THE MYTH OF THE LONE WOLF: CRIMINOLOGY, MASCULINITY, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically interrogates the myth of the "lone wolf," a sociocultural construction that conceals the deeply ingrained gendered and racialized nature of mass violence by attributing the same to psychological aberrations of individuals rather than to systemic crises. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that draws on the inputs of criminology, gender studies, and media critique, this paper contends that the lone male perpetrator is not an exception but an articulation of hegemonic masculinity that is presently in crisis. Where the perpetrator is not a coloured person, violent behavior is depoliticized and largely normalized by discourses surrounding mental illness, social isolation or unrealized potential. But where the perpetrator is racialized, violent behaviors are explained in the paradigms of collective ideologies as well as cultural deviance. In actuality, such violence originates in digital subcultures, grievance networks, and a performative logic that reifies acts of terror as a form of understood entitlement. The figure of the "lone wolf" does not emerge within an isolated context but is manufactured by a society that celebrates domination, erases vulnerability, and mythologizes male agency. This paper dispenses with euphemism and calls for a reconceptualization of violence as systemic, patterned, and constructed narratively. To understand these events is to know more than to name them; it is to engage with the cultural contexts that make them meaningful.

Keywords: Lone Wolf Terrorism, Hegemonic Masculinity, Media Narratives, Cultural Violence, Online Radicalization.

As Jamesie Baldwin had it,

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

The Myth of the Lone Wolf: Criminology, Masculinity, and the Performance of Violence

1. Introduction: Deconstructing the 'Lone Wolf' Narrative

Among mass media and even within policy communities, the "lone wolf" has been a familiar trope—a lone male, sometimes socially isolated, who resorts to violence with seemingly no connection to organized groups. From Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, to Norway's Anders Breivik[1], to the long list of young men responsible for school shootings in the US, this is a term habitually used to explain heinous acts committed by individuals who appear to operate alone. But the term does something more than simply identify a modus operandi or method—it faintly influences how such violence is interpreted, from whom it is anticipated, and what is perceived to signify.[2]

The popularity of the "lone wolf" script gained speed in the post-9/11 period, as international sensitivities were paralleled by growing interest in homegrown threats. This change had a peculiar companion: white male perpetrators tended to be described as disturbed loners, while racialized or Muslim suspects were interpreted in terms of terrorism, ideology, or communal threat.[3] In these circumstances, the lone wolf was more than a synonym—it was a sort of cultural mask[4], one that tends to obscure more fundamental issues regarding gender, power, and the social causes of violence.[5]

This paper aims to dig beneath that surface. Rather than treating the lone wolf as an isolated anomaly, it explores how masculinity, alienation, and cultural expectations come together to make such acts both legible and, at times, unintentionally normalized.[6] The use of the term

[1] Mark Hamm & Ramón Spaaij, The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism 45–47 (2017). Hamm and Spaaij provide comprehensive case studies of lone actor violence, particularly those involving McVeigh and Breivik, tracing their ideological and behavioral patterns.
[2] Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey & Brooke Foucault Welles, #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice 105–08 (2020).
[3] Michael Welch, Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat 30–34 (2012).
[4] Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices 22–26 (1997).
[5] Brentin Mock, The Double Standard of the 'Lone Wolf' Shooter, The Atlantic (June 18, 2015). Schmid critically deconstructs the definitional ambiguity of the term "lone actor" and cautions against its misleading isolationist framing.
[6] R.W. Connell, Masculinities 67–69 (2d ed. 2005).

itself may tell us more about societal discomfort with confronting certain forms of violence—especially when that violence emerges from within dominant identities—than it does about the attacker's psychology or actual isolation.[7]

In order to investigate these questions, this paper synthesizes several sources: close readings of media representations, trends from real-case studies, observations from criminological and gender theory[8], and digital records of radicalization. In doing so, it attempts to comprehend not just the people themselves, but the wider social narratives we share around them—and what those narratives enable us to forget.[9]

2. The Gendered Architecture of Violence: Masculinity and Deviant Subjectivity

When violence is perpetrated by a lone man, accounts tend to fall back on psychological aberration, social isolation, or individual trauma.[10] But gender itself is seldom questioned—not as a demographic category, but as an ingrained script that frames the ways in which violence is conceived, rationalized, and even enacted. Masculinity, especially in its hegemonic or dominant forms, has been historically inextricable from control, power, and acts of force. And too often in so-called "lone wolf" attacks, these entanglements are not random or unseen.[11]

