Masculinities: The Million Men March

By Norbert Finzsch

Abstract:
Norbert Finzsch analyzes the Million Men March (MMM) of 1995 as an alleged attempt to redefine African American masculinities in the context of the exclusion of other forms of non-hegemonic masculinity. As a relational category, masculinity invokes and implies definitions of femininity and of other categories that support the dominant paradigm of the patriarchal, racist, heteronormative and capitalist order. It is Finzsch's contention, therefore, that masculinity should be defined in concordance with theoretical models based on the model of intersectionality, despite the fact that this notion was developed by women of color in the context of a feminist critique of liberal (white) feminism. He also believes that the MMM should be contextualized in the history of different marches on and in Washington DC, since the MMM evoked images and myths of previous mass demonstrations in the capital.

1 Let me clarify what I want to achieve in my contribution by explaining the concepts of the article.

1. Masculinities in my title is a plural, because there is no such thing as a masculinity, according to sociologist Raewyn Connell. "Masculinity is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell, Masculinities 71). According to sociologist Jessie Krienert, instead of seeing masculinity as something that just happens to men or is done to men, masculinity is seen as something that men do. In an iterative process called *Doing Gender*, specific patterns are learned through the socialization process that appropriately represents masculinity (Krienert).
2. Masculinity as a singular must be performed and presented recurrently in any situation. Constant self-presentation occurs throughout every social interaction in which a man is involved. Ongoing re-creation is a defining feature of masculinity. This re-creation occurs in the family, at work, in school, and in all other social settings. The underlying goal of this performance is the assertion of power and dominance (Krienert). Since the aim of Doing Gender is the creation of a stable heterosexual hegemonic masculinity, it follows that there are other, conflicting and competing concepts of masculinities within the same society. Nonetheless, heterosexuality and homophobia are the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity.(Donaldson 645). Non-hegemonic masculinities, however, usually fail to influence structural gender arrangements significantly because their expression is either relegated to heterosocial settings or suppressed entirely (Bird 120).

3. I speak of the Million Man March as a myth in the sense of Roland Barthes, a second-order sign, because it is my contention that the Million Man March served primarily in order to signify, achieve, reinscribe and solidify a uniform black petit-bourgeois masculinist discourse by using a primary signification of black brotherhood, atonement and solidarity (Barthes). The material foundations of this masculinist discourse are found in the various marches for Civil Rights and the historical discourses of a non-hegemonic black masculinity.

2 In order to make my point evident will first make a few remarks about the March itself, followed by an example of the issues that were excluded from the march. I will then dwell upon the precedents of the Million Man March, which was not, contrary to what its organizers have claimed, a unique event in the history of African American men, but has a long history that goes back all the way to the construction of black masculinities after emancipation. Finally, I will come back to my initial contention of the Million Man March as a myth and explain the connection between this myth and other attempts to invoke the March as a tool to contribute to the issue of masculinity in America.

Fig. 1.

3 The Million Man March of October 16, 1995 was an event that received extraordinary attention in the media and in political discourses, although it remains unclear whether literally a million or just 400.000 African American men participated in the march.[1] Although primarily organized by the Black Nationalist organization Nation of Islam (NOI) and used by its charismatic leader, Louis Farrakhan, in order to promote the NOI as the foremost organization of African Americans in the US, the march received attention and positive comments all over the United States. The march itself and Farrakhan's speech was reported on CNN and various participants in the march were given media time. Most of the participants underscored their perception of the march as being beyond adherence to the beliefs of the NOI. Rev. Vernon Clay from the Lincoln Congregational Temple in Washington was quoted saying: "It's not about a march, a man, words. It's about a movement." (USA Today) Harold Ickes, Deputy White House Chief of Staff and former legal counsel to labor unions said, "This group is not Farrakhan's group. This is a group of black men from around the country who are coming here for a day of atonement and to talk about how to take responsibility for their own lives." (USA Today, CNN) Jesse Jackson, a close supporter of Martin Luther King, was heard on CNN, saying "It's important we have such a march to focus attention on the urban crisis and move from the negative urban policy of chasing welfare mothers, chastising their fathers and locking children up to some real commitment of reindustrialization of urban America." (CNN) The participants belonged in their majority to the so-called black middle class. "The middle class is dissatisfied, the masses are dissatisfied, but what we do with this dissatisfaction and frustration must be creative. That's why the Million Man March could have been, and yet may be, that catalyst for real change in**,** our own community. I was surprised when I learned that 44 percent of the men that were there had some college education. Over 20 percent of those men had businesses; they were entrepreneurs. It was tremendous. Here's a black middle class that comes to a march called by a man who is considered radical, extremist, anti-Semitic, anti-white. What does that say about the hunger, the yearning, of that black middle class? They really want to connect with the masses." (Farrakhan and Gates 149-150) According to a sociological study directed by Robert Joseph Taylor and Karen D. Lincoln at the University of Michigan, the Million Man Marchers tended to be more middle-aged, have higher levels of education, and higher incomes than black

