Chapter 33
Gender Politics in Men's Movements

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In this chapter Stephen Whitaker provides a thumbnail sketch of four major men's movements in the last few decades, all of which were in some way a reaction to the more generic movement to liberate women: the Mythopoetic men's movement, the Promise Keepers, the Million Man March, and the gay rights movement. Even more direct responses include those writing, speaking, and dialoguing about men's liberation, men's rights, and support of feminism.

As you read accounts of these groups, think about the connection between their ideologies and the trend toward gender equality. How has the shift toward more freedom and opportunity for women apparently affected men in these groups? Why might they be defensive about or supportive of this trend? Whitaker's descriptions of these social movements help to explain how gender relations are about power. What is being altered is the traditional role bargain (including the power distribution) between heterosexual men and women, and even heterosexuality can no longer be taken for granted. Gender issues have become political issues in many social arenas. Although they may be couched in different terminology or veiled by discussions of related values, the concerns of men in these movements revolve around basic issues concerning the structure of society as it relates to gender stratification. The shift from gender inequality to more gender equality is about a shift in social power.

> Carrying placards that read black by birth/gay by god/proud by choice, we proceeded south on 9th Street in Northwest Washington on a 30 minute procession to the Million Man March rally on the Mall.—Keith Boykin

Keith Boykin, the former director of specialty press for President Clinton and current executive director of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, was among the 200 gay men and "a handful of lesbians" who participated in the highly publicized (and frequently vilified) Million Man March on October 16, 1995 (Boykin 1996a, 206). The march, associated with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, called to Washington, D.C. African American black men and focused attention on black masculinity. Boykin writes that after marching several blocks and experiencing no "negative reactions" to the placards, the group began to chant, "We're black! We're gay! We wouldn't have it any other way!" Still experiencing no negative reaction, the group began to chant, "Gay men (woof!) of African descent (descent!)" as it moved "through the throngs of black men assembled on the Mall." The lesson learned that day, according to Boykin, was that belief in oneself leads to respect from one's community. However, the group's request of having an openly gay man and a person openly living with AIDS to speak was never honored. Further, Boykin discusses publicized homophobic comments issued by march organizers (Boykin 1996a, 206–207).

The Million Man March and Boykin's experiences as a gay black man within the march are important here because they show how a focus on gender or race can obscure other modes of domination, in this case heterosexism, even as such a focus criticizes the present preoccupation with white, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity as normative—and something to be either reclaimed or reformulated. The reformulation or reclamation of this particular masculinity—white, heterosexual, and middle class—is a central activity of a variety of other contemporary men's movements. This chapter examines the common themes of particular groups within these movements to consider their potential for a progressive intersectional politics that deals simultaneously with issues of race, class, gender, and sexual-

ity: the sort of politics and social critique located in the work of black feminist thinkers and international feminists who attend to the ways in which various modes of domination work together to shape individual experience and structure group identity (Amos and Parmar 1997; Collins 1998, 2000; Crenshaw 1997). Here, this sort of analysis permits sociologists to consider the relations of domination that are recreated within these movements by focusing on the way class, gender, sexuality, and race discourses are articulated within their various ideologies.

A preoccupation with white, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity has historically prompted a variety of political responses. For instance, Michael Kimmel describes several "boy's lib" organizations that operated at the beginning of the twentieth century to train white, middle-class boys to become masculine men (1996, 168). Through the decades there have been many other organizations and movements concerned both overtly and implicitly with white, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity. Here, however, the discussion is focused on the ideology that developed during the last 40 years in the context of a feminist, black liberation, and gay liberation "frontal assault" on traditional masculinity (1996, 280). Rather than providing a list of men's groups and organizations, the discussion will focus specifically on the ideas that emerge from the Mythopoetic men's movement, the Promise Keepers, the Million Man March, the gay-rights movement, and, finally, direct responses to feminism in the form of men's liberation, men's rights, and profeminism.