Sociologist R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful lens for reading such cases—not as exercises of pure madness or randomness, but as highly exaggerated expressions of culturally normed expectations. In cultures in which being a "real man" involves independence, dominance, and the repression of vulnerability[12], individuals who feel they have lost this status may retaliate in self-destructive, even dramatic fashion.[13]

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[7] Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence 42–45 (2004). Butler's work reveals how dominant identities are often shielded from scrutiny, even in acts of public harm.
[8] James W. Messerschmidt, Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory 4–9 (2018).
[9] Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation 164–168 (1981).
[10] Lisa Wade, The Myth of the Male Shooter, Sociological Images (2015), https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/10/02/the-myth-of-the-male-shooter/. Wade critiques how media and public discourse systematically overlook gender when explaining violence by men, especially white men, attributing it instead to mental health or personal trauma.
[11] R.W. Connell, Masculinities 77–78 (2d ed. 2005).
[12] Michael Kimmel, Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men 37–41 (2008). Kimmel's notion of "Guyland" explains how culturally sanctioned masculinity promotes dominance and emotional repression, making violence a coping mechanism for perceived emasculation.
[13] James W. Messerschmidt, Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory 16–18 (2018).

Violence here becomes not only a response, but an act—a regaining of power in a world in which one is otherwise powerless, inconspicuous, or emasculated.

Consider, for example, the works of Elliot Rodger, the Isla Vista killer, who clearly constructed his assault as retaliation against women who had rejected him and men who had eclipsed him. His manifesto is not mad—it is coldly lucid in its expression of misogynistic entitlement.[14] His violence, as that of other perpetrators before and after him, was not genderless. It was imbued with a perception that manhood had been withheld from him, and that violence would provide his proof.

Beyond singular instances, trends occur. More lone actor attackers are men, frequently white, frequently from cultures in which economic and social upheaval has disrupted traditional models of male identity.[15] Insecurity at work, racial fears, felt cultural displacement—these larger pressures are frequently mediated through an internal crisis of masculinity, ending in actions that seek not only to injure, but to assert presence, agency, and power.[16]

Instead of seeing such actors as anomalies, this article sees them as operating within a broader terrain—product of a world which still equates worth with dominion, speech with power, and aggression with male salvation.[17] Criminology cannot afford to make gender an adjunct variable. It is crucial to the study not only of who does what, but also of how what is read, recalled, and explained.[18]

[14] Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence 54–57 (2004).
[15] Pam Nilan & Robert McGlynn, Youth, Crime and Society 61–63 (2016).
[16] Susan Faludi, Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man 75–79 (1999). Faludi analyzes how shifts in economic and cultural roles of men—especially white men—can produce a backlash in the form of performative aggression and violence.
[17] Angela Y. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? 26–30 (2003).
[18] Jody Clay-Warner & Kathryn Zaykowski, Gender and Crime, in The Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Crime 163–164 (2018). This citation supports the argument that criminology must move beyond "gender-neutral" frameworks to properly interpret patterns in violent crime and perpetrators.

Media Portrayal of Lone Actor Violence: A Comparative Table

Aspect	White Male Attacker	Racialized Attacker (e.g., Muslim, Black, Immigrant)
Label Used	"Lone Wolf", "Troubled Young Man", "Social Misfit"	"Terrorist", "Radical", "Extremist", "Gang Member"
Narrative Focus	Personal trauma, mental health issues, loneliness, rejection	Ideology, religion, race, immigration status, cultural background
Framing of Masculinity	Implicit: Fragile masculinity, unfulfilled entitlement, white male victimhood	Hypermasculinity, religious authoritarianism, cultural deviance
Cause of Violence	Individual psychological breakdown, failed masculinity, alienation	Collective ideology, external radicalization, ethnic or religious motives
Social Isolation	Emphasized as a tragedy ("he slipped through the cracks")	Downplayed or linked to dangerous communities or online radical groups
Media Tone	Sympathetic, humanizing, often focuses on the attacker's "potential"	Alarmist, dehumanizing, often warns of wider threats or sleeper cells
Familial Background	Explored to elicit empathy (divorce, bullying, pressure)	Scrutinized for complicity, cultural failure, or lack of assimilation
Implication of Broader Group	Treated as an individual anomaly, not representative of white men	Treated as representative of a larger racial/religious group
Policy Response	Mental health reforms, school counseling, lone actor detection programs	Counter-terrorism, immigration controls, policing of communities
Gender Discussion	Often absent or obscured—masculinity is invisible or naturalized	Gendered analysis often replaced by racial/cultural threat discourses