[1] The National Park Service counted the number of participants from a helicopter – like animals in a National Park. Although it was touted as the "Million Man March", official figures from the National Park Service estimated about 400,000 men. Because of this count, Farrakhan and other organizers have sued authorities over the number, with claims of one million and even two million men being actually there. Organizers claim that racism, white supremacists, and the hatred of Louis Farrakhan affected the count. The photos used by the Park Service were then examined for some days by a ten-person team of experts at Boston University's Center for Remote Sensing, which estimated the crowd at some 873,000 plus or minus 20 percent. (Center for Remote Sensing, URL not longer in service).

men in general. One out of three (33%) marchers were aged 18-30, 42% were aged 30-44, 20% were between 41 and 60, and 4% were 61 years of age or older. Only 5% of the marchers had less than a high school education, 22% were high school graduates, 59% had some college or were college graduates and 14% had some post graduate education, thus marking the average marcher as a member of the middle class. This is also reflected by their average family incomes. "Only 10% of the respondents reported that their 1994 family incomes were $14,999 or less. Sixteen percent of respondents had family incomes between $15,000 and $29,999, 33% had incomes between $30,000 and $49,999, 17% had incomes between $50,000 and $74,999, 11% had incomes between $75,000 and $99,999 and 8% had family incomes of $100,000 or more." (Taylor and Williams).

4 Taylor and Lincoln also studied the reasons why African American men participated in the march. Comparing their own findings with those of a study conducted by Lester & Associates, a market research firm based in Washington DC, they found out that only a minority of about five percent of the respondents indicated that the single most important reason they were participating in the March was to show support for Louis Farrakhan. Three of ten participants (29%) indicated that the most important reason they participated in the Million Man March was to show support for black families, 25% stated to show support for black men taking more responsibility for their families and communities, 25% to demonstrate black unity, and 7% stated to demonstrate African American economic strength.[2] Apart from the critics who denounced Farrakhan and the NOI as anti-Semitic and racist, there were critical voices questioning the gender politics of the march. Angela Davis, black feminist and intellectual, raised doubts about the othering effects of the march. "No march, movement or agenda that defines manhood in the narrowest terms and seeks to make women lesser partners in this quest for equality can be considered a positive step."

Exclusion

5 Angela Davis's remark directs my questions to the issue of inclusion versus exclusion. The Million Man March was clearly aiming at establishing a racial harmony between African American men at the price of excluding women in general as well as Caucasian and Asian men. The organizers of the march were very specific about this and invited only a very small group of handpicked African American women to attend the march. One of the female participants remarked: ""I had to pinch myself constantly. Didn't know whether I was watching a white religious right's rally or an all-male religious, Islamic gathering in Iran." ([Anonymous] 63) As

