

A NATION OF EMPLOYEES: THE RISE OF CORPORATIONS AND THE PERCEIVED CRISIS OF MASCULINITY IN THE 1950S

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Often portrayed as a time of remarkable stability by the popular culture of later generations, the period from 1946 to 1963 actually marked a time of rapid social change. For white, middle-class men the period was a time of transition.¹ White middle-class men received college educations, worked in large corporations, lived in small suburban communities, and had more leisure time than in any other period in history. Changes to almost all of the major social institutions in the 1950s allowed for a renegotiation of hegemonic masculinity. The new white-collar lifestyle was no longer compatible with the dominant ideal of masculinity that emerged after the mid-nineteenth century. Personified by the small merchant, the self-made man image emphasized individuality and control.² White-collar masculinity, embodied by the man in the gray flannel suit, was quite different from the masculinity of the self-made man.³ White-collar masculinity emphasized leisure, family, and corporate work as ideal. An influential group of public intellectuals reacted to the emergence of a large group of white-collar men and corporate work because they believed that these men no longer fulfilled the self-made version of masculinity. Instead of accepting the social changes of the 1950s, social commentators attacked corporate work and white-collar lifestyles, claiming that they caused passivity and

¹ This paper's time period begins with the end of World War II and ends with the publishing of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. All references to the 1950s refer to this period, the long 1950s.

² Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17-30.

³ The man in the gray flannel suit became the dominant image of white-collar men. It became known as the uniform of white-collar workers, and even spawned a novel by Sloan Wilson, which was adapted into a movie, titled *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in 1956.

emasculated men, rendering white-collar men unable to fulfill the traditional cultural norms of masculinity such as pleasing their wives, participating in politics, and acting as self-determining and independent individuals.

Social commentators of the 1950s clung to this self-made man type as the only acceptable form of hegemonic masculinity. These social commentators included a combination of sociologists, psychologists, historians, literary critics, and other academics, along with writers, journalists, magazine editors, and anyone with a platform and capability to shape public ideas and attitudes.⁴ These predominantly white, male, educated, middle to upper middle-class critics were remarkably visible and influential in 1950s society. They often published articles in widely read newspapers such as the *New York Times* and in popular magazines such as *Time* and *Esquire*. Their work remained on the nation's fiction and non-fiction best-seller lists throughout the decade. Historian James N. Gregory best explains these commentators' impact in his assertion that:

[S]ocial science enjoyed a golden age, it was the middle third of the twentieth century, three decades beginning in the 1930s when sociologists, economists, psychologists, and others spoke with more authority and their voices reached farther in any other period before or since... Confidence in the scientific grounding of sociology and related disciplines soared... [as they] developed penetrating theories that seemed capable of answering key questions about the individual, the group, and society.⁵

The social commentators of the 1950s did not merely study corporations, popular culture and changing American values, but attempted to actively shape and combat many of the changes taking place in white middle-class men's lives.

All of the works of social commentators examined in this paper were selected because of their popularity – either the

⁴ This paper focuses on these groups, especially sociologists, who were particularly influential and vocal about white-collar work. However, social commentators also included individuals involved in the film industry and authors.

⁵ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 66.

popularity of the author, the piece itself, or the publication in which it appeared. These were well-known and influential authors, and their works shaped public perceptions about masculinity. In 1957, social commentator Russell Lynes noted that “at the top of the intellectual pyramid the critics and philosophers today have a power that they have not had in past America.”⁶ The works and authors which form the base of this study attempted to influence what it meant to be a man in the 1950s. They reached a large audience, and had unprecedented influence. Their works became instrumental in the construction of gender identity in the 1950s. This paper is not about whether men felt unsure about their masculinity, but why a certain group of intellectuals believed masculinity was declining, what form of masculinity they believed to be ideal, and how they interpreted changes in 1950s society.⁷

Social commentators became responsible for maintaining the hegemonic masculinity that white-collar workers challenged. Sociologist Michael Kimmel’s definition of masculinity as homophobia offers the best understanding of what these commentators attempted to preserve. Masculinity is about power and performance; it is a historical and changing construct that is “demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance [of masculinity].”⁸ Masculinity requires the constant reaffirmation that one is “man enough,” and men affirmed their manhood through public displays and marketplace success. Homophobia remains a constant theme throughout modern masculinity. Kimmel defines homophobia not as a fear of homosexuality but as “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, and reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up... the fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood.”⁹ Hegemonic masculinity is not

⁶ Russell Lynes, *A Surfeit of Honey* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1957), 17. Lynes asserted that David Riesman was the most influential of the social commentators.

⁷ Many of these sources were selected because they were referenced by other social commentators. These authors were having a public conversation about what it meant to be a man in the 1950s.

⁸ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Theorizing Masculinity*, eds. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (London: Sage Publishing, 1994), 120-126.

⁹ Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” 131.

just power over women, but power over other men.¹⁰

Societal changes in the 1950s altered men's ability to prove their manhood. Social commentators took umbrage with white-collar men because they allowed other men to have power over them. Social commentators believed that corporations emasculated men, dominated men, and created a group of men that did not measure up. Commentators asserted that by choosing white-collar work, men were giving up their power. Commentators' main criticism became the perceived powerlessness of white-collar men. The idolized self-made man was not emasculated by other men, but had power to control the events of his own life. Being 'subjected' to the will of other men, meant that men were not able to fulfill their roles and duties as men, particularly in the realms of sex, politics, and individual achievement.