Mythopoetic Men's Movement

The largely homogeneous constituency of the Mythopoetic men's movement is a visible marker of its neoconservative politics (Silverstein, Auerbach, Grieco, and Dunkel 1999, 666). That is, the mostly white, middle-class, middle-aged composition of the group is symbolic of its potentially exclusionary ideology. Relying on essentialist interpretations of masculinity, the movement gained momentum in the 1980s through gatherings such as weekend retreats in an attempt to reclaim the "natural" masculinity discussed in its "founding" book by poet Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990). Named "mythopoetic" for its use of poetry and myth in therapeutic work, the movement constructs gender as an eternal, fixed dichotomy. This movement is not so much concerned with social change as with self-change (Schwalbe 1996, 6). Some participants, in claiming an apolitical attitude, have denied that they can be considered a social movement at all.

Grounded in Jungian psychology, the Mythopoetic movement reinscribes the gender order in at least two ways. First, the movement's preoccupation with behaviors and feelings at the individual level negates broader systems of white, heterosexual, masculine power. In other words, exclusive attention to the pain individual men feel as the result of social expectations for masculinity does not address the privilege and power that accompany the pain.

Second, the movement relies on the idea of primordial, innate psychic energy that has affected men and women differently through an evolutionary process. The result is a dichotomous template, or archetype, that dictates that men "are inclined to place order on the world, defend territory, provide for others, give of themselves to others, and love women" (Schwalbe 1996, 37). This ideology attempts to reformulate masculinity but within a binary gender system that is the hallmark of the Western society that it attempts to critique (Bonnett 1996). Although there is some evidence that the present-day version of this movement is gradually attempting to deal with sexism, the reliance on essential, natural gender designations remains troublesome, particularly when viewed from the sort of intersecting analysis attempted here.

Because the movement is grounded in and attracts its constituency from the white middle class, the ways that upper-class, working-class, and poor men express masculinity are often overlooked. The movement's particular construction of masculinity is universalized (Bonnett 1996;

Kimmel and Kaufman 1994; Messner 1997). Similarly, racial and ethnic variations in expressions of and expectations for masculinity are absent from the discourse. Further, because the movement relies on "authentic" rituals constructed from mythical primordial origins and draws its gender ideology from colonial constructions of primeval gender relations, the image of Native Americans is particularly distorted (Bonnett 1996, 281–282). The reduction of gender to heterosexual relations between men and women excludes the potential for same-sex sexual relationships, and the presence of transgendered and transsexual people is ignored. Additionally, because masculinity and class interact with specific behavioral consequences, this discourse flattens the actual heterogeneity of gender and assumes a masculine standard for all men. In this binary system, a resulting implication for women is that femininity is also reduced to specific behaviors that are applied to all women as natural, biological, and inevitable. These are the "big three sins" of essentializing, universalizing, and naturalizing (King 1990, 89).

Promise Keepers

Rather than locating the source of natural, essential, and universal constructions of masculinity in some mythical past, the Promise Keepers, also a neoconservative group, locate it in the Bible. The implications for race, class, gender, and sexuality are similar to those of the Mythopoetic men's movement. There are some differences, however, that bear exploration. In addition to relying on an overt religious discourse, the Promise Keepers offer the pretense of an apolitical stance but are "self-consciously" political (Donovan 1998, 825; Lingard and Douglas 1999, 17). The movement has grown from less than 100 participants in 1990 to an estimated 600,000 in 1995 (Messner 1997, 24). Despite the sudden visibility of the movement, neither the ideology that underlies it nor the collective action that accompanies it is a new development —similar activity accompanied the "first wave" of the American women's movement (Kimmel 1996, 175–180; Messner 1997, 24–25).

