

# FORTY PLUS CLUBS AND WHITE-COLLAR MANHOOD DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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*As scholars of gender and labor have argued, chronic unemployment during the Great Depression precipitated a “crisis” of masculinity, compelling men to turn towards new industrial unions and the New Deal as ways to affirm work, breadwinning, and patriarchy as bases for manhood. But did all men experience this crisis? During the late 1930s, white-collar men organized groups called “Forty Plus Clubs” in response to their worries about joblessness and manhood. The clubs made it possible for unemployed executives to find new jobs, while at the same time recreating the male-dominated culture of the white-collar office. For male executives, Forty Plus Clubs precluded the Depression-era crisis of manhood, challenging the idea that the absence of paid employment was synonymous with the loss of masculinity.*

In her study of men and families during the Great Depression, sociologist Mirra Komarovsky documented how persistent unemployment had shattered the meanings of manhood. With so many men out of work for extended periods of time, the scholar found extensive patterns of gender inversion in American households. Many women assumed control of family finances, losing respect for their troubled spouses. Children ignored their fathers—traditionally the authority figures within the home. Men felt isolated and depressed, unused to remaining within domestic space during daylight hours. “The man appears bewildered and humiliated,” Komarovsky wrote. “It is as if the ground had gone out from under his feet.” Male anxiety permeated American culture during the 1930s. Men vocally opposed women’s employment and worried about adolescent males’ sexual choices.<sup>1</sup> The period witnessed what some historians describe as a “crisis” of masculinity, as the expression of manhood through work, breadwinning, and patriarchy seemed to be wiped away by constant joblessness. “He experiences a sense of deep frustration,” Komarovsky noted, “because in his own estimation he fails to fulfill what is the central

duty of his life, the very touchstone of his manhood—the role of family provider.”<sup>2</sup>

This crisis of masculinity defines historians’ examinations of men, gender, labor, and politics during the Great Depression. To understand the gender inequities of the early New Deal welfare state, as well as the sexist politics and imagery of the Committee of Industrial Organization (CIO), historians point to men’s deepening anxieties about the family wage principle and male breadwinner identities. Because of battles with chronic unemployment and the subsequent crisis of masculinity, men turned to militant new unions and the institutional structures of the welfare state to shore up the primacy of men’s preferred status as workers and breadwinners.<sup>3</sup> As various historians argue, men responded to their social and psychological crisis with aggressively masculine forms of politics: they struck against employers for higher wages and better working conditions; flocked to unions that proclaimed to represent their claims to manhood and economic authority; and endorsed new federal programs that restored men to work and their favored identities as breadwinners. The crisis of manhood transformed the making of the labor movement and the welfare state, underlining the importance of gender analysis to the social, political, and economic history of the New Deal era.

But did this crisis define all men’s experiences with unemployment during the Depression? Did all men respond in the same ways? This essay questions the crisis of masculinity paradigm by focusing on unemployed, white-collar men and their unique responses to the challenges of the 1930s. While working-class men in the auto, rubber, and steel industries looked to new unions to protect their vulnerable manhood, aging male office workers and professionals formed new organizations called “Forty Plus Clubs” to combat unemployment and other barriers to work (especially hiring age limits).<sup>4</sup> As historian Elizabeth Faue points out, male workers and unionists of the 1930s turned to class struggle and unionization as ways to reinvigorate working-class manhood; the CIO’s gender politics pointed to a culture of male aggression and power, emanating from the broader crisis of masculinity.<sup>5</sup> For the members of Forty Plus, however, their group’s activities emphasized the creation of social and professional continuity between employment and unemployment. The members of Forty Plus did not experience a crisis of manhood *per se* because they were very much able to mobilize and secure new white-collar jobs, while the culture and activities of the organization restored and continued the environment, daily work routines, and social practices of the white-collar office. While members of the organization were jobless, the Forty Plus Clubs provided struggling male executives and professionals with workable foundations for male identities. For them, there was no crisis. The white-collar men who joined the organization were able to blur the boundary between employment and unemployment, between manly productivity and unmanly inaction, challenging the idea that the absence of paid employment was synonymous with the loss of masculinity.