The self-made man identity emerged around the mid-nineteenth century as manhood became increasingly tied to the marketplace. The white middle-class man validated his identity "entirely from his success in the marketplace..."¹¹ One's manliness was communicated to other men through visible success in the marketplace. Continually proving one's masculinity became "one of the defining experiences of men's lives."¹² However, what constitutes masculinity and gender norms changes over time. In different historical periods manhood meant different things.¹³ In any one period there was not a single form of masculinity, but several masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity reflects the dominant position "in a given pattern of gender relations," and that position is perpetually contested by other forms of masculinity and femininity.¹⁴ One form of masculinity is always "exalted" in relation to other masculinities – these are what sociologist R. W. Connell refers to as subordinate and marginalized masculinities.¹⁵ In the 1950s the self-made man image defended by social commentators represented hegemonic

¹⁰ Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," 136.

¹¹ Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," 123-124.

¹² Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 1.

¹³ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 3-4.

¹⁴ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 76-77.

¹⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*, 76-77.

masculinity, and the white-collar masculinity that emerged reflected a subordinate masculinity. Despite thorough opposition, by the end of the decade, white-collar masculinity had been incorporated into hegemonic masculinity.

R.W. Connell's concept of multiple masculinities and Michael Kimmel's definition of masculinity as homophobia allow for a better understanding of 1950s social commentators. White-collar workers and their lifestyle offered a challenge to the older "marketplace manhood" defended by social critics, even though by the end of the 1950s it had become incorporated into the definition of hegemonic masculinity. The 1950s was a period of renegotiation in which definitions of masculinity were in flux: the leisure, managerial, service-based and family-oriented version of masculinity became dominant, while masculinity based in production and control declined in influence. Social commentators perceived a crisis of masculinity because they believed that the rapid changes in work, community, and education diminished the public space for the performance of masculinity, and most importantly these changes caused men to subject themselves to the control of other men and institutions. According to social commentators, the retreat into leisure, families, and suburbs removed men from the public sphere and caused a retreat into the private, 'feminine' sphere. Similarly, commentators asserted that corporations' emphasis on team work required conformity. Conformity violated one of the fundamental tenets of hegemonic self-made man masculinity because it allowed other men to dictate how white-collar men acted. Social commentators' critique of a loss of individuality reflected their fear of a large group of men becoming subservient. For these social commentators, it was not marginalized groups like black men, gay men, or even women that challenged hegemonic masculinity – the challenge came from white middle-class men, the group that normally constituted the hegemony.

According to Kimmel, the emergence of a type of hegemonic masculinity tied to constant marketplace performance prompted a perpetual crisis of masculinity from the 1830s to the present.¹⁶ Other historians have offered different explanations for the construction of gender norms in the 1950s. In *Homeward*

¹⁶ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 1-10.

Bound, Elaine Tyler May argues that gender norms were strengthened as a result of Cold War anxieties. May's work primarily emphasizes women's roles within the family, but her argument applies to men's lives as well. May asserts "in the early years of the Cold War, amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure, private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world."¹⁷ The family provided "a bastion of safety in an insecure world," and leaders promoted specific types of conduct and policies that emphasized an ideal version of "American home."¹⁸ The home and family became central to the domestic strategy of containment of communism, and this idea of "home" was deeply entrenched within traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.¹⁹

May's argument is convincing, but the suggestion that the Cold War strengthened gender roles ignores many of the prevalent institutions in men's lives. Men spent a majority of their days at work, and social commentators placed a significant emphasis on the changes in the means of production, apart from Cold War implications. To be sure, the Cold War influenced ideas about gender, and specifically masculinity, but many social commentators chided men for retreating into the home. The suburban home, and the work required to finance it, was heavily scrutinized. May asserts that men and women attempted to live up to the "domestic ideal," but throughout the 1950s there was broad disagreement on just what the domestic ideal actually was.²⁰ As the production based, self-made man ideal loomed over them, men encountered the home as yet another contested domain. May ignores the chorus of social commentators who saw the home as an effeminizing force in men's lives and an extension of conformity. The domestic ideal May describes was one aspect of white-collar masculinity, not part of the hegemonic masculinity supported by social commentators.

Another important argument about masculinity in the 1950s was that there were multiple masculinities; domestic

¹⁷ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 1.

¹⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 9.

¹⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 16.

²⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 173.

masculinity was just one of these. Historian James Gilbert, for example, rejects the idea of a crisis of masculinity in the 1950s. Gilbert argues that no one form of masculinity was dominant, but multiple masculinities offered various ideals to men. While plenty of leading authors in the 1950s lamented the decline of American men, “it is just as plausible to argue that these public figures were reacting with hostility to the changes that other men in society were quite happy to accept.”²¹ This paper attempts to build on Gilbert’s multiple masculinity idea. The social commentators that shaped public opinion reacted because they remained opposed to the vast and rapid changes which occurred in the 1950s.²² These influential public figures offered one side of a social conversation about the meaning of masculinity in the 1950s, and just because they perceived a crisis of masculinity does not mean that one existed.²³

While I adopt Gilbert’s concept of ‘multiple masculinities’ in this paper, my view of whether or not there was a dominant ideal of masculinity differs from his. Gilbert argues that these competing masculinities left a void, that there was not a clear sense of hegemonic masculinity in the 1950s. I argue, however, that the self-made man image was the dominant hegemonic masculinity in the period entering the 1950s. Utilizing Connell’s conception of hegemonic, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities, white-collar masculinity was a subordinate version of masculinity which challenged the hegemony of the self-made man ideal.²⁴ The 1950s was not a period of “male panic,” but a renegotiation of the self-made man version of hegemonic masculinity. The dominant idea of what was manly changed in the 1950s, and it changed largely due to men’s changing relationship to their work. The competing masculinities did not eliminate hegemonic masculinity. Instead, the production-based hegemonic masculinity evolved and incorporated various elements of the subordinate, white-collar, masculinities.²⁵

²¹ James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 9.

²² Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 5.

²³ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 1-10.

²⁴ Connell, *Masculinities*, 76-77.

