Men in Gray Flannel Suits: Troubling Masculinities in 1950s America

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Abstract:

This essay deals with American family life in the 1950s. In its first part, the text scrutinizes how the corresponding gender stereotypes were culturally shaped by an array of discursive enunciations and a vast number of social and political practices. A closer look at the 1950s focus-on-the-family will reveal that the breadwinning father was not at all the undisputed hegemonic male stereotype of the age. A conflict between differing norms of masculinity has to be attested: On the one hand, after World War II the restoration of the father to the leading position in the family promised to stabilize post- and cold war-America, on the other hand critics bemoaned a loss of virility among the fathers of the 1950s. A fear of masculine decline permeated American society, caused by the conformist urge and the obviously limited options of suburbanized and corporate life. Talk about a "crisis" among heterosexual white men was everywhere, and this supposed crisis was perceived as a crisis of America at large. The troubling masculinities in 1950s America will take center stage in the second part of my essay. This will be exemplified by an analysis of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, a 1950s book and movie, whose protagonist Tom Rath (Gregory Peck) epitomized the American suburbanite who felt overpowered by the requirements being addressed to him as a man.

Introduction

1   "The father" belongs to the most powerful concepts in American history. Since the foundation of the republic, being a caring and responsible father, protector, and provider, has been declared the most important part of every man's existence and the ultimate object of his longing. More than that, as embodiment of responsibility, reliability, and rationality, "the father" has been not only the seemingly "natural" head of his family, but he has also been defined as cornerstone of the liberal republic and its social and political order. By stressing the interdependence of individual, familial, and social/national well-being, politicians from John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to Bill Clinton, Newt Gringrich, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have re-enforced the notion that men have to live up to the ideal of good fatherhood to be good republican citizens. From the American Revolution to the Reagan Revolution and beyond, functional families with fathers and mothers were deemed "the fundamental building block of our society."[1]

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[1] The quote is from the congressional debate about the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act," Congressional Record. 104/2, Vol. 142, No. 102, July 11, 1996: 7441-47. Introductions to the history of families and fatherhood in America are provided by Cott, Public Vows; Griswold, Fatherhood in America. Critical studies about the focus on the family and its interdependence with the political organization of U.S. society are for instance offered by Kann, The Gendering of American Politics.; Yazawa, From Colonies to Commonwealth.; Martschukat, "Vaterfigur und Gesellschaftsordnung um 1800."; Adam,"The Defense of Marriage Act and American Exceptionalism." and May, "`Family Values´: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History."

2   Recent scholarship in the field of social and cultural history has convincingly argued that this concept of responsible fatherhood has been immensely powerful, persistent, and normalizing over the centuries, for instance by pointing out that the stigmatization of black men as deficient fathers and their continuous exclusion from political, economic, and cultural resources are two sides of the same coin (Finzsch*; Estes)*. The compelling normativity and longevity of this father-and-family-nexus is all the more astonishing since the nuclear family with breadwinning father and homemaking mother has hardly ever represented the household arrangements of a majority of Americans. That is why historian Stephanie Coontz named her most influential book on the history of American families "The Way We Never Were." In her study, Coontz argues that the current American obsession with family values and the constant invocation of the seemingly traditional family as embodiment of a better past has contributed to the creation of a nostalgic myth which, after all, strengthens existent power structures and social stratifications along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

3   However, as Coontz also stresses, if there ever was a period in American history when the normative ideal of the nuclear family and real life came close, it was the 1950s. Accordingly, in today's intense culture war about family values, the 1950s are often glorified as years of an ideal society, carried by a strong white middle-class perfectly organized in nuclear families, consisting of men and women leading their lives as married couples according to their supposedly natural determinations defined by their sex.

4   After the Great Depression and World War II, the re-solidification of American society seemed to require the re-invocation of the gender stereotypes of breadwinning father and homemaking mother. "Building a straight state" was the paramount object of American postwar politics (Canaday). As historians Elaine Tyler May and Kyle A. Cuordileone have argued convincingly, the upcoming conflict with the Soviet Union and the penetrating nuclear scare gave this drive towards a family centered heteronormative society further momentum – a society that consolidated itself by excluding everybody non-heterosexual, non-white, non-normalized. According to Elaine Tyler May, "the nuclear family in the nuclear age" was one of the most powerful images of the 1950s (May, *Homeward Bound*).

