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## The Masculinist #24: How to Respond to Failing Institutions

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Aaron M. Renn <arenn@urbanophile.com>

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To: "Aaron M. Renn" <arenn@urbanophile.com>

Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter about the intersection of Christianity and masculinity.

My family spent the month of July in Bloomington, Indiana, close to our hometowns. While there, Bloomington-based podcast Sound of Sanity invited me on to talk about the Masculinist. To listen, [click over](#) and start at 21:20.

I've been getting emails saying great things about the Masculinist. I just got one today that says, "You've been more thought provoking than most things I've read in the past few years. I've forwarded your emails to lots of my friends in ministry." One person said, "Another excellent, and terrifying piece. I want your insightful pieces to go on forever." Another said, "Love your newsletter."

I'm glad to hear people like it. Please do keep spreading the news and share with any Christian men you know who might find it valuable, because I need your help to make this a success.

To read the archives and subscribe, visit: <https://www.urbanophile.com/masculinist/the-masculinist-archives/>

I don't want to take too much credit though. A lot of what I write is actually basic stuff that we've lost track of as a society, as with the folk wisdom I [wrote about regarding Jordan Peterson](#). What I said about hypergamy in [Masc #23](#), for example, is available in lots of places, ranging from academia to the manosphere. The problem is that mainstream secular and church discourse studiously avoids talking about things like this. Part of my mission is just to bring age-old wisdom back to the fore.

In this issue, however, in addition to the works of others, I am presenting an original framework and analysis I developed.

### The Decline of Institutions

In [Masc #22](#) I made the case that the American elite had collectively failed, and talks about the numerous ways that they and the elite institutions they control had gone off the rails: poor economic and social results, foreign policy debacles (e.g., Iraq), bank bailouts, Hollywood and Catholic Church sex abuse problems, the replication crisis in science, etc.

One way this has manifested in is a decline in trust in societal institutions. Here are changes in trust in major institutions between 1973 and 2018 according to Gallup, the years chosen as the maximum span of the data reported.

Institution	1973		2018	
	<i>Great Deal or Quite a Lot</i>	<i>Very Little or None</i>	<i>Great Deal or Quite a Lot</i>	<i>Very Little or None</i>
Organized Religion/Church	65%	11%	38%	27%
Supreme Court	45	17	37	18
Congress	42	14	11	48
Presidency*	52	16	37	44
Organized Labor	30	26	26	25
Big Business	26	29	25	30
Public Schools	58	11	29	27
Newspapers	39	18	23	40
Military*	58	12	74	5

\* Base year 1975

Source: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

There are several more institutions covered at that [Gallup link](#), with year-by-year detailed results available.

Not all institutions are doing poorly. Trust in the military has improved since the Vietnam era. But others have fallen steeply.

In Masc #22 I talked about how to respond to elite and institutional failure at the personal level by seeking to be above reproach. But how do you address the institutions? This month I will share some preliminary tools and analysis, and continue to revisit the topic with more installments at future dates.

## Voice and Exit

One of the classic institutional decline response frameworks is Voice and Exit, described by A. O. Hirschman in his seminal 1970 essay *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. The first chapter is a bit dull, but then this must-read book gets very interesting.

Voice is an attempt to rectify the problem via appeals to management. This can be in the form of customer complaints, voting, protest rallies, etc.

Exit is leaving the institution and transitioning to a new one. We see this paradigmatically in the marketplace. If your dry cleaner starts messing up your shirts, you switch to a new one.

Generally speaking Exit is less costly than Voice where there is consumer choice. Hirschman notes that America, with its marketplace orientation, privileges Exit over Voice. The idea of Exit in a marketplace with many competitors is that loss of customers will impose discipline on firms and organizations that are declining in quality, and either cause them to fix the problem or go out of business.