²⁵ Gilbert, May, and Kimmel offer the most influential and compelling works on masculinity in the 1950s. Other histories of gender and the family in the postwar era include: Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American*

Middle-class men's relationships to their workplaces and the lifestyle of mass consumption they sought influenced gender construction.²⁶ The typical white-collar man was white and upper-middle class.²⁷ He lived in a newly created suburb community and commuted to his job in a city.²⁸ He normally stayed in one career, or at least did not change jobs frequently. His occupation could range from junior executive to office clerk. White-collar jobs usually involved some type of management of others, leading social commentators to label white-collar workers as "people pushers" instead of "pencil pushers."²⁹ Newspapers and magazines presented white-collar work as offering the highest

Families and the Nostalgia Trap (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and the collection of essays *Not June Cleaver*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). For the cold war's impact on the perception of the male body see K.A. Cuordileone, "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960," *The Journal of American History* (September 2000): 515-545. On male body image from the 1950s to present see Lynne Luciano's *Looking Good: Male Body Image in Modern America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), and Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). For works on consumerism in the 1950s see Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption Post War America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), and Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won In Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). For the legacy of the 1950s on present ideas about masculinity Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Perennial Books, 1999).

²⁶ Women had white-collar jobs as secretaries, stenographers, and similar work, but the nature of women's white-collar work did not contradict traditional ideas about femininity (other than working outside the home). Thus, women escaped some of the criticism put forward by social commentators. The nature of women's white-collar work did not impact the understanding of femininity because femininity is often equated with passivity. The critique that white-collar work caused passivity did not negatively affect perceptions of women, who were believed to be passive anyway.

²⁷ This paper is exclusively about white, middle-class men. Any generic reference to men implies white, middle-class, white-collar men.

²⁸ This paper relies on statistics found in popular newspapers and cited by social commentators. These statistics are not to be taken as completely accurate (as statistics from government agencies), but are important for the fact that they were what was being told to the public. These statistics are an attempt to demonstrate what the 1950s reader was being told about white-collar workers.

²⁹ "White Collar Work is Found Steadiest," *New York Times*, 29 December 1947.

salaries, which rose steadily throughout the decade.³⁰ White-collar careers offered the highest salaries available to college graduates by 1956.³¹ Even the wages of lower end of white-collar work remained relatively high.³²

White-collar workers ranged from the upper-middle-class to middle-class. Mass-produced housing and items limited some of the disparity between blue and white-collar workers, but class distinctions remained. The middle and upper-middle class differentiated themselves in the 1950s through material means, but the real difference between the managerial and production classes was the cultural status of their work. As historian Lizabeth Cohen asserts, “[t]he massive scale of suburban home building also lent itself well to the process of increasing class differentiation, as newly constructed houses easily bore class markings.”³³ The working class experienced much greater economic security and leisure comforts in the 1950s than other periods, but there still remained a physical distance from the upper echelons of white-collar workers, including different schools, neighborhoods, and social clubs.³⁴ The new group of college-educated white men were encouraged to join the corporate ranks through the higher salaries and vast opportunities they offered, but they remained continually criticized by the leading cultural critics of the 1950s. White-collar work carried with it a unique scrutiny.

White-collar work offered higher salaries than production and manufacturing-based careers, and the number of white-collar jobs increased while production-based jobs decreased. A 1959 *Time* magazine article noted that “automation and technological breakthroughs have sharply reduced the ranks of blue-collar (i.e.

³⁰ C. Wright Mills, “The Middle Class in Middle-Sized Cities: The Stratification and Political Position of Small and White Collar Strata,” *American Sociological Review* 11, no. 5 (October 1946), 521.

³¹ “Time Clock, Dec. 24, 1956,” in *Time*, 24 December 1956.

³² “White Collar Pay Has Higher ‘Floor,’” *New York Times*, 10 November 1952.

³³ Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 208.

³⁴ Matthew Lassiter’s *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Lizabeth Cohen’s *Consumer Republic* convincingly demonstrate the class separation and division that remained in seemingly “classless” suburbs.

usually hourly paid) workers...”³⁵ The emergence of a large-scale electronics industry created newer and more efficient machines that “automatically perform workday chores and take on thousands of complicated new tasks,” rapidly accelerating a long historical process of diminishing the necessity and status of blue-collar occupations.³⁶ By the late 1950s the *New York Times* reported that white-collar workers composed the largest percentage of the workforce nationwide.³⁷ While in some degree white-collar workers existed from the late nineteenth century, they became a significant group for the first time in the 1950s.

The significant increase in college graduates during the 1950s, specifically business graduates, combined with the good pay and availability of corporate jobs led to the increase in white-collar workers.³⁸ The 1950s produced “more college students than ever before,” and college graduates wanted white-collar careers.³⁹ “Clean hand” occupations held the most respectability and desirability among white males.⁴⁰ American anthropologist and one time employee of the Department of Agriculture and Labor Jules Henry surmised that college educated men no longer entered the blue-collar sphere for careers, nor did they attempt to become entrepreneurs. According to Henry small business entrepreneurs suffered the same fate as blue-collar workers, and he predicted that by 1963 only one out of eight high school students would

³⁵ “New Problem for Unions: The Rise of the White-Collar Worker,” *Time*, 29 January 1959. Blue-collar refers to workers engaged in actual production of goods. These differ from the service and sales-based white-collar occupations. Blue-collar jobs did not usually require college degrees.

³⁶ “Electronics: The New Age,” *Time*, 29 April 1957. The electronic industry emerged in the 1950s as one of the fastest growing industries, becoming the fifth largest industry in the United States by 1957. There were over 4200 electronics companies with a work force of over 1.5 million, and sales of more than \$11.5 billion annually.