5   Yet, as I will show in my article, even with regard to the family centered 1950s, historical scrutiny confounds easy answers. Therefore, in the first part of my essay, I will discuss how this seemingly natural lifestyle and the corresponding gender stereotypes were culturally shaped by an array of discursive enunciations (in the social sciences, in magazines, film, literature etc.) and a vast number of social and political practices. Second, complementary to historian Joanne Meyerowitz' argument that American 1950s society was less straight than

it seemed on the surface (Meyerowitz, *Sex Wars*; Meyerowitz, *Transnational Sex* 1280), my closer look at the 1950s focus-on-the-family will make the assertion that the breadwinning father was the undisputed hegemonic male stereotype of the age, a contentious one. Even if we focus on white heterosexual middle-class men, a conflict between differing norms of masculinity has to be attested: On the one hand, the restoration of the father to the leading position in the family promised to stabilize post- and cold war-America, on the other hand critics bemoaned a loss of virility among the fathers of the 1950s. A fear of masculine decline permeated American society, caused by the conformist urge and the obviously limited options of suburbanized and corporate life. Talk about a "crisis" among heterosexual white men was everywhere, and this supposed crisis was perceived as a crisis of America at large: of its strength and stability. These antagonisms between different male stereotypes captured something quintessential about America at that time, and both, the caring, responsible father as well as the strong-minded man who pioneered the continent and built American greatness, were deemed indispensable for America's stability and survival.[2] The troubling masculinities in 1950s America will take center stage in the second part of my essay. This will be exemplified by an analysis of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, a 1950s book and movie, whose protagonist Tom Rath (Gregory Peck) epitomized the American suburbanite who felt overpowered by the requirements being addressed to him as a man.

De- and re-centred men

6   Understanding the obsessive urge of American postwar society to reinstall the man as head of the household requires going back to the early 1930s when a long process of masculine de-centering began. With the Great Depression and unemployment rates of up to 25% of the labor force, the quintessential male stereotype of father and breadwinner was not accomplished by a significant number of men any longer. In the 1930s, sociological studies researched the psychological and material effects of constant unemployment upon men, their position in the private and in the public sphere. These studies diagnosed a fundamental dislocation of traditional gender roles in both, families (and particularly white lower middle-class and upper working class families) and the society at large. Often enough, men had to accept relief and, on top of that, put up with the fact that wife and children filled the gap they had left by contributing to the family income with more or less meager jobs (Martschukat, "I relinquished power in the

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[2] For a study on white middle-class men in 1950s America see Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*.

family"). [3] "The Depression was emasculating both at work and at home," writes historian Michael Kimmel, "unemployed men lost status with their wives and children and saw themselves as impotent patriarchs" (199). [4]

7   The Great Depression lasted all through the 1930s, and, at last, economic recovery was brought by World War II and the transformation to a war economy. However, regarding the ideal of American nuclear families, war and mobilization meant further dislocation through potentially absent fathers and working mothers. Sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and the press raised their voices against drafting fathers into the army, because if fathers carried their responsibility as citizen soldiers and fought the war abroad, the dissolution of the American family and a lack of parental guidance at home were fearfully expected as a consequence. It was widely argued that without fathers as role models and patriarchal educators, young boys would get spoiled by "the pathology of maternal overprotection" and by "momism," and they would finally transmute into either effeminate homosexuals or violent criminals (Whiley). Consequently, "rebels without a cause" would emerge, a term that was coined by psychologist Robert Lindner in 1944 and taken up in the mid-1950s as argument in the debate on the decay of American men and the deterioration of their gender role.