Hirschman noticed that this does not always work, especially when institutions have recourse to state sponsorship. He developed his framework while examining the poor performance of the Nigerian state railways. Most of its potential customers had exited, yet it continued to perform poorly. Hirschman notes:

The presence of a ready alternative to rail transport makes it less, rather than more, likely that the weaknesses of the railways will be fought rather than indulged. With truck and bus transportation available, a deterioration in rail service is not nearly so serious a matter as if the railways held a monopoly for long-distance transport – it can be lived with for a long time without arousing strong public pressures for the basic and politically difficult or even explosive reforms in administration and management that would be required. This may be the reason public enterprise, not only in Nigeria but in many other countries, has strangely been at its weakest in sectors such as transportation and education where it is subjected to competition: instead of stimulating improved or

top performance, the presence of a ready and satisfactory substitute for the services public enterprise offers merely deprives it of a precious feedback mechanism that operates at its best when the customers are securely locked in. For the management of a public enterprise, always fairly confident that it will not be let down by the national treasury, may be less sensitive to the loss of revenue due to the switch of customers to a competing mode than to the protests of an aroused public that has a vital stake in the service, has no alternative, and will therefore “raise hell.”

He observes in fact that poorly performing institutions often want customers to Exit:

Those who hold power in the lazy monopoly may actually have an interest in *creating* some limited opportunity for exit on the part of those whose voice might be uncomfortable... Latin American powerholders have long encouraged their political enemies and potential critics to remove themselves from the scene by voluntary exile. The right of asylum, so generously practiced by all Latin American republics, could almost be considered as a “conspiracy in the restraint of voice.”

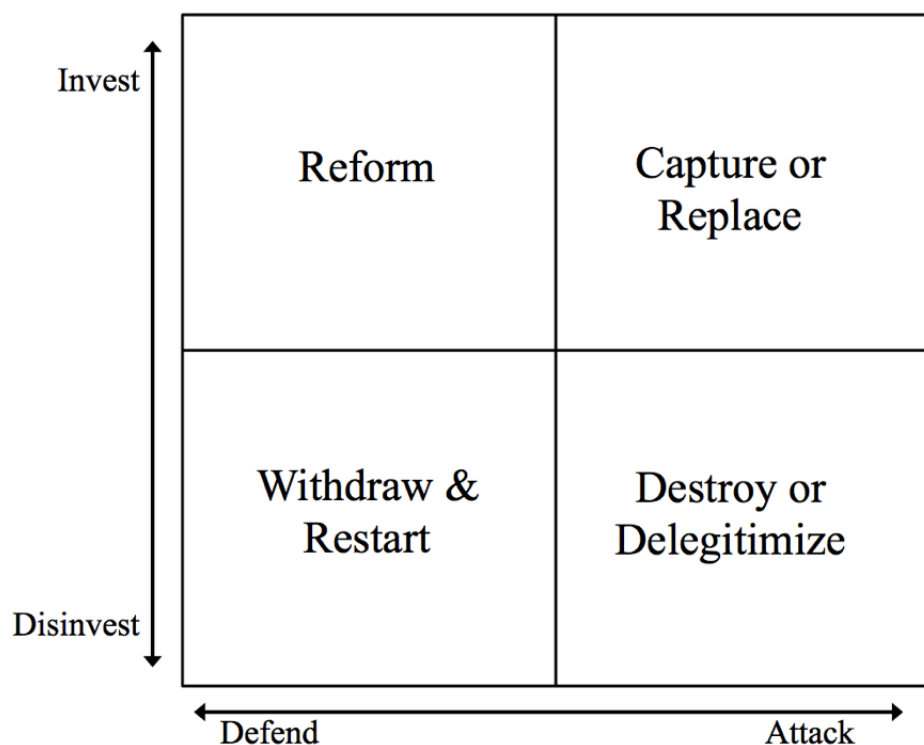
You can probably predict that Hirschman was an early critic of school choice, suggesting that government sponsorship of public schools would render them insensitive to Exit, and that the opportunity for Exit would bleed off the most quality-conscious families first, the very ones who would be the most effective users of Voice. (Today’s advocates of things like charter schools are more likely to frame them in terms of how they benefit the children who attend, rather than as a mechanism of promoting reform in traditional public schools. However, Hirschman would have predicted that the public school incumbents would have at least tacitly supported some form of school choice to get rid of troublemakers, something that hasn’t happened).