³⁷ “White Collar-Group Largest Labor Bloc,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1957. John Littlepage Lanaster’s “Personal Income Estimate for Virginia Counties and Cities: 1960,” for Bureau of Population and Economic Research: University of Virginia, 1960, ii-iii. The findings of the government study supported that of the *New York Times* article for Virginia and the upper South.

³⁸ “Education Prospects,” *Time*, 7 February 1949. The number of men able to go to college increased among white males largely because of the G.I. Bill.

³⁹ “Education Prospects.”

⁴⁰ “Science: The Triumphant White Collar,” *Time*, 3 February 1947.

want to go into business for themselves.⁴¹ As early as 1952, some felt the appeal of starting a small business was beginning to decline.⁴² Prominent social critic and University of Columbia sociologist C. Wright Mills proclaimed that in the “early nineteenth-century probably four/fifths of the occupied population were self-employed entrepreneurs,” and in the 1950s “only the modern middle class has steadily grown.”⁴³ White-collar workers emerged after World War II as the fastest growing labor group. They represented a new dominant force in society, and their occupations and personal lives subverted older pillars of hegemonic masculinity.

These new workers obtained a new education and built new homes. White-collar workers and their families moved in large numbers to newly built suburbs outside of cities.⁴⁴ Suburbs remained largely racially homogenous. Mr. Levitt, the owner of the company that built the Levittown suburbs, stated “[o]ur policy on that [race] is unchanged. The two other Levittowns are white communities.”⁴⁵ The mass exodus of white-collar families came at the expense of cities and smaller farm towns. According to *Time* magazine, little towns slowly withered in the 1950s. The magazine quoted Ernest Edwards, owner of a general store in the small town of Shannon City, Iowa who said “none of the kids ever comes back here to live after they’ve gone away to school.”⁴⁶ Other small towns such as Mart, Texas lost significant portions of their younger population after the 1940s. Small towns lost residents largely because of a lack of jobs that appealed to college graduates, and big towns equally lost significant portions of their white-collar populations. Most white-collar workers wanted “to live, not in a big city, but near it. All over the nation, people fleeing the city’s crowds and taxes, people fleeing the country’s torpor and low wages, have settled in the suburbs.”⁴⁷ Suburbs

⁴¹ Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Random House, 1963), 39.

⁴² Eileen Ahren, “White Collar World,” *Washington Post*, 31 May 1952.

⁴³ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 63.

⁴⁴ “The Census: From the Country & the City,” *Time*, 3 July 1950. Levittown and Crestwood Heights were the two most well-known and studied suburbs.

⁴⁵ “Third Levittown Gets Under Way,” *New York Times*, 6 June 1958.

⁴⁶ “The Census: From the Country & the City.”

⁴⁷ “The Census: From the Country & the City.”

arose around all major cities all over the country.⁴⁸ The suburbs marked a drastic social and geographic upheaval. The combination of new communities, new jobs, and a new type of college student created a vastly different society after World War II.

Influenced by the rapid and dramatic postwar changes in men's work, community, education, and expectations, many social critics believed that the new white-collar man of the 1950s no longer fit the traditional form of the self-made man. The dominant and most influential social commentators believed that corporations did not lend themselves to the ideas of direct competition, nor did they allow workers the necessary control to fulfill traditional gender norms. According to social commentators, men's relationship to corporations caused the decline of the "rugged individualism that is supposed to be the business of business."⁴⁹

Social commentators combined the emphasis on teamwork with the importance of personality as the foundation of their belief that corporations lacked competition. They believed men relied on their personalities as a way of negotiating their way through corporate hierarchies. Industrial psychologist Fred E. Fiedler's report on effective leadership in corporate settings indicated "our society has come to depend to an increasingly large degree on work which is performed by groups and teams rather than by individuals working alone." With the growing centrality of the team in business, personality became increasingly essential to effectively leading a group.⁵⁰ Specific personality types became so important that by 1954 sixty percent of corporations used some form of personality test.⁵¹ When looking for potential employees for white-collar jobs corporations sought men who participated in clubs and groups. Corporations linked participation in these clubs with a type of personality suitable for sales and white-collar work, qualities that remained

⁴⁸ "The Census: From the Country & the City."

⁴⁹ William H. Whyte Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 18.

⁵⁰ Fred E. Fiedler, *Leaders Attitudes and Group Effectiveness: Final Report of ONR 170-106, N6-ori-0713* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958).

⁵¹ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 173.

unimportant when hiring production workers.⁵²

Many outside the white-collar world perceived personality, group work, and conformity as more important than aptitude and individuality for success in white-collar occupations.⁵³ The three most influential works of the 1950s by *Fortune* editor William H. Whyte Jr. and sociologists David Riesman and C. Wright Mills all emphasized the late nineteenth century as the height of American masculinity. William H. Whyte Jr. lamented the loss of the Protestant work ethic mentality, which he believed declined after the nineteenth century. Corporations replaced the Protestant ethic with a new "Social Ethic." Whyte defined the Social Ethic as a "temporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual." The Social Ethic emphasized the belief in the group as "a source of creativity," the belief in belongingness, and the use of science to achieve belongingness, such as personality tests.⁵⁴ For some, this ethic resulted in a decline in individuality which was central to self-made man masculinity. Men looked to other men for ideas, instead of coming up with them on their own. Whyte believed men were no longer able to succeed independently. The reliance on other men implied weakness in white-collar men.

C. Wright Mills proposed a similar view of the past. Mills asserted that "the nineteenth-century farmer and businessman were generally thought to be stalwart individuals – their own men." For Mills the corporation spawned "a New Little Man" that always "belongs" to someone else. Mills considered the white-collar man a "small creature who is acted upon but does not act."⁵⁵ According to Mills, men no longer proved themselves in the public sphere. These men were incapable of acting, of performing and proving their masculinity in the public sphere. Instead, they became the property of other men. By contrast, the nineteenth century man offered complete control. While the white-collar man abdicated his power to other men, the self-made man remained fully capable of proving and defending his

⁵² "How to Apply for a Job," *Washington Post*, 6 November 1952, 13.