8   These devastating consequences were stressed in 1943 by Senator Burton Wheeler in intense congressional debates on exempting fathers from the draft. Wheeler and his supporters pointed out that absent fathers and husbands meant promiscuous wives, disoriented children, dysfunctional families, destroyed homes, and social decay in general. As consequence, not only the total annihilation of the traditional, self-reliant American family unit lurked (which had been weakened by the economic depression, anyway), but the loss of the American way of life as such – and totalitarianism stood in the doorway: „The home is the backbone of a democratic republic, is it not?", Wheeler asked rhetorically, "if you destroy the home, you destroy your country, you destroy America."[5]

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[3] Sociological studies on unemployed men and their families were conducted by E. Wight Bakke Unemployed Worker and Citizens Without Work, and by Mira Komarovsky. The disrupting effects of unemployment on men are also shown by numerous letters written to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and edited by McElvaine, Down and Out.

[4] The dislocation of gender roles during the Great Depression is also discussed by Griswold 143-160, and Jarvis 15-35, whereas the only historic monograph on 1930s fathers focuses on the modernization of fatherhood (LaRossa).

[5] U.S. Congress, Senate. Subcommittee on Military Affairs: Hearings on Married Men Exemption. Drafting of Fathers, 78 Cong. 1st session, 1943, 310. See also the related hearings on juvenile delinquency as effect of absent fathers: U.S. Congress, Senate. Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor: Hearings on Wartime Health and Education: Juvenile Delinquency, parts 1, 4 , 78th Congress, 1944. For the contemporary debate see for instance Malkin or Modell and Steffey.

9   Though the majority of congressmen rejected finally Burton Wheeler's idea, nevertheless fathers were drafted in a less rigorous manner, and they were the first to be released from the service when the war came to an end. In addition, the functional family was in the center of national wartime rhetoric and iconography. A powerful national discourse of political debates, propaganda, radio shows, or commercials constantly repeated that young men fought this war for the protective and cozy family, and it emphasized that the currently de-centered world of work, social life, and gender should be limited in time. The war aim of reclaiming the traditional social and gender structure was for instance explained by a young man to his girl in a popular 1942 radio show named *to the young*. According to the boy's words, the Second World War was "about love and gettin' hitched, and havin' a home and some kids, and breathin' fresh air out in the suburbs ... about livin' and workin' *decent*, like free people." Obviously, the family provided some understandable substance to abstract values like freedom, democracy, and humanity, as argued by historians Elaine Tyler May, Robert Westbrook, or Matthias Reiss in an article on the famous New Haven-Railroad advertisement about the *Kid in Upper* 4 (Cott 187; May, *Homeward Bound* 51; Blum 28; Prinzon and Swain).

10   In addition, even before D-Day and the first GIs disembarked on the shores of the Normandy, the U.S. federal government had begun to prepare for the return of the veterans and the reconstruction of a male and father-focused society after the war. After all, though fathers were reluctantly drafted into the service, every young man fighting in World War II was at least a *potential* father who would need the support of his government to live up to the totally different expectations of a peacetime society (Modell and Steffey). In June 1944, the *Servicemen's Readjustment Act* was adopted, and it declared all soldiers to be future providers. The so-called *GI-Bill* supported World War II-veterans morally, socially, and financially. It provided educational opportunities to every veteran, preferred treatment on the job market, health insurance, and affordable family housing through subsidies and cheap credits. It is noteworthy that veterans were 98% male and 96% white, which underscores the fact that white men were reinforced as the focal point of American society. Historian David Onkst underlines this point by demonstrating that African-American veterans were largely denied their GI Bill benefits through local offices of the Veterans Administration.

11   After the war, countless experts, a flood of advice-literature, and increasingly intense TV programming constantly reiterated that men, women, and children needed each other to rebuild a "normal" and safer world where everybody would fulfill his or her so-called naturally defined duties. Also, the wedding and family enthusiasm unfolded in full force. Americans married younger (women at 20.5 years and men at 22.5 years on the average), had more children

(3.2 on the average), and built more houses than ever in rapidly growing and exclusively white suburbs. After fifteen years of depression and war, suburban postwar utopias like the notorious "Levittowns", in combination with the financial subsidies of the federal government under the GI Bill, opened up new opportunities to white Americans to own affordable housing in what was considered a family-friendly environment (Canaday).The building contractor and entrepreneur William J. Levitt sold the most moderately prized houses for $ 6,990, and even a higher class ranch-style house sold for less than $ 10,000, with no (or a very limited) down payment and an interest rate of 2-3%. For instance Levittown, New York, had 17,400 houses, each equipped with a living room with panorama window, and three bedrooms, fully equipped kitchen and bathroom, and a barbecue place, giving room to 82,000 residents – and according to historian Kenneth Jackson none of them were black. Between 1945 and 1960, 12 million houses for 40 million people were built throughout the US. Sixty-two percent of the American population owned property, and more than half of the male household heads had been supported by federal government funding (Coontz 76ff.; Halberstam 132-139; Jackson 241; Hayden 128-153; see also Keating; Wiese).