At the core of the movement and its evangelical Christian ideology is its founder, former head football coach of the University of Colorado Bill McCartney, whose primary focus is on the state of American white, heterosexual, middle-class families. In particular, he views the emphasis on the male role as breadwinner outside the home as competition for the male role as leader *within* the home. He suggests that men "take back the mantle of responsibility as leader of the family" (Silverstein, Auerbach, Grieco, and Dunkel 1999, 667). The ideology carries an explicit misogynist bent: America's "national crisis" is related to the production of "sissified men" (Evans 1994, 73; Messner 1997, 26). In other words, men who behave like women are responsible for the destruction of the nation—a characterization that associates destructive behaviors with women. Like the Mythopoetics, the Promise Keepers essentialize gender categories. The Promise Keepers, however, link gender directly to biology through conservative religious readings and assert that biological differences naturally result in social differences between men and women. Also unlike the Mythopoetics' individual-level analysis, the Promise Keepers are preoccupied with masculinity within the context of family relations, particularly the "God-given division of labor between women and men" (Messner 1997, 30). Finally, the Promise Keepers have overt political aims tied up in the rhetoric of traditional family values, particularly with the regulation of sexuality: McCartney has been publicly associated with anti-gay and anti-abortion initiatives.

The implications of the Promise Keepers' ideology for class and sexuality are clear. For American men to have the luxury of devoting time to the domestic sphere, they must have that time available. Working-class or poor men may not have that time. An overt anti-gay position linked with religious fundamentalism and a focus on the heterosexual family excludes same-sex sexual relationships and negates the potential for transgressing gender roles. An analysis of gender and race, however, is somewhat more com-

plicated. Both Brian Donovan (1998) and Louise Silverstein and her colleagues (1999) note the uneasy similarity between a feminist call for responsible fathering and the sort of paternalism advocated by the Promise Keepers. In other words, in some ways the Promise Keepers are advocating a form of masculinity that has been the object of positive feminist theorizing. At the same time, however, the Promise Keepers limit the potential for positive fathering to the white, middle-class, heterosexual family, and many feminists have argued that "Positive father involvement can exist within many different family forms including mother-headed, gay/lesbian, and step-parenting families" (Silverstein, Auerbach, Grieco, and Dunkel 1999, 667). Further complicating the issue is the Promise Keepers' rejection of "the stereotypical stern and insensitive patriarch," calling instead for respect for wives, prayer for relationships, and sexual purity (Donovan 1998, 828).

Meanwhile, the traditional family form advocated by the Promise Keepers has distinct racial implications. That is, the diverse and fluid forms of the pre-Industrial Revolution family were gradually replaced by the patriarchal "nuclear" family norm that relegated white, middle-class men to the paid work world and white, middle-class women to unpaid domesticity. Clearly, this norm was unattainable for many groups of people. American black women under slavery, for example, worked as farm laborers without pay in the context of routine violation of family privacy (Collins 2000, 47), a situation that had profound implications for the construction of black masculinity. Despite the absence of a critical discourse on race and the presence of a majority of white, middle-class men, the Promise Keepers have taken steps toward some racial awareness. In 1996, the movement publicly discussed racial barriers in conferences organized around a theme of "Break Down the Walls" that included African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American religious leaders (Messner 1997, 26). The composition of the group, however, remains virtually unchanged (Leibowitz 1996; Messner 1997, 26).

Million Man March

A common thread exists between the Promise Keepers and some forms of religious black nationalism. The Million Man March discussed in the introduction also focused on a conservative construction of family that relied heavily on a division of labor that considers men's work to be outside the home and women's work to be within. This gendered division was symbolically enacted as black men were invited to participate in the march while black women were encouraged to engage in a private "Day of Absence" at home (Messner 1997, 71). The religious essentialism that permeated the movement with regard to asymmetric gender roles mirrors closely the politically conservative gender, class, and sexuality ideology of the Promise Keepers. In particular, the antifeminist, anti-gay discourse springs from the same biblical "authority." And, like the Promise Keepers, the Million Man March's pledge included a prohibition against spousal abuse and a promise of respect for one's wife as the procreator of the race (Sadler 1996, xvii). Clearly, at least this indicator of ideology places women in a heterosexual, marriageable, reproductive role while it reformulates black masculinity into one that respects women and values family. At the same time, the pledge encourages participation in the American economic system through support of black enterprises—a view that indicates an awareness of class issues missing from the Promise Keepers' rhetoric.