⁵³ *Esquire's Etiquette: A Guide to Business, Sports, and Social Conduct* by the editors of *Esquire* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1953), 36.

⁵⁴ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 1-7.

⁵⁵ Mills, *White Collar*, xii.

masculinity.

With a perspective similar to that of Mills, influential sociologist David Riesman coined the term “other-directed” to described white-collar men of the 1950s. The other-directed man, as opposed to the inner-directed man of the nineteenth century, relied on his peers for guidance and socialization. The inner-directed man expressed a self-assuredness, which the other-directed man replaced with an intense need to be accepted by his peer group.⁵⁶ Inner-directed men settled the frontier, while other-directed men manipulated their personalities to become “good packages.”⁵⁷ Other social critics of the period came to highly similar conclusions about men’s relationship to their work, and often adapted some variation of these terms and ideas. Mills, Whyte, and Riesman supplied the framework and the vocabulary for criticizing white-collar masculinity.

The men portrayed by Whyte, Mills, and Riesman each held a similar understanding of the nature of work, and looked to the nineteenth century as the epitome of manhood. For almost all of the commentators work was meant to build character, required individuality, and provided meaning. One of the most common assaults from social commentators against corporations was that corporations robbed men of meaningful labor.⁵⁸ Work for previous generations of men offered a sense of power, but the “fundamental structure” of the bureaucracy and hierarchy of corporations was believed to create feelings of powerlessness.⁵⁹ Riesman’s inner-directed man needed “discipline, sobriety and integrity.” With the belief that other-directed men dominated the society of the 1950s, many commentators believed that these

⁵⁶ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 16-24. Inner-directed men did exist in the 1950s, but they represented a small and declining minority.

⁵⁷ David Riesman, “Individualism Reconsidered,” in *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays*, ed. David Riesman (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1954), 27-35.

⁵⁸ David Riesman and Howard Roseborough, “Careers and Consumer Behavior,” 1955, in *Abundance For What? And Other Essays*, ed. David Riesman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), 147.

⁵⁹ Joseph Bensman and Bernard Rosenberg, “The Terror and Therapy of Work: The Meaning of Work in Bureaucratic Society,” in *Identity and Anxiety*, eds. Maurice Stein, Arthur Vidich and David Manning White (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), 186-191.

values were no longer required to achieve success.⁶⁰ New white-collar workers remained only “cogs of the bureaucratic machinery.”⁶¹

The perceived threat that white-collar workers posed to individuality contained implications for democracy. Social commentators believed the new emphasis on teamwork and personality eliminated the competition necessary for democracy to flourish.⁶² Riesman’s inner-directed man derived his idea of politics from the “sphere of production.” The inner-directed man viewed “politics as work, and work as good.”⁶³ The meaninglessness of the other-directed man’s work caused him to conceive of politics in a different way. Riesman asserted the other-directed man’s conception of politics came from “consumership.” These men no longer idolized “great politicians,” nor did they understand political issues. Instead the other-directed man consumed packaged values based on appearances.⁶⁴ The inner-directed man supposedly remained above the tricks and deceptions of advertising, but the corporate man lacked both the fortitude and the independence necessary to preserve democracy.⁶⁵

Despite the focus on the “decline” of democracy, commentators such as Riesman, Mills, Whyte, and their ilk rarely discussed the threat of communism.⁶⁶ Their conception of politics was tied less to the Cold War than to politics as a realm for the performance of masculinity. Historically, masculinity was linked to visibility in the public sphere, thus for these critics the white-collar workers’ retreat into the private sphere was a retreat into femininity. Politics of past generations offered a realm for men to prove their masculinity. However, the public space associated with masculinity began to vanish during the 1950s. Historian Lizabeth Cohen asserts “mass consumption in postwar America

⁶⁰ Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 115.

⁶¹ Mills, *White Collar*, 80.

⁶² Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Reinhart and Company, Inc., 1946), 210.

⁶³ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 210.

⁶⁴ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 211-216.

⁶⁵ Mills, *White Collar*, 43.

⁶⁶ The notable exception is Arthur Schlesinger Jr. While Schlesinger did not reference communism in his *Esquire* article, the theme is prevalent in several of his other works.

created a new landscape, where public space was more commercialized, privatized, and feminized....”⁶⁷ Large shopping centers replaced town squares, and private spaces limited men’s ability for public activity.⁶⁸ Social commentators’ attitudes towards white-collar men’s interests in politics, similar to their attitude towards white-collar work, are best understood as reactions to the changes in 1950s superstructures. These privately constructed new “town squares” were designed with the “female consumer in mind,” and diminished the public opportunities for men to demonstrate their masculinity.⁶⁹

Rather than accept a new form of masculinity based on a rapidly changing postwar society, social commentators blamed political apathy and most other social ills on white-collar men’s lack of individuality. Social critics believed conformity led to men’s success and promotions in the corporate world.⁷⁰ Whyte argued that corporate personnel men “weeded-out” strong-willed men, in order to find men able to thrive in a group-think environment.⁷¹ Despite an increase in material wealth, social commentators viewed white-collar men as considerably less independent.⁷²

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. believed conformity stemmed from an identity crisis faced by 1950s men. Schlesinger asked in *Esquire* magazine’s fitness guide: “What has happened to the American male? For a long time he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society.” The fear that “men will not be man enough” grew from an “uncertainty about his identity in general.”⁷³ Schlesinger specifically cited the “new age” of social and geographic mobility as the catalyst for the destruction of the self-made-man.⁷⁴ In order

⁶⁷ Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 286.

⁶⁸ Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 289.

⁶⁹ Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 278.