12   The suburban sprawl was of major significance in the project of reclaiming the American way of life. After fifteen years of abdication and austerity in depression and war, and, moreover, facing the new threat of communism and collectivism, living the American way of life more than ever meant property, consumption, family life, and distinct genders, all of which seemed to signify and assure individuality. Within this "reproductive consensus" of the postwar world, to use a term coined by sociologist Barbara Ehrenreich, women's place was declared to be at home and with the family. Though the absolute number of working women hardly changed after the war, women did not proportionately participate in the postwar boom of the labor market, and the wartime heroine in overalls disappeared from American culture and discourse (Ehrenreich; May, *Rosie;* Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver)*. Popular magazines like *Life, Look* or *Esquire* demonized working wives as "menace" or "disease," and the concept of an independent woman was declared a "contradiction in terms." The desire to re-create a clear-cut social and gender structure seemed to require the institutionalization of a male provider and a female homemaker at its core. In post- and cold war culture there was only room for a straight and conventional heterosexual gender identity, and American society was permeated by a manic fear of the privately and politically destructive potential of non-conform genders and sexualities outside of the boundaries of married relationships (Friedmann; Johnson; Cuordileone).[6]

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[6] The confusion created by Alfred Kinsey's studies on sexuality have been discussed by Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 81-105.

13   This cold war was a war without a front, where a man proved his civic responsibility by having success at home and at the workplace, by being a good father and provider, a good producer and consumer, rather than a soldier, fighting at the front with a gun in his hands. The political constellation matched perfectly with Sigmund Freud's writings, which were particularly influential and culturally all-embracing in those years (Yalom). Responsible fatherhood was defined as the one and only form of sound manhood and citizenship, as the unmistakable sign of male "maturity," a keyword of the 1950s. Every other lifestyle but a heterosexual relationship with children was deemed immature and an indicator of escapism; an escapism that was deemed the more threatening by the mainstream culture because it seemed to be spreading. For instance H.A. Overstreet, author of a 1950s non-fiction bestseller entitled *The Mature Mind*, stressed that a man is immature if he regards the support of a family as a kind of a trap in which he, an unsuspecting male, has somehow been caught. Again, the person who cannot settle down, who remains a vocational drifter, or the person who wants the prestige of a certain type of work but resents the routines that go with it, are immature in their sense of function.

14   It is important to note that being immature and unmarried was not only considered an aberration from the path of the good and the normal, but a pathological disorder. Overstreet's conclusion was just one small item in an encompassing discourse. As sociologist Morris Zelditch put it in a 1955 essay published in a collection by Talcott Parsons, the American male, by definition, *must* 'provide' for his family. He is *responsible* for the support of his wife and children. […] His *primary* function in the family is to supply an 'income', to be the 'breadwinner'. There is simply something wrong with the American adult male who doesn't have a 'job' [and a family]. (339) Obviously, after long years of social, political, and gender confusion, the American man and his family finally seemed to be re-centered. According to a representative public-opinion poll, at that time only ten percent of Americans believed that an unmarried person might achieve happiness. One of the highly popular advice manuals got to the point by stressing the normativity and the seeming self-evidence of the marriage- and family-focus: "The family is the center of your living. If it isn't, you've gone far astray." (Coontz 25)