[2] Compare this with the results of a survey among black academics. ([Anonymous])

bell hooks has pointed out, a march for blacks that deliberately excludes women is not really a march for black people, but rather a march for something like rejuvenated black patriarchy. Gay black men were discriminated against or downright excluded (Reis-Pharr 38-39). The African American gay activist Cleo Manago was invited to deliver a speech during the gathering on the Mall in Washington. It was only shortly before the scheduled speech that he learned that he would not be allowed to give his speech. No reason was given, but it can be assumed that Manago was denied the possibility to address the participants because of last-minute reservations against him due to his sexual orientation and the controversial issues that he would in all likelihood address in his speech. Since I had access to the text of his never delivered address, it is obvious that Manago clearly intended to question the prevalent notions of masculinity and tried to expand manhood as something that encompasses more than the traditional concept of a protecting patriarch, who provides for his nuclear family, while the black mother stays at home and takes care of children and household. Manago invoked different images of black masculinity when he intended to speak of black role models like Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, accused of sexual harassment in 1991, "King of Pop" Michael Jackson, accused of pedophilia in 1993, actor O.J. Simpson accused of murder in 1995, and rap musician Snoop Doggy-Dogg, also accused of murder in 1995.[3] Manago then asked the crucial question: "Who is defining us, defining Blackness, manhood, male responsibility? Who created the model? Does the model work? And work for who [sic?]? Why do we want to be men? Why don't some of us […] want to be Black men? Why are we all here today? Might it be because the model, wherever it came from, doesn't work -- for the Black community?"[4]

Historical Masculinities

6 Manago's indictment of the model of black masculinity defined as "Afrocentric" "hard, strong, masculine, heterosexual, responsible" culminates in a questioning of the historical essentialism that antedated the Million Man March by at least 100 years. The invoked model of

[3] "Are we a Million 'men' here today? YES -- today we are classified as Black or African-American men. It's important to remember that for much of our experience in this country, our 'manhood' has been subject to the whims of another culture. 'Our' manhood defined for us, not by us. Clarence Thomas is a superior court judge supposedly a great achievement - is he a man? Michael Jackson has achieved fame unattained by almost everyone else in the Western world -- is he a man? O.J. Simpson achieved fame and wealth, was accused of murder found not guilty, leaving two white people and a large section of white America, some feel, with no retribution. Is O.J. a man […]? What is a man, a Black man? Snoopy Doggy-Dogg is a house-hold word. He's walking down the street smoking endo sipping on gin and juice, with his mind on his money and his money on his mind -- is Dogg a man? (Manago, MANHOOD). This site was no longer available in 2010.

[4] Louis Farrakhan obviously reversed his earlier position on GLBT-people, since he allowed Cleo Manago to represent a gay perspective during the Millions More Movement rally in 2005, commemorating the 1995 Million Man March ten years after the event. (Manago, What Really Happened). The text is no longer available on that site.

the black male is a role that emerged at the end of the 19th century in an elitist discourse created by members of the very small black intelligentsia and middle class in order to promote a patriarchal version of the Black family that would then be permitted to lead a marginalized existence at the fringes of white America. It served to counteract the dominant two-layered image of the black male as "Sambo", a submissive, weak, child-like, almost feminine buffoon (Schroeder 74-87) on the one side and as the "buck", a hypermasculine, violent brute and rapist on the other side, so vividly described by Martha Hodes in "White Women, Black Men." (Hodes 176-208.)