⁷⁰ David Riesman, “The Saving Remnant: An Examination of Character Structure,” in *Individualism Reconsidered*, 104.

⁷¹ Riesman, “The Saving Remnant,” 110.

⁷² David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 95.

⁷³ *Esquire’s The Art of Keeping Fit: On How the Successful Male Can Avoid Going to Seed*, by the editors of *Esquire* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 30-33.

⁷⁴ *Esquire’s The Art of Keeping Fit*, 32.

to reassert their masculinity men must reclaim:

[A] sense of individual spontaneity, and to do this a man must visualize himself as an individual apart from the group... Achievement and identity, the conquest of a sense of self – they will do more to restore American masculinity than all of the hormones in the test tubes of our scientists.⁷⁵

Schlesinger linked the idea of an identity crisis to men seeking material and social safety through conformity. Conformity stemmed from a lack of control. For Schlesinger and the other social critics, if men lacked the ability to control various aspects of their lives then they ceased to be men. Belonging to a group was believed to be relinquishing control, usually to other men. Schlesinger's identity crisis was a crisis of power. It was a crisis of an older form of hegemonic masculinity being challenged, and largely supplanted, by a newer white-collar ideal.

The rise of corporations caused a renegotiation of older conceptions of individualism and ambition, a negotiation many critics were reluctant to acknowledge. Social commentators fetishized nineteenth-century small business owners and independent farmers. They clung to the ideal of the self-made man as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Critics asserted the career of the independent farmer and the small business owner represented a world of risk, while the corporation reflected a world of security. Social critics asserted that the new man of the 1950s displayed a "passive ambition." For example, Whyte argued that men wanted to rise fast through the corporate hierarchy, but not if that ambition placed an unnecessary strain on them. Men only worked hard enough to achieve a specific standard of living.⁷⁶ Men, according to Whyte, consciously chose to no longer prove themselves in the marketplace, and instead opted for the feminine sphere of consumption and family.

Many critics believed the America of the 1950s did not reflect the historical "struggle of winners and losers," but a new America where "everyone has won a fairy-tale, luxury, but lost himself."⁷⁷ Work no longer built a strong character in men, and

⁷⁵ *Esquire's The Art of Keeping Fit*, 34-36.

⁷⁶ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 131.

⁷⁷ Harold Rosenberg, "The Organamerican Phantasy," in *Identity and Anxiety*, 324.

the love of luxury and leisure confirmed men's passivity. Social commentators considered the white-collar worker the ultimate passive male.⁷⁸ William H. Whyte Jr. noted that business jargon "is marked by the heavy use of passive construction. Nobody ever does anything. Things happen, prices rise but nobody raises them."⁷⁹ Passivity at work translated to sexual and physical inadequacies. White-collar men's lack of individuality translated into a lack of sexual confidence. Commentators believed the white-collar sphere contained significant levels of anxiety. Anxiety differed from the idea of stress. Stress came from hard work or overworking, while anxiety came from a lack of confidence about one's position or identity. Anxiety became responsible for a myriad of social and personal problems, including poor sexual performance. One industrial psychologist stated, "[t]hese men have drained off their energy through worry over their job so much [that] they are no longer any good lovers." Sexual anxiety further distracted men from their work, creating a downward spiral leading to further problems, such as alcoholism.⁸⁰

Commentators did not explicitly elaborate on the sexual prowess of the nineteenth century male, but the self-made man represented the antithesis of the white-collar male. It can be inferred that along with being a pillar of self-control and individuality, he exuded sexual prowess. David Riesman made the analogy, in *The Lonely Crowd*, that "the professional man's uneasy relation to his craft resembles that of a husband to a good-looking and flirtatious wife in a room full of competitive men."⁸¹ Riesman's analogy juxtaposed the sexual inadequacies attributed to the effeminate other-directed man, with a central characteristic, competitiveness, of the self-made man. The inherent

⁷⁸Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 21. Passivity's equation with femininity stemmed from the idea that men act. Bourdieu asserted men take action while women are receptors of actions. Passivity equaled femininity. Social commentators use of the word passive equated white-collar men with women.

⁷⁹ William H. Whyte Jr., *Is Anybody Listening?: How and Why U.S. Businesses Fumbles When it Talks With Human Beings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 48.

⁸⁰ Anonymous industrial psychologist quoted in Whyte, *Is Anybody Listening?*, 168.

⁸¹ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 141.

“competitive” and assertive nature sexually threatened the passive professional male. Riesman implied the professional male lacked the sexual ability to satisfy his wife, as well as the ability to control his household. Conversely, the inner-directed man was sexually alluring and capable of satisfying a woman. Riesman’s analogy alluded to the idea that the inner-directed man’s wife would never seek other men, while the other-directed man remained cuckolded by a flirtatious wife.

Portraying them as timid and passive in all areas of life, social commentators extended the idea of white-collar men’s passivity to the bedroom. While Riesman implied the virility and sexual prowess of the nineteenth-century man, *Esquire* identified a type of sexual encounter suitable for the physically and psychologically deteriorated white-collar male. *Esquire* asserted that white-collar work could render a man so unhealthy, and by extension unmanly, that it prohibited him from engaging in sexual activity. The passivity and sedentary lifestyle of white-collar work relegated men to being forced to have “sedate coitus.” Sedate coitus was marital intercourse “in the presence of a good, affectionate relationship, with the healthy spouse willing to co-operate in all the measures which the patient’s health makes advisable.”⁸² The “active,” “rugged,” “aggressive,” and “competitive” nature of the inner-directed man, capable of subduing and controlling his women and other men, would never allow him to engage in a sexual act such as “sedate coitus.” However, the act fit the “passive” nature of white-collar men, a group already perceived by many as physically and mentally soft.