Meanwhile, with regard to sexuality, Boykin's experiences, discussed in the introduction, suggest that there is a level of acceptance for black gays and lesbians within the context of a black liberation agenda but a silence as well. He writes that there are "a number" of gays and lesbians among the prominent figures on the "national stage" who go unnoticed "unless the issue becomes embarrassing" (Boykin 1996a, 207). This silence has a price, according to Boykin, particularly with the way race and sexuality intersect in the form of AIDS: "Unfortunately, the disease will continue to take a toll on our community so long as black people

and our so-called leaders remain too afraid to address publicly issues of sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation" (Boykin 1996b, 17). He further describes black gays and lesbians as "a key" to black unity.

Gay Rights Movement

In 1982 Martin Duberman, speaking at a Lambda Legal Defense Fund dinner, raised the ire of several members, who "angrily" walked out: "It is no news —though the news has not exactly been trumpeted abroad— that racism, along with its kissing cousins, sexism and classism, is rampant in the gay male community," Duberman's speech began (Duberman 1991, 186). He writes that an agenda that includes gender, racial, ethnic, and class discrimination has been coopted by "liberal" goals of reforming current political and social structures. There is evidence that an intersecting politics that included a race, class, and gender critique was never fully articulated in most of the organizations within the mainstream gay rights movement and further evidence that the situation has changed little. Boykin describes the "popular view of gay rights as the exclusive property of a particular group" as the result of the "dominance of white gay men in the gay movement" as well as "the gay movement's collective failure to address concerns of nongay minorities." He further notes that attempts at coalition building between gay rights and black power movements have been largely unsuccessful. Drawing connections between racism and homophobia, he describes the attempt by Black Panther leader Huey Newton to work with the gay rights movement as one that was rebuffed by gay rights activists ostensibly because they saw the Panthers as homophobic but more accurately because they were not prepared to join hands with a group that sought to "destroy this nation." Although there is ground for coalition building between the two movements, according to Boykin, a sophisticated understanding of how they are interrelated, similar, and different must be achieved: "Only when we examine carefully how race and sexual orientation are defined and (mis)understood in this country can we better determine what common ground, if any, exists between blacks and gays." Boykin further observes that regardless of the how the movements are different, there are ultimately grounds for shared understanding because "members of both groups know what it means to be oppressed" (Boykin 1996a).

Meanwhile, the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in America, often addressed issues of exclusion from the mainstream gay rights movement in its publication *The Ladder.* "There has been little evidence that the male homosexual has any intention of making common cause with us," Shirley Willer, DOB president, wrote in a 1966 *Ladder* edition. "We suspect that should the male homosexual achieve his particular objectives in regard to his homosexuality he might become a more adamant foe of women's rights than the heterosexual male ever has been" (Willer [1966] 1997). During the 1970s, a variety of different groups emerged as part of the gay rights movement, but mainstream organizations such as the Student Homophile League were still criticized for expressing little interest in women's issues. As a result, more and more lesbians turned away from the movement. And many, such as Rita Mae Brown, turned in vain to the women's movement in search of support. Brown writes of the elitist and sexist or heterosexist attitudes of both groups and was particularly critical of the Student Homophile League: "Homosexual men (with few exceptions) are like heterosexual men in that they don't give a damn about the needs of women" (Brown 1972). The mainstream gay rights movement not only exiled lesbians but also excluded working-class people from their ranks, according to Del Whan, onetime chair of the Gay Liberation Front. Whan, who was instrumental in organizing the GLF's Women's Caucus (Lesbian Feminists), names two reasons for the masculine focus of the movement. First, men tend to be more visible and occupy more positions of power than do women. Second, women took part in some of the demonstrations, but for the most part they were uneasy about an inability to consider how they were oppressed as gay women (Whan 1972). Brown, writing

that "oppression runs deep," observes that "Among our own we act it [oppression] out on each other with as much viciousness, sometimes, as the very culture which produced the oppression." She goes on to call for a destruction of the "male value system," which rests on the exploitation of women (Brown 1972). Despite the problems with earlier forms of the gay rights movement, there is some evidence that present-day mainstream gay rights leaders are articulating a progressive agenda. This development will be discussed further in the Conclusion.