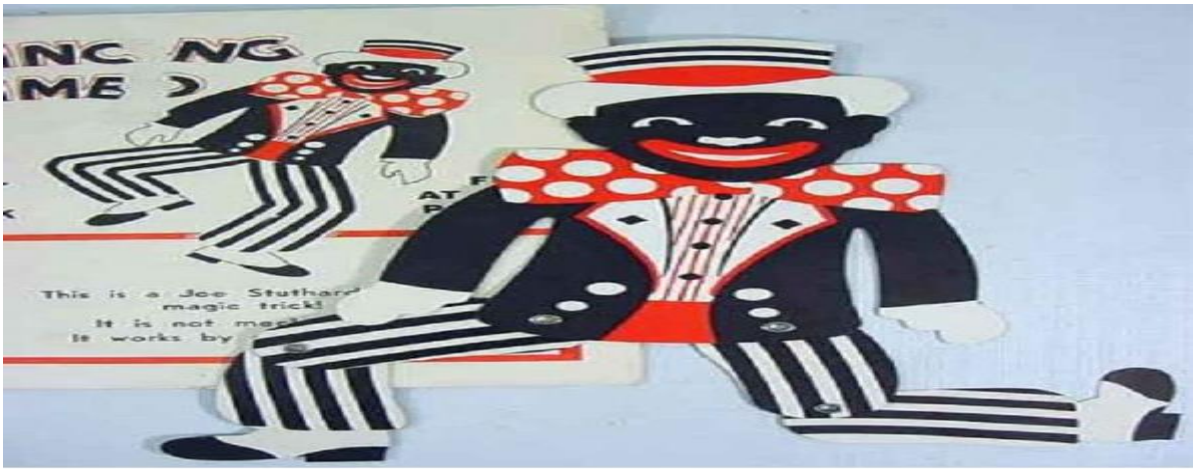

Fig 2.: Sambo.

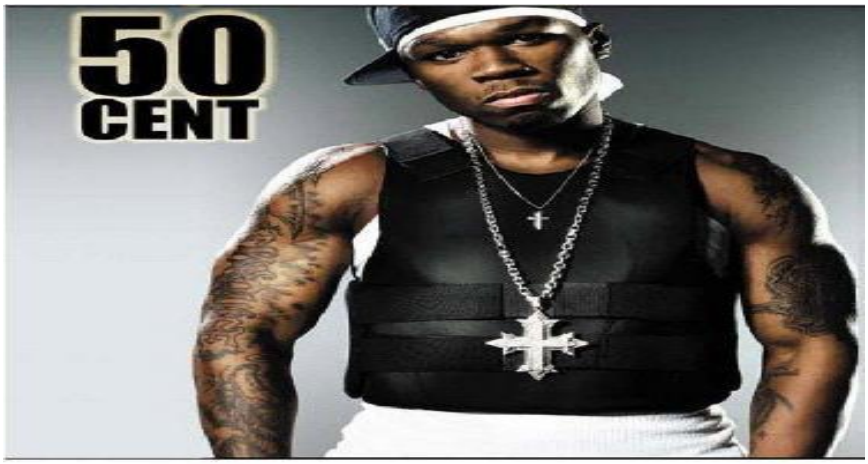

Fig. 3.: Fifty Cent and Hypermasculine Ideals.

7 After the emancipation from slavery, African American men reconstructed their lives in the South on the basis of a sharecropping economy, which allowed men to control the means of agricultural production while the women took care of the children and the housework. On the other hand, White men had to reconstruct their lives after a humiliating defeat on the

battlefield and the loss of their property, thereby also reinforcing the values of middle-class respectability and patriarchal power (Whites 158-159). In other words, the Black male as a responsible, reliable yet patriarchic head of household, who protects and provides for his family, is a doppelganger of an older white male role model that was constructed in the middle of the 19th century, when the nuclear family emerged as a result of a gendered division of labor and the creation of separate spheres for both women and men (Finzsch and Hampf 47-49).[5] In order to enjoy "manhood's rights" i.e. franchise and office holding, African American men had to conform to middle–class whites' definitions of manhood (Gilmore 61-63).[6] Simultaneously, post-bellum Black Migration enlarged black communities in the northern cities dramatically.[7] African American men perceived this new life not only as deracination but also as a possibility to achieve (economic) independence and survival, in economic as well as in gendered terms. In the South the first Jim Crow laws had been passed in the 1880s, which had "redeemed" the South and had reestablished the old order in which white Planters owned the land and black families tilled the earth. These Jim Crow Laws "emasculated" African American men by denying them civil rights. Under Jim Crowism, Black men were also threatened physically since thousands of them were subjected to torture and lynching which, in a very literal sense, included the emasculation of the victim before or after death. "Escape from such conditions meant the opportunity to be a real man as well as a free man." (Kimmel 86) Under these circumstances, the idealized reproduction of the nuclear family in the emerging African American communities