Table 1. Comparative Media Portrayal of Lone Actor Violence by Race and Identity[19]

[19] Adapted from Brentin Mock, The Double Standard of the 'Lone Wolf' Shooter, **The Atlantic** (June 18, 2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/the-double-standard-of-the-lone-wolf-shooter/396752/; see also Lisa Wade, The Myth of the Male Shooter, **Sociological Images** (June 24, 2015), https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/06/24/the-myth-of-the-male-shooter/; Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color, 43 **Stan. L. Rev.** 1241 (1991).

3. Myth-Making and Media: The Lone Wolf's Construction

Following acts of mass violence, the media race to make sense of them[20]—and usually settle on the figure of a reserved, aggrieved man who "snapped." The headlines border on biography: his musical preferences, his teenage years, his isolation. When the perpetrator is white, this image is close, personal. His name is called out. His childhood is analyzed. The violence is, in short, domesticated[21]—made into a human tragedy instead of a political or social threat. It's not an accident. It's sort of a myth-making.[22]

At the center of this myth is a reassuring falsehood: that this kind of violence is exceptional, inexplicable, and unrelated to deeper cultural currents.[23] The "lone wolf" description moves the action away from structural causes. It keeps the perpetrator isolated from ideological inheritance[24], communal influence, or structural grievance. By doing so, it de-politicizes violence—particularly when perpetrated by those holding dominant racial, gendered, or class positions.[25]

Media theory scholar Roland Barthes talked about myth as a form of speech[26]—a means of transforming history into nature. The lone wolf is exactly that: a figure who is created, and presented as natural. He is set up not as a product of his world, but as someone beyond it[27], catastrophically flawed. This depoliticization is particularly shocking when compared to the way the non-white perpetrators are depicted. When a Muslim man is violent, the narrative just moves to ideology, religious extremism[28], or national security. The same act, when perpetrated by a white man, is labeled as a failed coping mechanism.

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[20] David Garland, The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society 76–79 (2001). Garland explains how criminal incidents are discursively framed through narratives that serve the cultural and political anxieties of the time, often reducing systemic causes to individualized responses.
[21] Lisa Wade, The Myth of the Male Shooter, Sociological Images (2015), https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/10/02/the-myth-of-the-male-shooter/.
[22] Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices 22–26 (1997).
[23] Angela Y. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? 41–45 (2003).
[24] James W. Messerschmidt, Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory 30–34 (2018).
[25] Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color, 43 Stan. L. Rev. 1241, 1245–49 (1991). Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality helps reveal how power operates invisibly when violence is perpetrated by dominant subjects (white, male, heterosexual) and becomes hypervisible when committed by marginalized groups.
[26] Roland Barthes, Mythologies 109–112 (1957).
[27] Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation 164–68 (1981).
[28] Brentin Mock, The Double Standard of the 'Lone Wolf' Shooter, The Atlantic (June 18, 2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/the-double-standard-of-the-lone-wolf-shooter/396873/.

This double standard is not just a matter of optics—it affects how society responds to crime[29]. Media narratives shape public fear, policy priorities, and even sentencing.[30] A white shooter is often seen as reclaimable[31], as someone who could have been saved. A racialized attacker is treated as evidence of a larger threat, a reason to surveil communities or strengthen immigration laws.

The media's function, therefore, is not neutral. It makes and perpetuates myths that conceal the gendered and racialized nature of violence[32]. The lone wolf is not only a man without co-conspirators; he is a symbol stripped of politics. By emphasizing pathology at the individual level[33], the media avoids unpleasant realities about whose violence is named, whose suffering is heard, and whose lives are deemed threats.