Responses to Feminism

Messner lists men's liberation as "one of the first organized responses to the reemergence of feminism in the early 1970s," a movement that recognized the price of sexism for women but was also concerned with the limitations of masculinity (Messner 1997, 36). Or, as Kimmel puts it, it was "a curious mixture of a social movement and psychological self-help manual" (1996, 280). Both Messner and Kimmel describe the movement's concern as focused on "sex roles" and the restrictions placed on masculine emotionality. This focus, however useful, does not adequately address the privileges men receive through the system of institutionalized gender relations in the United States. Specifically, a preoccupation with individual behavior as the unit of analysis shifts attention from the systems of domination that create the group identity in the first place. Because the individuals involved are white males, however, identity politics might not be as important because "social institutions as currently constructed protect their interests" (Collins 1998, 151). Certainly the movement's early focus came from a liberal humanist perspective that assumes symmetry between the social positions of men and women and the fact that men and women are equally oppressed (Lingard and Douglas 1999, 33; Messner 1997, 38).

Although this movement did not naturalize or essentialize masculinity, its liberal humanist ideology tended to universalize all male experiences. That is, a discussion of male sex roles focuses attention on the behaviors associated with a single masculinity (in this case white, heterosexual, and middle class) and does not attend to the vast differences among men—such as race, sexual orientation, and class. Further, just as the lack of attention to institutional sexism obscures male privilege, the absence of an overt position on class, race, and sexuality tends to subsume experiences of the majority of men.

> By ignoring the institutionalized racial and class constraints faced by black, Latino, Asian, working class, and poor men, men's liberationists could preoccupy themselves with the "lethal aspects of the male role" and the "burden of the breadwinner role," but avoided the issues of their own positions of privilege within race, class, and gendered hierarchies. (Messner 1997, 41)

Two other disturbing implications are associated with men's liberation ideology. First, the focus on men's behaviors reformulates the gender discourse in a way that suggests that a woman's oppression is related to her own behaviors. Second, it suggests that men's behaviors can be changed for the better without any significant change in the institutional arrangements that give them their power. By the end of the 1970s, men's liberation had split into two camps: men's rights and profeminism.

As the conservative heir of men's liberation, the men's rights movement is also a response to feminism. It is not, however, preoccupied with symmetry between the oppression of men and women. By the conservative 1980s, men's rights placed a different spin on gender inequality altogether, describing feminism as a plot to conceal the truth: "It is actually *women* who have the power and *men* who are most oppressed by the current gender arrangements. Men's shorter life span, health problems, military conscription, and divorce and custody laws were used as evidence of men's oppression" (Messner 1997, 41). By the 1990s, the movement's overtly anti-feminist claims blamed feminism for anti-male sentiment (Lingard and Douglas 1999, 36) and providing women more choices than men, and it described feminists as the *real* sexists. The contemporary focus on men's rights is used in relation

to fathers' rights and becomes actualized in courtroom situations where custody battles between divorcing parents turn into acts of "revenge." Some groups under the umbrella of men's rights, such as the National Organization for Men, articulate a discourse that sounds like equality but disregards any male institutional privilege. "NOM opposes affirmative action, forced collection of alimony and child support, and a single sex military" (Kimmel 1996, 306).

Because men's rights groups focus on gender relations in an "equality for men" context, in the best-case scenario, issues of race, class, and sexuality fall by the wayside. Further, a direct assault on issues such as affirmative action makes problematic an adequate response to racism. In the worst-case scenario, the accompanying conservative political agenda contains the potential for homophobia. Because men's rights "operates within a framework which fits easily into existing economic and political structures," the potential for any sort of progressive analysis of institutional power arrangements is limited (Lingard and Douglas 1999, 340).

Profeminist men, by contrast, articulate a critique of institutional power that is closely aligned to that of feminism. Also emerging from men's liberation of the 1970s, profeminist men tended to participate directly in the women's movement, the gay-rights movement, or both. Messner's discussion of profeminism includes a distinction between radical-feminist men and socialist-feminist men. Radical-feminist male discourse focuses on the system of male supremacy, the domination of women, and sexual violence as extreme forms of domination (Messner 1997, 51). In short, the radical perspective tends to focus on power and how power works with regard to gender in a patriarchal culture. A socialist-feminist analysis incorporates a class critique and explores the ways in which the economic system and the patriarchal power structure work together with differing effects on gender and class configurations.