[5] In 1903, Edward Augustine Benner wrote to Booker T. Washington, referring to his son Booker [sic], who had spent some time in the Tuskegee Institute: "My dear Dr. Washington: I am very glad to report a great improvement in Booker's spirit and way of going to work. He seems to have acquired more manliness and feeling of responsibility." (Harlan and Smock, vol. 7, 309). The notion of masculinity or manliness (in order to use a 19th-century concept) only rarely transcended the realm of labor. When a military training unit was established in Wilberforce, Ohio, a traditionally black school, Charles Young wrote to Booker T. Washington, "It would be impossible, however, for me to do creditable work with the boys without the General Government would with your permission furnish guns and equipment for them. […] The boys at Wilberforce have had such equipment and arms in their possession for 5 years with the best results. The pride and manliness, the self-respect and obedience, the strong virtues of promptness, reverence, neatness, and command – things consequent of this training – are not to be had without a gun, a uniform, and authority at the back of the whole department." (Harlan and Smock, vol. 5, 69-70).

[6] A large number of books appeared beginning in the 1880s, which portrayed Black "Best Men", i.e. Black role models. They invoke "specimens" of "true manhood" in contrast to "true womanhood". (Simmons and Turner, Kletzing and Cragman, Richings).

[7] The reconstruction of Black masculinity after 1865 was based on the assumption of gender roles that would not respect the "natural division" between the public and the private. This is very clearly stated in the analysis of gender relations among slaves by an imprisoned member of the BPP. "That beautiful black woman was the one who stood up and fought our slave masters while we so-called men ran to our safety or hopped a train to flee the scene. We left our women to do a man's job, feeding our children, clothing them, milking the cows, cutting the wood, drawing the water, slopping the hogs, plowing the fields and going hungry to let our babies eat, hoping that one day we would become men and make a better place for them to live. And all the while, the racist red neck pig slave master exploiter who forced or bribed her into immoral and degenerate acts to satisfy his [curiosity]. Brothers when we left her, we did more than disrespect her, and she knows it as well as we do." ([Wheeler], Kimmel 1996, 85-86.

in the North gave a sense of security to the uprooted, despite the fact that many Black women not only contributed to the family salary but quite often were the only steady providers of income in a racialized and gendered split labor market (Bonacich 1975, Bonacich 1976, Bonacich 1972, Thomas, Herring and Horton).

8 It was exactly during this period that Black educators, intellectuals and writers such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois started to comment on the apparent threat to the Black family and the gender roles within it (Pendergast 65-69):

> I am an earnest advocate of manual training and trade teaching for black boys, and for white boys, too. I believe that next to the founding of Negro colleges the most valuable addition to Negro education since the war, has been industrial training for black boys. Nevertheless, I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men; there are two means of making the carpenter a man, each equally important: the first is to give the group and community in which he works, liberally trained teachers and leaders to teach him and his family what life means; the second is to give him sufficient intelligence and technical skill to make him an efficient workman; the first object demands the Negro college and college-bred men—not a quantity of such colleges, but a few of excellent quality; not too many college-bred men, but enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses, to raise the Talented Tenth to leadership. (Washington 21)

Black masculinity was debated not only among Black activists and intellectuals, but soon the first African American magazines like “Colored American”, “Alexander’s Magazine”, “Horizon” and “The Voice of the Negro” tried to acquire a niche in the market for an emerging Black middle-class (Pendergast 65-111). This discourse then permeated into a professionalized discourse of social scientists by way of activists and intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier (Frazier 1932, Frazier 1939). W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in “Souls of Back Folk”: To-day the young Negro of the South who would succeed cannot be frank and outspoken, honest and self-assertive, but rather he is daily tempted to be silent and wary, politic and sly; he must flatter and be pleasant, endure petty insults with a smile, shut his eyes to wrong; in too many cases he sees positive personal advantage in deception and lying. His real thoughts, his real aspirations, must be guarded in whispers; he must not criticize, he must not complain. Patience, humility, and adroitness must, in these growing black youth, replace impulse, manliness, and courage (Du Bois 90).