Preoccupation with men’s softness in the bedroom reflected a broader concern with their overall health. Critics portrayed white-collar men as continuously worrying about their status, leading sedentary lifestyles, and working in overly comfortable jobs. An article in *Time* asserted that white-collar “subordinates” suffered from higher blood pressure and artery disease than their executive bosses. Arteriosclerosis, “fictionally supposed to be the greatest killer of tycoons,” was more common in executive’s “minions” than actual executives.⁸³ The *Time* magazine piece continued by suggesting that a man in his fifties

⁸² *Esquire’s The Art of Keeping Fit*, 48.

⁸³ Arteriosclerosis was the leading cause of heart attacks. “Medicine: The Life of Stress,” *Time*, 28 July 1958.

and still a subordinate most likely suffered from “inferiority feelings, a sense of injustice and frustration, whereas the top executive’s very position insures him against the worst ravages of all these stressful, health-destroying emotions.” Corporations acted upon men making them passive. That passivity caused deep feelings of inferiority, which eventually culminated into serious health problems.⁸⁴ Social commentators believed that allowing other men to determine their rate of success and thus giving other men control over them, caused such levels of self-doubt that it impacted men’s health.⁸⁵ Despite higher levels of responsibility, and presumably stress, executives who controlled their actions supposedly suffered from fewer health problems.⁸⁶

Blue-collar workers and workers who engaged in physical labor were not believed to suffer from heart problems the way white-collar men did. Hard physical labor did not damage a man’s health, but “work involving nervous and mental strains from hurrying, constant deadlines and too few vacations” caused serious health problems.⁸⁷ Social commentators believed the self-made man’s work shielded him from fraying nerves, because it instilled in him a character lacking in the white-collar worker. Values such as “hard work, thrift and abstemiousness” created a man capable of the risk and rigor required to succeed as an independent business owner. Since critics believed these values remained absent from white-collar life, the self-doubting, anxious, white-collar worker remained vulnerable to health problems.⁸⁸ White-collar work caused men to “go to pot.”⁸⁹

White-collar work’s perceived impact did not stop with men’s health, bodies, and libido, but influenced men’s roles within their homes and communities. Social commentators believed the wives of white-collar men became part of the corporation, and suburbs extended the corporation’s value of conformity. Wives became an essential part of a white-collar man’s personality.⁹⁰ Women’s social capacity in entertaining and

⁸⁴ “Medicine: The Life of Stress.”

⁸⁵ *Esquire’s The Art of Keeping Fit*, 6.

⁸⁶ “Medicine: The Life of Stress.”

⁸⁷ *Esquire’s The Art of Keeping Fit*, 8.

⁸⁸ Henry, *Culture Against Man*, 44.

⁸⁹ *Esquire’s The Art of Keeping Fit*, xi. Pot means out of shape, obese, unhealthy.

⁹⁰ Wives also became important because they reassured employers of men’s

mingling at office events could help or hinder their husband's careers.⁹¹ Whyte believed that business intentionally attempted to "cross the threshold" of the home through family programs and family social clubs. One executive characterized the ideal wife as "highly adaptable, gregarious, and realizes her husband belongs to the corporation."⁹² The wife became a manifestation of the corporation, and her behavior and personality were scrutinized just as thoroughly her husband's personality.⁹³ For the wife of the corporate man gossip, an unwillingness to move, a breach of social etiquette when dealing with her husband's superior's wife, being disagreeable, or even being unattractive all could potentially sabotage her husband's career.⁹⁴

Critics portrayed wives as inextricably bound to the corporation, just like their husbands. A man's loss of personality and individualism extended to his wife. Louis Ruthenburg, Board Chairman of Serval, a gas refrigerator corporation, never hired a white-collar worker without examining his wife first. Ruthenburg and other executives called wives at home, because if a man married a wife "who didn't fix her husband a good breakfast" then he "wasn't a good risk." Even a wife's career posed a risk to the white-collar or potential white-collar worker. A wife with an income caused suspicion, because it meant either that a man lived beyond his means or that his wife "wears the pants."⁹⁵ In contrast, the self-made man's wife did not determine his success or status.⁹⁶ Social commentators asserted that women's conformity to an ideal type for their husband's success mimicked the same conformity men endured to get ahead.

The assertion that the corporation controlled employees' households served as the ultimate emasculation. Social commentators believed men no longer "controlled" their wives,

heterosexuality.

⁹¹ This focuses on women who were not low level white-collar workers themselves, but wives of white-collar workers only.

⁹² Anonymous executive quoted in Whyte, *Is Anybody Listening?*, 146.

⁹³ Whyte, *Is Anybody Listening?*, 146-154.

⁹⁴ Whyte, *Is Anybody Listening?*, 155-156. One example of a breach of etiquette would be inviting her husband's boss's wife out, rather than accepting an invitation.

⁹⁵ Anonymous executive quoted in Whyte, *Is Anybody Listening?*, 180-183.

⁹⁶ *Esquire's All About Women*, ed. Saul Maloff and the editors of *Esquire* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963), 34.

but allowed other men, their bosses, to do so. The corporation, not women's husbands, set expectations for women's behavior. The self-made man controlled his household, but social critics believed the corporation controlled both the white-collar man and his wife. Women and other men performed the role of traditional masculinity, because white-collar men remained incapable of doing so themselves.