*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* is an extremely stimulating analysis of the dynamics of institutional reform. Hirschman reviews the surprising dynamics of Voice and Exit in various situations, and how they are affected by Loyalty to institutions. Anyone who cares about the decline of institution should read and think about his book, whether or not you agree with all of his conclusions. It’s short, and there are quotable passages on nearly every page.

### Extending Voice and Exit

I have put together my own framework that can be used to analyze institutional decline response strategies. It maps responses along two axes: Invest-Disinvest and Defend-Attack. This leads to a 2x2 matrix with the following four strategic quadrants: Reform, Withdraw and Restart, Capture or Replace, and Destroy or Delegitimize.

## Institutional Decline Response Framework



This framework essentially extends Hirschman's Voice and Exit model into a second dimension. I would classify both Voice and Exit as fundamentally defensive strategies. (Hirschman did identify a small number of efforts, mostly hypothetical in America, that I would classify as Attack, but overwhelmingly his paradigm is defensive in that the strategies people choose are more oriented towards themselves than towards the institution). Reform (invest-defend) maps closest to Hirschman's "Voice" option. This would be typical of strategies like staging protest rallies, calling your Congressman, etc. Withdraw and Restart (disinvest-defend) maps closest to Hirschman's "Exit" option. This involves things like home schooling or forming intentional communities such as the Amish.

Hirschman's fundamentally defensive model makes sense because in his original case study, the Nigerian state railways, the power of would-be reformers was weak. They had no opportunity to pursue more aggressive strategies, such as a hostile takeover of the railways in order to replace the existing management.

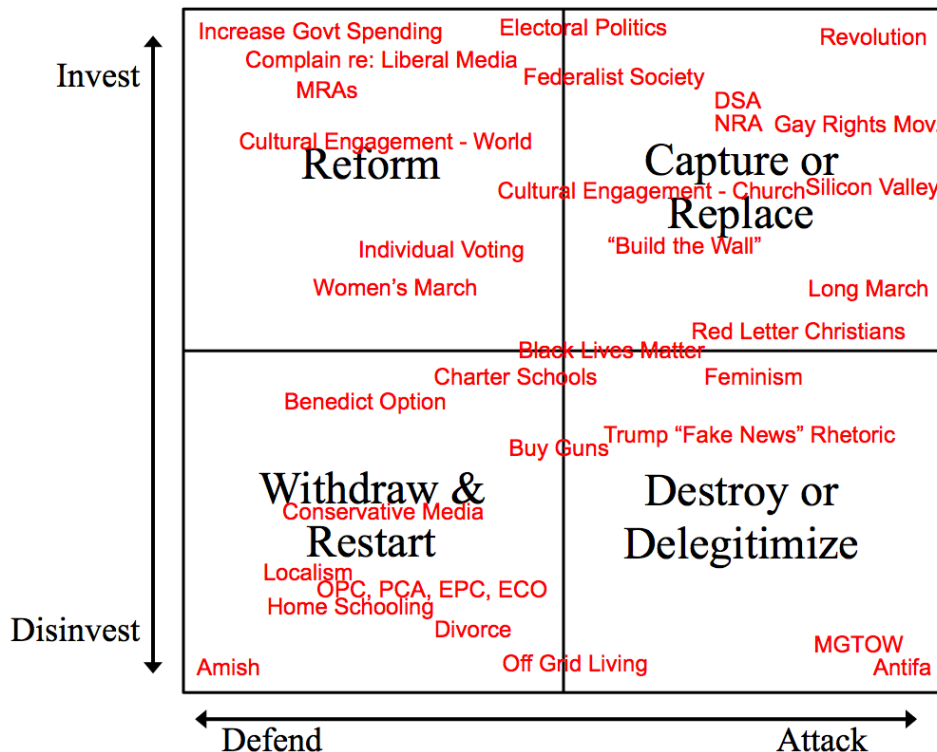
If we provide for the potential of these more aggressive, attacking strategies, we end up with two additional options for addressing an institution that is in decline or otherwise not doing what we want.