Men in gray flannel suits

15   Dominant as the "reproductive consensus" and the concept of family and fatherhood in the American suburban utopia of the postwar world was, it still caused a certain cultural uneasiness inspired by an increasingly threatening fear of masculine decline. After all, a man's

life seemed extremely limited when his ultimate object of desire was a fully equipped "ranch-style family home" in one of those Levittowns, with three children in the house, a station wagon in the garage, a highball in his hand, and a steak on the grill. Soon, those residential areas were given nicknames like "rabbit hutch" or "fertility valley." (May, *Homeward Bound* 153; Jackson 235) This sort of life offered no great expectations or prospects, and it restricted men in their opportunities and their ambitions. One of the questions which concerned more and more American writers and intellectuals was, what sort of men were shaped by these standardized homes in standardized suburbs, rushed every morning to catch the 8:26 downtown train to spend the day in their standardized offices from nine to five? Didn't a life like that mean total emasculation, the complete loss of virility, male death by conformity?

16   It was just the beginning of the 1950s, when sociologist David Riesman characterized modern men as "other-directed conformists." According to Riesman, modern men had been taught to conform to group designs and to please others. They had no sense of direction any more, and in his version of postwar America, its men and its masculinity, the suburban utopia of consumerism and family life distorted into a conformist dystopia. According to historian James Gilbert, "David Riesman was the reluctant prophet of the new man in this purportedly feminized modern world of togetherness, suburbs, personnel manipulation, and mass culture." (Gilbert, *Men in the Middle* 61; see also Gilbert, "David Riesmann und die Krise der Männlichkeiten") Riesman's diagnosis was widely supported, for instance by social critic C. Wright Mills who complained that white middle-class men did not take their lives into their own hands anymore – and in the 1950s 60% of Americans were considered belonging to the middle class. They did not act, but were mostly acted upon, were "never talking loud, never talking back, never taking a stand." (Riesman, 11-12) Whereas according to the established gender concepts in 1950s America, other-directedness and woman matched perfectly, other-directed men appeared as contradiction in terms. They seemed effeminate, soft, and – in a word – "emasculated." After all, these men were not in control of their lives any more and not able to govern themselves, and self-control and self-government were defined as crucial features of real men in liberal societies.[7] Obviously, two predominant male concepts were deeply antagonistic, and that posed a troubling dilemma. In this world of suburban family fathers and "corporate clones" (Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* 117), men's masculine drives seemed to vanish. Men who controlled their own destinies, pushed frontiers and conquered the unknown, envisioned progress, and turned nature into culture and civilization – men who had made

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[7] On self-government, masculinty, and liberalism see Martschukat "Vaterfigur und Gesellschaftsordnung um 1800", and Martschukat "Feste Bande lose schnüren."

America great, in other words – did not exist any more.[8] In the suburban residential areas, the American frontier in the wilderness had degenerated into a "crabgrass frontier," to borrow an expression from historian Kenneth Jackson. The American male was "domesticated" and seemed to vanish in a state of deep "crisis," as numerous voices in the public American discourse moaned in the early 1950s. He subordinated himself and his manliness to the conformist urge and finally disappeared as "real man." After all, the act of subjection was perceived as incompatible with straight masculinity, liberal capitalism, and democracy, but as an inherent feature of femininity, homosexuality, and totalitarian societies. (Jackson; Cuordileone; Canaday)

17   In 1955, the archetype of the other-directed, domesticated, conformist man was invented. Tom Rath was the main character of Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,* which was initially published both as a book and a serialized version in *Collier's Magazine.* Though contemporary critics dismissed the book as low-brow literature, the story was turned into a movie within less than a year, starring Gregory Peck as Tom Rath and Jennifer Jones as his wife Betsy. Tom perfectly incorporated the 1950s' male dilemma of opposite demands. On the one hand, he lived his life according to the familial imperatives of the postwar world, and yet, on the other hand, he was grayish, conformist, not in control of his own existence, subordinated, and consequently considered "no man at all."[9]

