doubt. Where it will finally rest, no one can say. What men make of it differs by age and temperament, by upbringing and community and the ground each happens to occupy. Some adjust and find their footing. Some cannot and reach backward for a world that will not return. None of this leaves a man unneeded in the human sense. Two people who meet as equals rely upon each other still, for company, for counsel, for the shared labor of a life. What has ended is only the old dependence that bound a woman to a man whether she wished it or not. What is offered in its place is a bond weighed more toward want than before, and less compelled by need, though the two have always mingled and always will, in proportions that differ from couple to couple and shift across a life. In it he is held not because he is required but because he is wanted and known not for his rank but for himself. The world supplies the signals. Each man actualizes his answer and crafts his action. In the end, it is for each man to determine how he relates to the woman in his life and how he moves from a bond of need to one of need and want together.

The four traditional roles that defined his father and his father's father before him, he now knows are no longer his only roles. They were what the world once asked of men and asks no longer. His predecessors were spared the question of who they were, for the roles answered it in their place, and that, understandably, is how they defined themselves. But the centrality of those roles has faded, and they can no longer speak for him. He is left, perhaps for the first time in the long line of men behind him, free to ask who he is apart from everything he was once required to be.

So the question with which this paper began returns, no longer the world's to answer, but his. Who is he, when he is no longer needed merely to fulfill those functional roles, and must now answer to the roles of desire, of being wanted? How does he define himself? This paper does not claim to know. There is only the question, and he is free to discover and redefine himself.

There is a final irony in it. The whole of this account has traced a man reacting to a woman's liberation, defending, resisting, grieving, reaching backward. But the roles he is losing were never only his power. They were also his confinement. He was conscripted into them at birth, as his fathers were, and made to be the protector, the provider, the one who knew, whether or not it suited the man he might otherwise have

become. The old order bound them both. It denied her a self and denied him the freedom to be anything but his function. When it falls, it frees them both, though only one of them was asking. What began as a woman's liberation may prove, if he can see it, to be his own. This is a story about self-determination.

Notes

1. On the postwar architecture of the single-earner middle class, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill, extended to returning veterans low-cost mortgages, business loans, and tuition; the Employment Act of 1946 committed the federal government to full employment; and postwar union contracts lifted the common wage. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/serving-our-voices/impact-of-service/the-gi-bill-75-years-of-opportunity/>
2. On the long movement of manufacturing abroad and its concentrated local effects, see the research of David Autor and colleagues on the China trade shock.
3. Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
4. Women's labor-force participation rose from about 34 percent in 1950 to about 60 percent by 2000. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
5. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; and Richard Reeves, *Of Boys and Men* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022).
6. On assisted reproduction and donor conception, the spread of sperm banks, in-vitro fertilization, and surrogacy.
7. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, prospect theory (1979), on the asymmetry between losses and gains.
8. On the emerging ideological divide between young men and women, Gallup; and John Burn-Murdoch, *Financial Times*.
9. 19th News and SurveyMonkey, *State of Our Nation poll (2025)*, a national sample of 20,807 U.S. adults, in which about four in ten women, and roughly half of all adults, held that society would benefit from a return to more traditional gender roles.
10. On the divergence across the developed world, and the cases of South Korea and Japan.