Capture or Replace (invest-attack) involves attempting to take over the failing institution in order to fix or redirect it, or to explicitly try to disrupt and replace the institution. Silicon Valley is the paradigmatic example of a Replace strategy. They don't just want to provide opportunities for Exit from traditional industries. They want to Replace the industry incumbents. Think about Uber/Lyft vs. taxis or Amazon vs. physical stores. A good example of the Capture strategy is the "long march through the institutions" of the post-1960s left. The SBC "conservative resurgence" is a right-wing example.

Destroy or Delegitimize (disinvest-attack) involves going to war against the institution in question. An example of this is the MGTOW (men going their own way) movement. I mentioned them in a [previous installment](#). MGTOW advocates that men avoid marriage and entanglements with women generally. What distinguishes them from a traditional Withdraw/Exit strategy is that they don't just want to personally choose to avoid marriage to protect themselves; they want to discredit marriage and promote further abandonment of it elsewhere. They propagandize against marriage in general and viciously attack marriage advocates like Brad Wilcox.

I have mapped various political, cultural, and religious movements on this matrix:

## Institutional Decline Response Framework



This is only one framework for thinking about the problem. It's a lens on the problem, not the only possible lens. It completely omits many possible dimensions of response. For example, a friend of mine recently argued that in today's disintegrating, combative political and cultural environment, it's important to be clear on your principles and let those drive your policies and behaviors. So "principles based" could be a potential axis in a different framework of analyzing responses.

Also, some movements utilize multiple response strategies and so don't map cleanly to the framework. Black Lives Matter has elements of three quadrants, for example (Reform, Capture, and Delegitimize). So I place it near the center. You may also disagree with the specific placement of some of these movements. That's great. The idea is to engage with the framework. If you're interested, [download a PowerPoint copy](#) to play with it yourself.

## **Explaining Donald Trump and "Fake News"**

This framework is very helpful in helping to understand various aspects of our contemporary world. For example, despite being condemned from all sides for doing it, why does Donald Trump persist in attacking the media and calling it "fake news" and an "enemy of the people"? Look at the chart. If you believe, as Trump does, that the media is biased against you – the particular form of perceived institutional failure he is interested in correcting – what do you do?

Trump could attempt a Reform strategy, which would in essence be using Voice to complain about media bias. He does some of this, but it's not a winning strategy. Conservatives have been doing this forever to no effect, and there's no reason to believe Trump would have been any more successful than them at forcing media change. He could have used Withdraw and Restart (Exit) to create his own media outlets. In fact, he essentially did this with his social media feeds, which are his own de facto media platform. Again, conservatives have done this repeatedly in the past, such as with talk radio and Fox News. These have been successful in a sense, as with Trump's twitter feed. But because these are all low status institutions, they have no cultural power. You'll notice that if the New York Times, Washington Post, and the Atlantic gang up on someone – say, Augusta National golf club for not admitting women – the organization frequently folds. Fox News and Rush Limbaugh don't have anything like that kind of power. Similarly, could Trump Capture or Replace high status media organizations? No way. Nobody is going to sell him the New York Times, etc.

So what does that leave as Trump's only viable, potentially effective option? Delegitimize or Destroy, which is exactly what he's doing. While he's unlikely to destroy these outlets, some of which are owned by super-billionaires like Jeff Bezos, he's clearly been effective in delegitimizing them in the eyes of much of the American populace. (It helped him that they quickly and willingly jumped into the mud with him). They retain elite legitimacy and power, but the spell that allowed them to claim a privileged position to speak in the name of shared truth or the consensus of broader society has been broken. Everyone today understands that these entities are just instrumentalities of elite power. (Do you personally like those outlets? Don't forget, many of us are members of the elite at some level, whether we want to admit it or not).