18   Tom Rath lives in one of the burgeoning suburban residential areas, commuting between wife Betsy and children in Connecticut and his boring job in New York City. All of Tom's life is focused on a moderate increase in salary and a larger house which appear to be worth giving up masculine self-determination. At first, Tom plays according to the rules of the conformist game, and he is willing to get along with everybody and everything just to get ahead. When Tom's story was published, critics immediately took his fictional life as paradigmatic of most American men's real life. In a book review, the magazine *Look* (1 May 1956, 104-106) emphasized that in real life "nearly every white-collar man" was in the same situation as Tom, and, similarly, *Life* magazine pointed out that Tom was caught in the "Gray Flannel *Trap,*" (9 April 1956, 111-114) and as such, he was the prototype of the contemporary American suburban man. According to the critics, a man like Tom, be it in real life or in fiction, had been transformed into a "professional yes-man," an "unprincipled robot" of company and family,

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[8] On the concept of conquering masculinity see Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*; see also Greenberg, "Männlichkeiten, territoriale Expansion und die amerikanische Frontier im 19. Jahrhundert"

[9] Gerald Weales, Life in Modern America, in: Commonweal (26 Aug. 1955), 526, maintained that Tom Rath is "not everyman, but no man at all." Book and film are discussed by Rosenberg; Wood,17-29; Cohan, 68-78; Bruzzi, 37-50.

had lost his self-determination, and had stopped being a man. It is important to note that none of the critiques was limited in its scope to film and book. They all stressed that Tom's story represents the typical American male life in 1950s America.

19   Tom's malaise cannot be understood without taking the role of his wife Betsy into consideration. After all, she urges her husband Tom to apply for a better-paid job because she longs for a bigger and more costly house. It is her desire to move on in the feminized world of consumerism that forces Tom to play according to the rules of the conformist game. Yet, as soon as he has learned to sidle through the world, please his boss, and advance in an unobtrusive way, Betsy complains about her husband having lost his drive and his self-determination. She wants a good father for her children, a good provider, and "a real man" at the same time. In one of their countless debates she gets to the point by saying, "I wanted you to go out and fight for something *again* – like the man I married [before the war]. Not to turn into a cheap, slippery yes-man." (Wilson 185)[10]

20   By referring to Tom's fighter qualities, Betsy relates the 1950s father to the soldier who fought for family and democracy in World War II. Besides the powerful urge to conform, it is the war memories that make Tom suffer most. In the postwar-world, and facing the upcoming cold war, there was neither room nor time for American soldiers to cope with their disturbing war experiences, be it the cruelty of war or marital infidelity in the face of death. (Michel; Förster and Beck; Bourke; Engelhardt) While Tom had spent the summer of 1945 in Rome, waiting to be transferred from the European to the Pacific war theatre, he had fathered a child. In book and film, that child breaks into utopian family life in suburban Connecticut and makes its quandaries visible. Only when Tom finally confesses his infidelity to Betsy does he regain control over his life once again. Through intense marital struggles, Tom earns Betsy's understanding and even her support for the decision to take responsibility for his child in Italy. This is Tom's coming out as father *and* self-directed man because he consciously decides to live for family and fatherhood. After having taken that decision, his life as father is not an expression of other-directed conformity any more but of autonomous self-control. Tom has solved the male dilemma and bridged the gap between the antagonistic male concepts – *seemingly* antagonistic, as we know now, after the presentation of Tom's solution. (Wilson 260-276)

21   Yet, in the American public and among American intellectuals, the way Tom solved the dilemma of antagonistic male concepts did not gain him as much popularity as epitomizing the

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[10] The conversation is quoted acc. to the movie; in the book she stresses that "I don't like the idea of you becoming a cheap cynical yes-man and being so self-satisfied and analytical about it [the problem they are discussing];"

man in gray. Soon after the publication of book and film, Tom evolved into one of the dominant male representations of the age, he was the incarnation of the "dishwashing dad" and the "slippery yes-man." When for instance sociologist William Whyte revealed his thoughts on *The Organization Man* in 1956, he declared Tom Rath to be "paradigmatic of corporate life in America." In November 1956, a popular magazine like *Woman's Home Companion* referred to the man in gray to stress the importance of conserving a strong-minded and strong-bodied masculinity for America: "If the masculine drives are always and completely inhibited," it warned its readers, "the man in the gray flannel suit will stop being a man." In 1958, *Look* published a special edition on "conformity," including essays that emphasized the interconnectedness of an allegedly sound masculinity and a stable and democratic political and social system: "One dark morning this winter, Gary Gray awakened and realized, he had forgotten to say the word 'I'. ... He had lost his individuality. In the free and democratic United States of America, he had been subtly rooked of a heritage that Communist countries deny by force."(Whyte 146, 278)[11] Finally, the *Playboy* magazine has to be mentioned, which since the mid-1950s was one of the bestselling magazines on the American market, and it constantly battled against "conformity, togetherness, anonymity," explicitly fought the "gray flannel mind" and the "womanization of America" (Wylie, *The Abdicating Male* 29).[12]