Grasping this narrative building isn't about bashing reporters or dismissing genuine mental health conditions. It's about seeing that the types of stories we build around violence—who gets mentioned, fully fleshed out, or feared—are not random. They're signs of profound assumptions about race, masculinity, and authority.[34]

4. Interconnected Wolves: Networks, Online Radicalization, and the Illusion of Isolation

In spite of the terminology, the "lone wolf" is seldom ever alone. More often than not, the road to violence passes through a thick landscape of online forums[35], obscure websites, anonymous chat rooms, and algorithm-based platforms that promote grievance, amplify hate, and commemorate violent spectacle.[36] The appearance of solitude is expedient—it enables law enforcement and media to view such events as isolated incidents instead of as part of a digital subculture sharing common codes, symbols, and mythologies.[37]

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[29] Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey & Brooke Foucault Welles, #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice 98–102 (2020).
[30] Zeynep Tufekci, YouTube, the Great Radicalizer, N.Y. Times (Mar. 10, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.
[31] Michael Kimmel, Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men 143–145 (2008).
[32] Elizabeth A. Stanko & Jane Caplan, Crime and Justice: A Review of Research 201–204 (2007).
[33] Alex P. Schmid, Terrorism and the Lone Actor: A Critical Analysis 10–14 (2011).
[34] Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence 42–45 (2004).
[35] Michael Welch, Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat 52–56 (2012).
[36] Zeynep Tufekci, YouTube, the Great Radicalizer, N.Y. Times (Mar. 10, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.
Tufekci highlights how algorithmic platforms such as YouTube, by nudging users toward extreme content, contribute to a radicalization funnel, even in the absence of formal networks.
[37] Alex P. Schmid, Terrorism and the Lone Actor: A Critical Analysis 15–19 (2011).

Or take the message boards on sites like 4chan, 8kun, or some corners of Reddit[38], where mass shooter memes spread as tribute rather than warning. Or Telegram groups where white nationalist propaganda masquerades as "edgy humor"[39] but has one constant message: that the gunman is a hero taking back lost power in a rotting world. These online places don't just provide content—they reframe reality[40], validate grievances, and provide a distorted sense of community. Radicalization doesn't need a handler[41], or a manifesto. Sometimes it's just about repetition, anonymity, and the promise that somebody, somewhere, gets your rage.

From a criminological point of view, this changes the landscape. What we tend to label as "self-radicalization" is actually a type of distributed grooming[42]—one that takes advantage of isolation, grievance, and masculine vulnerability[43]. The online pack doesn't gather face-to-face, but it also shares ideology, aesthetics, and tactics. Memes are turned into recruitment tools[44]. Live-streamed shootings are viewed and shared again as performance art. Violence is gamified.[45]

Philosopher Jean Baudrillard cautioned of a world where images cease to describe reality and instead substitute for it—where simulation is more real than the real.[46] The "lone wolf" world is filled with this hyperreality.[47] The attackers copy themselves after past shooters—repeating their manifestos,[48] replicating their arms, even holding their attacks on the same dates. These are not solo outbursts of anger but repetitive enactments in a digital feedback loop. The gunman is both actor and artifact in a cultural script already written.

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[38] Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey & Brooke Foucault Welles, #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice 108–110 (2020).
[39] Elizabeth Pearson, Online Extremism and the Gendered Nature of Terrorism, 40 Stud. in Conflict & Terrorism 1, 2–4 (2018). Pearson explores how humor and irony function as entry points to extremist discourse, particularly among disaffected male youth. This masks real harm under cultural play.
[40] Christopher J. Ferguson, Moral Combat: Why the War on Violent Video Games Is Wrong 85–88 (2017).
[41] Mark S. Hamm & Ramón Spaaij, The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism 103–107 (2017).
[42] Audrey Kurth Cronin, How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns 188–90 (2009). Cronin notes that radicalization today is decentralized, mimicking marketing strategies—offering identity, grievance validation, and emotional resonance without hierarchical structure.
[43] Michael Kimmel, Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—and Out of—Violent Extremism 29–32 (2018).
[44] Julia Ebner, Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism 98–101 (2020).
[45] Clint Watts, Messing with the Enemy: Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers, Terrorists, Russians, and Fake News 137–141 (2018).
[46] Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation 172–175 (1981).
[47] Lisa Blackman, Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation 119–122 (2012). Blackman builds on Baudrillard to show how media-mediated subjectivities—especially those formed online—disrupt traditional notions of identity and embodiment, crucial for understanding radicalization.
[48] Greggor Mattson & Thomas Hegghammer, Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979 56–60 (2010).