Keep in mind that my framework doesn't include any ethical dimensions. This isn't about whether one agrees with Trump or despises him. In fact, one might utilize it to analyze responses to the Trump presidency, treating it as the institutional failure that need remedying. (Clearly many de facto did this and likewise chose Destroy or Delegitimize). Nor am I claiming Trump's actions are a result of some sort of sophisticated analysis on his part. I'm simply showing that they have a certain sort of Machiavellian logic to them, given his position and premises.

## **The Limitations of Defend-Only Strategies**

This framework is helpful both in analyzing what other people are doing in response to perceived institutional problems and in assessing our own potential responses.

For example, if you look at my mapping of movements, one of the things that you see is that a lot of traditional conservative responses are in Withdraw and Restart quadrant. To (over)-generalize, progressives are good at capturing institutions, and then conservatives leave to start new ones. If you think about it, it makes sense. Conservatives in theory want to conserve something, they want to preserve the status quo ante at some level. This is an inherently defensive mindset. Most famously in the Christian world, the theological modernists (who denied many core Christian doctrines such as the Virgin Birth) of the late 19th and 20th centuries successfully captured most of the traditional Protestant (mainline) denominations, and many of the more conservative denominations in those traditions today are a product of Withdraw and Restart (for example, the OPC, PCA, EPC, and ECO in Presbyterianism, representing a chronologically arranged list of some of the splits). Not all Withdraw and Restart efforts are

conservative. Various localism (local food, local beer) movements and intentional communities are basically progressive. But this is a go-to move for conservatives. Generally it's oriented as an explicitly minority strategy. What differentiates these from a Silicon Valley style Replace strategy is that these institutions have no pretense to supplanting the mainstream ones they are designed to replicate.

Defend only strategies are typically ineffective in the long run. If we look at the cultural movements that have had the most impact in contemporary America, most of them heavily use Attack. Even if small, an implacable, hostile group can have a surprisingly outsized influence. Nassim Taleb has talked about this in terms of [rule by the intolerant minority](#). Just as one present day example, antivaxxers, a small group who are today mostly made up of progressives, are not only personally keeping their own kids from getting vaccinated, they are managing to [disrupt vaccine research](#).

Gary North, the controversial Christian reconstructionist, wrote a detailed 1100 page history about the capture of the northern Presbyterian Church by theological modernists called [Crossed Fingers](#) (or [free PDF](#)). The limited reviews it garnered were positive and his history foots to what I've read elsewhere, although he uses some oddball frameworks. While I am not an adherent of North's theonomy and such, I think the historical facts he presents are probably sound.

North identifies a large number of factors contributing to the modernist victory, but one of the key ones was that the traditionalists took a purely defensive approach in the struggle:

The conservatives in both the Old School and the New School adopted a defensive strategy after 1900. First, it was defensive intellectually. It allowed the intellectual leaders of a rival confession to establish the terms of public discourse. It was in this sense reactionary. This was the conservatives' crucial strategic error. In intellectual matters, as in moral matters, a defensive stance leads to surrender on the installment plan.

Ultimately the most prominent conservative intellectual leader, Gresham Machen, lost control of Princeton Seminary and was expelled from his denomination. He was utterly defeated personally and institutionally. He was then forced to found smaller, lower status replacement institutions to try to preserve the faith as he saw it. This was successful in a sense, because his institutions still exist. But his OPC has only around 30,000 members, and while Westminster Theological Seminary still exists, Machen's strain of "Old School" Presbyterian theology is extinct.

By contrast, the modernists engaged in total war. They were aggressive intellectually. They attacked in writing from without. They pursued internal takeovers of every board, presbytery, seminary, etc. from within. They made use of lies (the "crossed fingers" of North's title). They used financial threats (e.g., pension loss) to neuter opponents, and expelled the recalcitrant like Machen. They had big money donors (e.g., John D. Rockefeller, Jr.) and the establishment behind them, at the time when there was a very powerful WASP establishment in America.