Not only did men's relationships with their wives come under scrutiny, but their role in their community did as well. William H. Whyte, Jr. identified the suburbs as reflecting "values of the organization man, communities made in his image... new social institutions, dormitory life into adulthood."⁹⁷ The suburbs, made up of similar houses, gave significance to innocuous purchases. Since one's home no longer displayed wealth to the neighbors, "meaningless" purchases conveyed status between white-collar workers.⁹⁸ *Business Week* deemed the 1950s an age of "inconspicuous consumption," where the addition of a swimming pool or new refrigerator separated one home from another.⁹⁹ Men and women in the suburbs "struggle with their gardens," because the garden offered a form of consumption visible to their neighbors. Southern historian William Dobriner summed up social commentators' view of the trivialness of suburban living when he stated a "sloppy garden" meant an inept household.¹⁰⁰

The suburbs placed an increased emphasis on consumption and luxury, which further alienated the white-collar man from the self-made man ideal. Believed to be an extension of the corporation by social commentators, the suburbs invoked the same fear of the loss of individuality. Suburbanites no longer wanted a relationship with city, and as attitudes toward work and leisure intertwined they viewed the home as a "self-sufficient center."¹⁰¹ The emergence of large chain stores, such as

⁹⁷ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 267-280.

⁹⁸ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 287-314.

⁹⁹ "The Leisured Masses," *Business Week*, 12 September 1953, 150.

¹⁰⁰ William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 9. Suburbanite refers to someone who lives in the suburbs, also referred to as an exurbanite. Suburbanite is equated with a white-collar family, and in this paper white-collar male.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 238-241.

supermarkets, allowed for suburbs to become almost entirely independent enclaves. Supermarkets and mass retailers freed suburbanites from dependence on the city, and increased the isolation of white-collar enclaves.¹⁰² The rise of supermarkets corresponded with the decline of the “mom-and-pop food stores.” *New York Times* contributor and financial expert Sidney Margolius noted:

Thus is the last stronghold of traditional American ‘rugged individualism’ being breached. Time was when an ambitious young man could start a career in retailing with a small store, or even a push cart. Now he is more likely to become a corporation employee, an organization man in what has become one of the biggest of big businesses.¹⁰³

Supermarkets’ triumph over the independent entrepreneur exemplified the negotiation between white-collar masculinity and the self-made man. The supermarket reflected a new world of convenience, leisure and luxury, while social critics perceived it as an example of mass consumption and conformity, both of which commentators considered feminine.

Suburbs epitomized the “modern culture” loathed by social commentators.¹⁰⁴ By the end of the 1950s, the suburbs became the dominant communities for white-collar workers, and provided a drastically different landscape from before World War II.¹⁰⁵ Political scientist and member of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Robert Wood summarized critics’ views of white-collar suburbanites when he asserted that they “exchange individuality, privacy, the certain satisfaction of pride and craftsmanship and work well done, for something obscurely defined as the social ethic....” Wood, utilizing Whyte’s conception of the social ethic, believed the suburbs created communities where people with no natural ties to each other sought an identity through conformity and mass consumption. Only consumption allowed a suburbanite to obtain status in the

¹⁰² Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia*, 18.

¹⁰³ Sidney Margolius, “Super Business of Supermarkets,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1959.

¹⁰⁴ Robert C. Wood, *Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 1.

¹⁰⁵ Wood, *Suburbia*, 4.

community. For critics the hard work and reputation that made the nineteenth century man the pillar of his community no longer existed.¹⁰⁶

The 1950s represented a vastly changing world for middle-class men. New occupations and communities offered a higher standard of living, but came with new types of pressures. The white-collar worker existed since at least the late nineteenth century, but never represented a dominant group until after World War II. The corporation increased men's standard of living and ability to enjoy their leisure time, but it also became "the relentless enemy of individuality" to the critics of the 1950s.¹⁰⁷ Many influential thinkers proclaimed that corporations diminished the importance of competition and rugged individualism, and replaced struggle with security and prosperity.¹⁰⁸ This led many social commentators to believe they lived during a new period of American history, a type of "fourth epoch," based on new white-collar values.¹⁰⁹ Social critics rejected these values, and attempted to keep the self-made man ethos central to masculinity in the 1950s. However, white-collar men "reproduced themselves like fruit flies," until they became the predominant character type of the white, middle-class men. The new white-collar ideal replaced the independent businessman and the self-made man model of masculinity by the end of the 1950s.¹¹⁰

The idea of the self-made man had been the pinnacle of masculinity since the mid-nineteenth century. Shaping the land, asserting dominance, self-control, competition, individuality and succeeding in the face of great risk: these were the attributes of hegemonic masculinity. White-collar work challenged hegemonic masculinity with new values of teamwork, family, and leisure. The dominant social structures of the 1950s no longer allowed for hegemonic masculinity to exist in the way 1950s commentators envisioned. The ideal of the self-made man no longer fit in a

¹⁰⁶ Wood, *Suburbia*, 5-7.

¹⁰⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 52.

¹⁰⁹ C. Wright Mills, "On Reason and Freedom," in *Identity and Anxiety*, 112.

¹¹⁰ Harold Rosenberg, "The Orgamerican Fantasy," in *Identity and Anxiety*, 328.

white-collar society, yet social commentators still championed it as the ideal form of masculinity. The clashing values of the self-made man and the reality of the white-collar worker created a state where social commentators perceived a dire crisis of masculinity.

Whether or not an actual crisis of masculinity existed in the 1950s, it undoubtedly existed in the minds of a very influential group of social commentators. The 1950s was a period in which hegemonic masculinity was not only challenged by disempowered groups such as women and homosexuals, but by the dominant group of white middle-class men. It was not a period of stable gender norms, but rather a period where the meaning of hegemonic masculinity was up for renegotiation. Social commentators reacted to a new dominant group of white-collar workers that challenged their ideal of the self-made man. These commentators did not deal with crisis on the individual level, but attempted to encourage stability in a period where masculinity remained in flux. The emergence of white-collar workers allowed for a vast cultural discussion of what it meant to be a man in the 1950s, and these social commentators offer a clear and coherent argument for the retention of the self-made man as ideal in the 1950s.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Emily Westkamper, Sierra Smith, and editor Sarah Lebel Van Vugt for all of their help with this article.