A radical-feminist male response does not adequately attend to issues of race, class, or sexuality because such an intense focus on men's shared privileges fails to take into account how those privileges are arrayed or the domination of men by men. A socialist-feminist response does provide for a class differential accompanying a gender analysis, but it fails to consider adequately either race or sexuality and runs the risk of economic reductionism. In other words, the differences among men (and women) can become reduced to class rather than other differences such as race or sexual orientation and can obscure systems of domination that sustain oppression across these differences regardless of class. Messner describes the socialist-feminist perspective, however, as one that "demonstrated the greatest potential among feminist discourses to develop a balanced understanding of the structured privileges, costs, and inequalities among men" (1997, 60).

Conclusion

With the theoretical limitations of the discourses of these men's movements in mind, it is important to consider that it is from these limitations that a more coherent, sophisticated analysis can be developed. The interrelated systems of political consciousness and the multiple systems of human domination gave rise to these men's movements in the first place, so that should become the focus of analytical inquiry (Morris 1992, 360). This chapter has attempted to show the ways in which various incarnations of these movements dealing with masculinity have contended with other social "differences" as a means to assess their potential for a progressive intersectional politics. Of the men's movements discussed here, on the one hand, the ideology accompanying the Mythopoetics and the men's-rights groups hold the least potential for this sort of political action. The Mythopoetics' individual-level focus, positioning within a rigid gender dichotomy, reliance on a mythological past, and apolitical stance severely limit their appeal to other groups and stifle opportunities for building a coalition. At the same time the men's rights groups' focus is on restoring prefeminist constructions of masculinity. Because this particular form of masculinity

was achieved historically in America during periods of slavery, deep class stratification, and/or rampant homophobia, working to restore it precludes attention to issues of intersectionality.

On the other hand, the facets of the men's movements mentioned here that are in the best position to develop a progressive politics include the socialist-feminist men and the contemporary gay rights movement. Socialist-feminist men, despite the potential limits of their analysis, articulate an intersecting gender and class position. The work of "multicultural feminists" along similar lines should assist in expanding that position to include race, sexuality, and a variety of other differences. At the same time, contemporary politics around sexual orientation include a focus on coalition building. Former National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Director Urvashi Vaid, for example, has issued a call for "a new understanding" for the mainstream gay rights movement to recognize, accept, and change its biases to create an inclusiveness that will lead to coalition building (Vaid 1995). The other movements mentioned here—Million Man March, radical-feminist men, the Promise Keepers—are illustrations of the complexity of the task at hand because they articulate analytically sophisticated positions in some situations, grossly oppressive positions in others, and positions that are not yet easily interpreted elsewhere.

The ideological positions described here appear to be the collective positions of these particular movements within specific historical, political, and social contexts. They may *not* encompass all, or any, of the views of a specific individual within the movements mentioned, and they are *not* representative of all the views contained within the movements. Rather, they appear to be the discourses of various forms of dynamic movements dealing with masculinity, movements that have focused attention on masculinity in a variety of ways, created social space for a more comprehensive discussion of gender, and made possible a work and a politics that focuses on men. As Onaje Benjamin, an activist who has moved across a variety of these movements, puts it: "There must be a political component to *all* 'men's work' that addresses the full spectrum of issues related to inequalities in our society. As men, we should be open to challenges regarding our commitment to confronting those systems which perpetuate gender and other injustices" (1995, 290).

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think members of the various men's movements of the late twentieth century were unwilling or unable to be more inclusive in terms of race, ethnicity, or class?
2. Compare and contrast the ideologies of the gay liberation movement with the movement of the Promise Keepers. With what different assumptions and values do these groups begin?
3. Do you personally know a member of the Promise Keepers or someone who participated in the Million Man March? How would you characterize the person in terms of social identity? Does he support or contradict the stereotype?
4. How are gender issues revealed in these movements also political issues? What do you think are the concerns about power? What is at stake for the people sharing certain social locations (e.g. African American men, upper-class white men, lesbian women, middle-class Asian or Latina women)?

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