A purely Defend strategy only seems to work if you don't have a battle with a rival movement. The Amish have been successful to date, but only because they don't have any powerful enemies and mainstream society has decided to leave them alone so far. If that changed they'd get squashed like bugs, especially since many of them don't even believe in filing lawsuits if they've been wronged.

## The Key Questions You Need to Answer

These frameworks suggests that there are some key questions it's necessary for people to ask themselves when responding to institutional problems:

1. Do you support or are you invested in the status quo ante? This determines your view of institutional health. If the status quo ante is your benchmark, institutional change is the threat to be combated. Whereas if you have problems with it, then institutional change is the solution.
2. Is disinvestment (Exit, etc.) a legitimate or viable option for the institution in question? Hirschman notes that Exit is a privileged mode in American life. However, from a Christian perspective, there are institutions that can't be exited. In particular, in almost all cases it is not allowed to Exit your family. Nor can one Exit the church entirely (though possibly one could switch to a different congregation, denomination or parish, depending on your theology). God created these institutions to be permanent in this world.
3. Is Attack a legitimate or viable option? If so, what Attack tactics are legitimate? Not only do conservatives tend to have a defensive orientation by default, I've observed that many of them tend to view any Attack strategy other than electoral politics (i.e., "fighting fair" within the rules) as inherently illegitimate. Most right-wing Attack strategies tend to be dissident type groups.

The debate over tactics is very old. Machiavelli famously said that, “A man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil. Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity.” That’s the logic of someone who doesn’t see room for God to show up. However, other than a small minority of absolute pacifists, Christians have not historically rejected Attack, instead seeing it as a legitimate strategy. Consider, for example, St. Athanasius’ lengthy quest to [stamp out the heresy of Arianism](#).

Christianity does require that we treat authorities as legitimate. The Bible says that we should “be in subjection to the governing authorities,” that “there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God,” and to “render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” (See Romans 13). There’s much debate about what these mean, but I think we can see that from the example of Christ himself and how he treated the Pharisees – acknowledging that they “sit in the seat of Moses” while using absolutely brutal rhetoric against them – that there’s plenty if not unlimited room for maneuver. (It might be interesting to apply my framework to events in the Bible. Many of the prophets were Reformers. The Israelite conquest of Canaan was Replace. Etc).

Defend-only strategies in cases where you have an opponent are likely to result in defeat, so that is an outcome one must be prepared to accept if Attack is rejected.

4. How important is victory? What are the stakes? What price are you willing to pay to win? Some battles aren’t worth fighting. Others are existential conflicts. During the Cold War the US strategy for confronting the Soviet nuclear threat was “Mutually Assured Destruction.” But how much blood and treasure should be expended in Afghanistan? Is it better to burn an institution down than to surrender it to your enemies?

In a world of disintegrating politics, culture, and religion, when it seems like many of the rules we thought applied don’t work anymore, different people are going to answer these questions very differently. Those different answers will lead to fundamental conflicts. For example, tradcons like Brad Wilcox look at the decline of the family, and decide to double down (far upper left of my matrix), engaging in significant research and marketing efforts to tout the benefits of marriage in the hopes of getting greater market adoption despite radical societal changes. MGTOW looks at the same facts and pays lip service to historic marriage, but argues that changes in society have irrevocably turned marriage into an abomination, such that the present incarnation of that institution should be destroyed.

This is going to lead to people who were formerly allies or members of the same team– or even close personal friends – ending up on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide, which will be a painful and acrimonious process. The crackup of political conservatism over Donald Trump, with many like George Will “self deporting” from the Republican Party, is a preview of coming attractions. The same process is happening in the Democratic coalition. Most current day groupings politically and theologically are experiencing the same sort of stresses. So one thing I’d say is to be prepared for a day when you have to acknowledge to yourself that people you thought were your friends are now your enemies.