In addition, the allegedly spontaneous nature of such attacks is undercut by how worked out, practiced, and beautified they are. From GoPro video to graphic manifestos, the violence is produced—staged for an audience.[49] The image of the attacker as a loner, mentally deranged guy with no attachments doesn't only miss the digital environment—it refuses to look at it.[50]

Knowing these digital ecosystems defies the very assumption of the lone wolf.[51] It uncovers a new type of network: not hierarchical, but viral. Not organized, but intensely organized by culture, repetition, and irony.[52] These wolves can hunt in solitary fashion[53], but they howl in concert.[54]

5. Retelling the Story: From Isolated Pathology to Cultural Violence

If the lone wolf isn't really alone, then we need to also ask what else this figure erases. This paper has examined how media, masculinity, and online subcultures operate in tandem to create a clean and depoliticized vision of some violent men.[55] But behind that vision is something much more structural: a cultural economy that not only condones violence, but in some instances, silently sanctions it[56]—particularly when it is domestic.

Classic criminology has depended on individualized explanations for a long time: psychological disorder, dysfunctional family, or hotline temperament.[57] These continue to be valid but no longer adequate. The "lone wolf" is no exception to the system; he is its reflection. He is created by unseen forces—racial stratifications, economic disaffection, gender roles[58]—and abetted by public rhetoric that views his violence as private tragedy instead of as a symptom of social malaise.[59]

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[49] Mark Andrejevic, iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era 77–80 (2007).
[50] Pam Nilan, Young People and the Far Right 93–95 (2021).
[51] Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization 148–151 (1996).
[52] Sarah Thornton, Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital 106–109 (1995).
[53] Jody Dean, Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies 112–114 (2009).
[54] David Lyon, Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life 117–120 (2001).
[55] Angela Y. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? 50–53 (2003).
[56] David Garland, The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society 85–88 (2001). Garland explains how policy and cultural norms normalize punitive or violent responses to social crisis—especially when enacted by privileged demographics under duress.
[57] Elizabeth A. Stanko & Jane Caplan (eds.), Crime and Justice: A Review of Research 203–205 (2007).
[58] Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color, 43 Stan. L. Rev. 1241, 1246–50 (1991).
[59] Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence 28–30 (2004). Butler describes how public discourse can frame acts of harm differently depending on the subject's identity—some as human tragedy, others as political threat.

A truer accounting would begin by acknowledging that a great number of these acts are not just criminal, but political.[60] They are reactions to perceived challenges to male authority, white supremacy, or cultural ascendancy. They are performed frequently as much for spectacle, for meaning, for recognition[61], as for destruction. In a world where masculinity is equated with control and visibility, violence can be a pathological means of self-proclamation.

Not to justify, but to account—for and in doing so, to be responsible to the wider structures that make such actions make sense.[62] Carceral responses are insufficient to remedy these deeper foundations. The issue is legal, but also cultural. And culture cannot be policed—it must be remade.[63]

That transformation starts with words. It starts by taking euphemisms such as "lone wolf" out of retirement that desex, depoliticize, and deracinate acts.[64] It needs criminology to rejoin feminist theory, media studies, and online sociology[65]—to observe violence not merely as something that takes place, but something that gets made possible, carried out, and told.

Finally, it is a demand not for a new theory, but for a new honesty. If we are to take violence seriously, then we must also take seriously the worlds that generate it—the myths we share, the headlines we receive, and the silences we allow.[66] The lone wolf, as we've learned to know him, does not exist.[67] What does is a society that is willing to believe he does.[68] *Pam Nilan & Robert McGlynn, Youth, Crime and Society 70–72 (2016).*

[60] Susan Faludi, Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man 318–320 (1999).
[61] Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation 172–174 (1981). Baudrillard's notion of simulacra—violence as image and ritual—helps explain the symbolic function of performative acts of mass violence.
[62] Audrey Kurth Cronin, How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns 191–93 (2009).
[63] Zillah Eisenstein, The Female Body and the Law 81–85 (1988).
[64] Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey & Brooke Foucault Welles, #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice 102–105 (2020).
[65] Jody Clay-Warner & Kathryn Zaykowski, Gender and Crime, in The Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Crime 164–166 (2018).
[66] Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices 22–26 (1997).
[67] Mark S. Hamm & Ramón Spaaij, The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism 1–5 (2017).
[68] Michael Kimmel, Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—and Out of—Violent Extremism 205–207 (2018). Kimmel explains that social systems often manufacture belief structures that mask collective accountability for extremist behavior, allowing myths like the "lone wolf" to thrive unchallenged.

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