9 E. Franklin Frazier wrote in 1939 "[...] the Negro woman as wife or mother was the mistress of her cabin, and, save for the interference of master and overseer, her wishes in regard to mating and family matters were paramount." (Frazier 1939, 125)[8] According to Frazier,

[8] The trope of the Black woman as "mistress of her cabin" reappeared over and over again. It resurfaced as late as 1976 in a sociological study (Rubin 5)

slavery taught African American women the value of self-reliance and initiative and prepared her for the questioning of male authority. Black masculinity, on the other side, was constantly threatened and undermined by slavery, due to the Black male's inability to protect his wife, sister or daughter from sexualized aggression by White men. The Frazier hypothesis received recognition and support from other social scientists and historians, such as Kenneth Stampp, Stanley Elkins, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Stampp 344, Elkins 130, United States 31, Finzsch 2002). In the mid-sixties and early seventies the "Black matriarchy thesis" was taken up, first by Black nationalists and radicals, by the Back Panthers and the Black Muslims alike, then by conservative critics, who blamed the women's movement and feminism for a vilification of traditional and essentialist masculinity. (White in DuBois and Ruiz, 22-33, Finzsch 1999, Finzsch 2003):

> We must have a Black Men's Movement to correct the negative effects of the 1970's White Women's Feminism Movement. This Feminism movement had nothing to do with being 'feminine' per say [sic]. Instead, it taught against men and the family itself; and after 25 years, we can now see that it has destroyed the proverbial "nuclear family's" health by getting women out of the kitchen. And Ironically [sic], as a result, everyone is more overweight and unhealthier since women 'abandoned ship' and deserted 'house work'. And contrary to popular opinion, Black men did not 'abandon' their role and duty as 'bread winners' -- women abandoned theirs!!! (Blacktown.Net)

The Men's Rights Movement of the 1970s eventually influenced both African American masculinist discourses as well as its predominantly White Christian and misogynist counterpart, the Promise Keepers. (Clatterbaugh 61-63, Abraham, Allen, Bartkowski 2000, Bartkowski 2004, Bloch, Claussen, Donovan, Heath, Johnson).

10 Marches of protest have a long history in America that extends from national meetings of fraternal orders like the National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic in Washington DC in 1892, to the protest of Coxey's Army in 1893 and the parade of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) through New York in 1920 to the Bonus Army March to Washington DC and its consequent violent dispersal by the police in 1932 (Debouzy). An impending march on Washington, organized by Black labor leader Asa Philip Randolph in 1941 was called off at the last possible moment after President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave in and issued Executive Order 8002, which not only outlawed discrimination in government-contracted defense industries but also established the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate breaches of the order. The one march on Washington that stood out among the many demonstrations of the Sixties was undoubtedly the one in 1963, organized by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin and best remembered for Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"-speech (Doak).