This process won’t be easy. For Catholics, for example, how do you respond to the deeply corrupt hierarchy that continues covering up sexual abuse? Do you pursue Reform/Voice? Do you Exit to Eastern Orthodoxy or Protestantism or abandonment of faith? Do you launch a scorched earth campaign against the bishops? For the deeply faithful, it’s not an easy question.

Gresham Machen was not attacked and destroyed by secular society. Rather, his enemies were inside the church. Similarly, I would suggest that a major, perhaps the major threat to those who wish to hold to Christianity comes not from the world but from inside the church itself. This was the case in much of the New Testament, with various epistles written to combat false teaching. Some of that false teaching came from people who were trying to undermine the authority of authentic apostles.

If you are Catholic, your problems might come from those who don’t want to address abuse. For Protestants, it could be from contemporary forces like those Machen faced who are planning to rewrite Christian theology while swearing up and down they still hold to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Even many of the most conservative branches of Protestantism are already in the process of significantly redefining what they are about and what they believe, with some already making it clear they will not allow any dissent.

In short, don’t be surprised if you end up at odds with what you thought was your own team, or even find yourself pushed or forced out of your own church or broader Christian community, just as Machen did and just as St. Athanasius did during his various exiles. That might seem like a grim forecast, but better to be prepared for the worst than to be

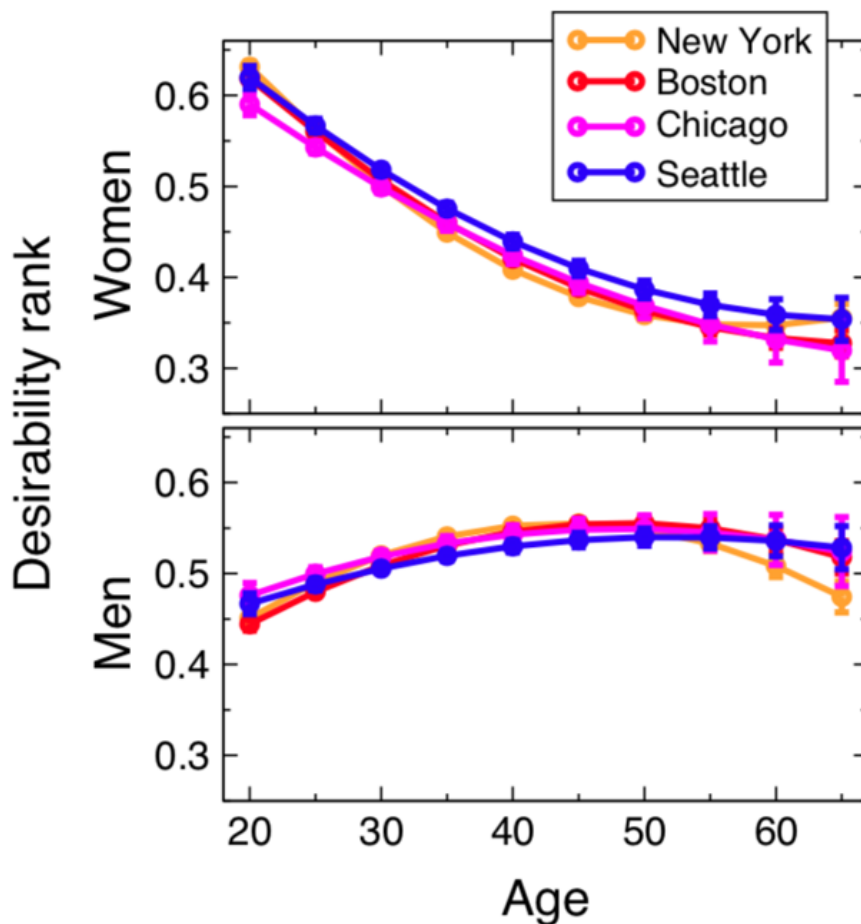
blindsided by it.