Exit options

22   American culture and society developed several strategies and instruments to cope with this perceived dilemma of antagonistic male concepts, to keep the father alive and revive the dominating male explorer. One way, demonstrated by Tom Rath, was the conscious decision for family and fatherhood. By launching his *Playboy* magazine in December 1953, Hugh Hefner opened up an alternative option. The *Playboy* was sold to millions of men and fathers by boasting that "we aren't a 'family magazine.'" Hefner earned a fortune by selling the fantasy of individual and masculinized consumerism to millions of family men: While they remained within the boundaries of their family life, consuming the *Playboy* nourished the dream of owning a fast sports car instead of a station wagon, of living in an urban skyscraper playboy

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[11]Lyndon, 107; besides the Look - special see on conformity Lindner, Must You Conform? Leonard, "The American Male: Why Is He Afraid to Be Different?"

[12] See also Wylie, "The Womanization of America"; Panel: "The Womanization of America" Playboy (June 1962). Interestingly enough, when in 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan published his notorious Moynihan-Report purporting the dysfunctional black family, he refers to the "gray flannel suit" to characterize a life-style nonexistent among black men. On the other hand, Norman Mailer (White Negro) establishes in his article on the "White Negro" the urban black outlaw as counterpoint to the effeminate white suburban man in gray. I would like to thank Nina Mackert (34) for drawing my attention to this reference.

penthouse instead of a suburban ranch-style family home, of wearing elegant silk instead of gray flannel, and of loving pretty young bunnies instead of their wives (Osgerby).

23   Another outlet for the supposedly generic male drive and the creative energy of the explorer that was inhibited by cold war family life was "the hobby," which gained new momentum in the 1950s. The hobby was supposed to channel male energies and exploit them for the benefit of the family. For instance, most standardized suburban family houses had unfinished attics or basements which father could turn into an extra room in his spare time. Thus, many gray flannel men changed into handymen at weekends and gave their houses an "individual" touch. Psychologist Henry C. Lindgren even recommended building model ships "as one of the numerous ways of finding an outlet for creative needs."(479)

24   Those exit options are only two more examples of a powerful discourse on American men with their lives torn apart by antagonistic male concepts. It is particularly important to note that this discourse re-generated its own object: it shaped a hegemonic concept of the male as heterosexual, middle class, and white. Furthermore, this hegemonic white middle-class man had to be a family man who at the same time was willing and able to take his life into his own hands – a man who was caring and responsible as well as free and forward-moving. It was the constant reiteration of this type of man being in a state of deep crisis that created a cultural feeling of anxiety and of an urgent necessity to re-stabilize this character and his position in society if America was to be saved. Thus, by complaining about the loss of a certain type of male character, the talk about "the man in gray" reiterated the notion that this character had to be at the center of American society and culture.

25   By the end of the decade, it was John F. Kennedy who demonstrated the effectiveness of this discursive *modus operandi*. Kennedy took the American public by storm by uniting the seemingly antagonistic masculine stereotypes. After the Democratic Convention at Los Angeles in July 1960, author Norman Mailer was stunned and boasted that "superman comes to the supermarket."(Mailer, *Superman;* Dean) Kennedy blemished the "softness" and "corrosion" of the 1950s consumer society, and he demanded a revitalization of the American "pilgrim and pioneer spirit of initiative and independence." He generated himself as forward marching, powerful, and energetic explorer with, according to Mailer, "savvy and go-go-go," and he was a womanizer par excellence. At the same time, JFK presented himself as family man, as husband of a beautiful wife and as father of two wonderful children, playing in the Oval Office of the White House while father was taking America to new frontiers.

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