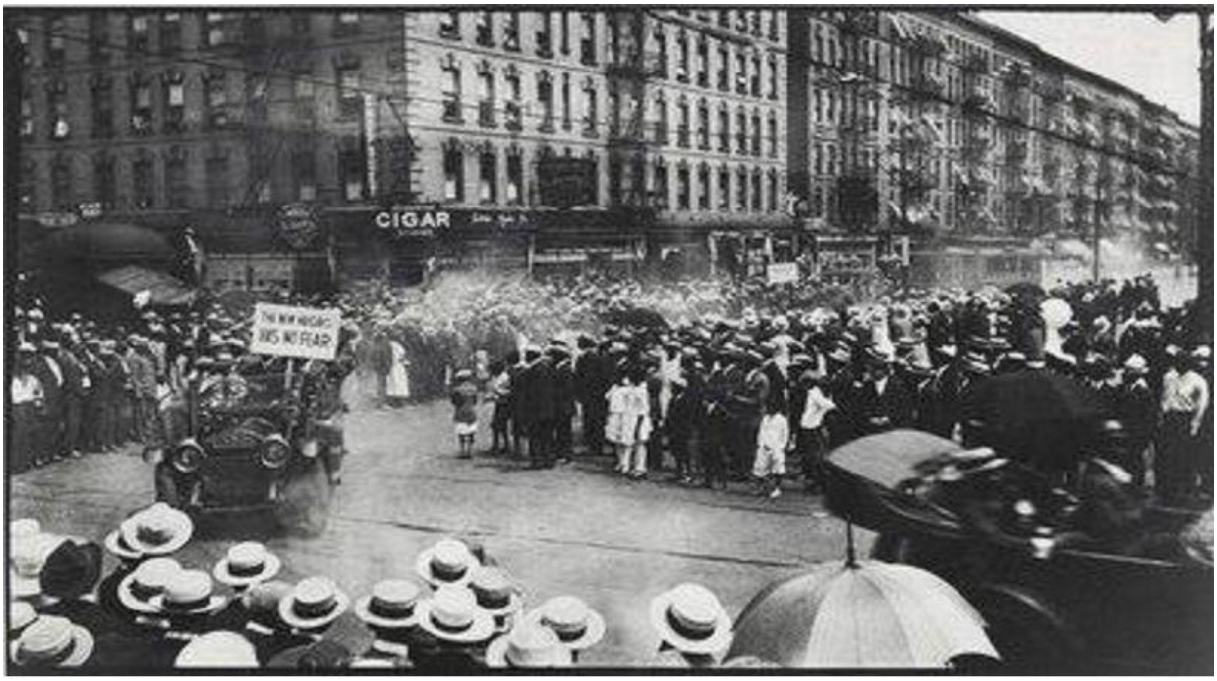

Fig 2.: 1932s Bonus Army March to Washington DC in 1932.

Fig.5.: March on Washington, organized by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin in 1963.

The march on the National Capital has a specific meaning that is conveyed through the effectiveness of the previous marches, even if they only served as a means of political blackmail, and the media attention that accompanied every one of the marches mentioned here. The march functions as a sign in itself. It signifies not only dissatis-faction and anger, but holds the promise of redress and atonement at the same time. Through the charging of the previous national marches with the image of successful protests for Civil Rights, the Million Man March has acquired the status of conveying politicized de-mands although the actual topics of the Million Man March were “brotherhood”, “solidarity” and “atonement”, values that are more in accordance with traditional religious and middle class values than with politics.

11 Because of the necessary ambiguity of the Million Man March through its construction as a myth, the myth can be told over and over again and lends itself easily to other causes, thereby reinforcing the mythical function of its original invocation. There was a Million Woman March on October 25, 1997 in Philadelphia (Campbell), a “Stand in the Gap” rally of the White Christian Promise Keepers on Washington DC on October 4, 1997, a Million Youth March on September 5, 1998 that has meanwhile turned into an annual event, a Million Family March on October 16th, 2000, and from 2002 to 2004 the Christian Promise Keepers managed to assemble another "Million Men at the Cross". Although the Nation of Islam and the Christian Promise Keepers are unlikely allies, they focused on the same value system: Strengthen the heterosexual nuclear family, take back control and responsibility in the family, and reassert patriarchal control over women and children:

> The charge that the Promise Keepers are about oppressing women is a charge borne of a deliberate misunderstanding of the Promise Keepers basic beliefs. The Promise Keepers are all about supporting women. The part that NOW [National Organization of Women, N.F.] trumpets is the command (derived directly from the Apostle Paul's writings) that men take the leadership role in their families. The part it conveniently neglects is what immediately precedes: that husbands must love their wives and care for them as much as they would their own bodies. That explicitly precludes using women as doormats, punching bags or other accessories.” (Tipton)

According to NOW, the National Organization of Women, the

> Promise Keepers do not encourage a relationship of equals in a marriage. Rather, they call for men to "take" their role as the leader in the family. Promise Keeper Tony Evans stated "I am not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I am urging you to take it back. There can be no compromise here.” (National Organization of Women)

12 Louis Farrakhan has been reported to have supported the "Stand in the Gap" rally of the Promise Keepers, as Promise Keepers had endorsed the Million Man March of the NOI.[9]

[9] Reuters News Service reported the Promise Keepers' (PK) call for unity was also extended to Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam in the form of an invitation to join the 1997 PK rally in Washington, DC Reuters News Service, Tues., Feb. 4, 1997, 1:46 PM, Reuters Internet News Service.

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