## In the Culture: Online Dating

A major [new online dating study](#) confirms a number of key points I've laid out for you in the Masculinist. The authors used a data from four cities – New York, Boston, Chicago, and Seattle – from a free dating site (my guess: OkCupid) and applied Google's Page Rank algorithm to analyze desirability.

The most important part of this study is a graphical representation of the Attractiveness Curve I described in [Masc #18](#). Because the factors that drive attraction are different for [men](#) and [women](#), and because these mature at different rates, women hold an attraction advantage when young but after age 30 there's a shift such that men have an advantage.

Here are the graphs they researchers produced for female and male attraction:



The curves cross around age 32. They find that male attractiveness peaks at 50, which seems high to me. But the male curve is much flatter than the female one.

I've also talked about the long odds facing single Christian women in New York when it comes to finding a husband vs. other cities. This study confirms NYC is a man's market. Per the Atlantic article:

New York is a men's market, at least according to this particular study. It's not just that older men are considered most desirable in New York. "New York is a special case for men," Bruch told me. "It's the market with the highest fraction of women. But it's also about it being an incredibly dense market."

I also noted in Masc #18 that traits of accomplishment such as income and education have little effect on making women more attractive to men and that very high intelligence can even be counter-productive. This study confirms that while a bachelor's degree raised a woman's attractiveness, graduate degrees reduced it:



A more educated man is almost always more desirable, on average: Men with postgraduate degrees outperform men with bachelor's degrees; men with bachelor's degrees beat high-school graduates. "But for women, an undergraduate degree is most desirable," the study says. "Postgraduate education is associated with decreased desirability among women."

The headline finding I've seen in most reports is that people tend to message others who are exactly 25% higher in attractiveness than themselves. I thought that was interesting. I would have expected men to take a more shotgun approach, so I'll have to dig into it and think more about it. But it's very clear from this study that attractiveness actually exists and people are good at assessing it.

Here's the question to ask yourself: In the voluminous sermons and writings on marriage and relationships by various Christian figures, how much of this information did you hear before you heard it from me?

## Noteworthy

The BBC, the state broadcaster of the UK, [calls for #NoMoreBoysAndGirls](#).

Bonobos [says](#), "The word 'masculine' is currently defined as having qualities traditionally associated with men, especially through strength and aggressiveness, with synonyms like powerful, macho, and red-blooded — it's time to change"

Note powerful elite institutions like the BBC as well as corporations employing the Delegitimize strategy against you. How do you respond?

The Atlantic: [Why don't more men take their wives' last name?](#)

Art of Manliness: [How to stop being a "nice guy"](#)

NYT: [The rise of sperm decline awareness](#)

WSJ: [America is running out of family caregivers, just when it needs them most](#) – well surprise, surprise, surprise

One correction to last month's issue. Someone pointed out that the song She's Like the Wind was written by Patrick Swayze (with Stacy WidELITZ), not Christopher Cross. Apparently many sites incorrectly list Christopher Cross as the songwriter.

## Coda

The traditional American idea of success confirms the hold which exit has had on the national imagination. Success – or what amounts to the same thing, upward social mobility – has long been conceived in terms of evolutionary individualism. The successful individual who starts out at a low rung of the social ladder, necessarily leaves his own group behind as he rises, he "passes" into, or is "accepted" by, the next higher group. He takes his immediate family along, but hardly anyone else. Success is in fact symbolized and consecrated by a succession of physical moves out of the poorer quarters in which he was brought up into ever better neighborhoods. He may later finance some charitable activities designed to succor the poor or the deserving of the group and neighborhood to which he once belonged. But if an entire ethnic or religious minority group acquires a higher social status, this occurs essentially as the cumulative result of numerous, individual, uncoordinated success stories and physical moves of this kind rather than because of concentrated group efforts.

A. O. Hirschman, [Exit, Voice, Loyalty](#)

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