The Forty Plus Clubs were the brainchild of Roland Darling, a struggling advertising man and former newspaper editor from the New England region. When he lived in Bar Harbor, Maine during the early 1930s, he knew many struggling hotel workers. He helped them organize a self-help group that “worked well enough,” and some of the men found new jobs in other hotels. After relocating to Boston in 1938, he met many more unemployed men, “all desperately in need of work.” However, it was respectable,

established white-collar men's rapid downward mobility that most alarmed and inspired Darling. "Here were men," he noted, "whose previous measure of success had led them to acquire homes, encourage their children to expect college educations, and in general set up standards of living which were now going to smash."<sup>6</sup> Darling wanted to form a new organization that would combat managerial biases against veteran job-seekers and help these once-respectable men find new jobs. Aging male office workers, and factory workers, often heard hiring managers tell them: "We make 40 our deadline in taking on new people."<sup>7</sup> Available data is incomplete, but a variety of sources indicate that the percentage of American companies with hiring age limits ranged from 30 percent to more than 40 percent during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

In a study of white-collar workers during the 1930s, historian Clark Davis argues: "White-collar unemployment attracted considerable attention, for it seemed a new problem and one that aroused many status anxieties."<sup>9</sup> Male professionals and executives in their forties and fifties constituted a major element of the unemployed ranks, as observers and workers themselves often pointed out. For example, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a struggling executive in the oil industry approaching the age of forty, wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt about his troubles finding a new position. He worried that when his old job would be refilled, "it will be with a younger man." In 1938, an unemployed salesman in Minneapolis complained that "none" of the offices in his city would hire a 40-year-old man, and some companies even refused to hire men over 35.<sup>10</sup> Before the hard times of the 1930s, these white-collar men enjoyed status and privilege. Statistics showed that while not as high as the national unemployment rate of 15 percent in 1937, the number of white-collar men that were out of work reached a significant 8.8 percent.<sup>11</sup> As John Steven McGroarty, the poet laureate of California, insisted in an editorial, "The white-collar man, the artisan, and the other classes of men, are not wanted after they are even forty-five years of age. They are ditched by employers just when they are most capable."<sup>12</sup> In addition to receiving letters from former industrial workers and farmers, the "majority" of letters sent to the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in Los Angeles were from jobless male professionals and staffers, many of whom were in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. "Please, please give this consideration," an unemployed executive wrote, "what I want is a job and I will not fall down on you no matter what it is." A relief worker was shocked by the condition of these unemployed white-collar men—men who had lost not only their incomes, but also their privileged status when their employers fired them. He met many dethroned executives, "able-bodied, well-educated men of the finest sort who came into his office and simply cried because they could not find a job."<sup>13</sup>

In response to such fears, Roland Darling organized the first Forty Plus Club in Boston, which he called "Forty Plus of New England."<sup>14</sup> The group started small, featuring only 13 members, and the organization went to "work" immediately; five found new jobs during the first summer. Within the next few months, over 100 men joined. Soon after, anxious executives in other cities formed their own clubs. In addition to other clubs in New England (including those in Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts), unemployed professionals started organizations in Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New York City, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Missouri, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and Syracuse. In the South, clubs appeared in Miami, Greenville, South

Carolina, Tulsa, and Savannah. The group was also international; men in Montreal, Toronto, and London, England, formed Forty Plus Clubs.<sup>15</sup>

Darling envisioned the Forty Plus Clubs as practical, rather than political, organizations. The members were not activists. Instead, they aggressively used their professional skills as administrators, advertisers, and negotiators to locate jobs for members. The men came together and “sold each other” to new employers.<sup>16</sup> Members of Forty Plus contacted business managers in various fields to convince them to fill vacancies with members; some “salesmen” claimed to meet with as many as 200 employers every week. Forty Plus members circulated “rosters” of men, which highlighted their skills and experience. In an effort to protect older men from discrimination, Forty Plus leaders concealed names and ages. The clubs hoped to see veteran job-seekers get hired (or even denied employment) based on their qualifications and experience, rather than age.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Forty Plus Club members were unemployed workers, their sales activities allowed them to conceal their true social and economic status, taking on the professional identity of a working salesman. The problem of unemployment only factored into their “work” when they pitched resumes of Forty Plus members to potential employers. Whether the commodity to be marketed and sold was paper, machinery, or unemployed veteran executives, the Forty Plus Club’s salesmen negotiated with managers, tried to charm, won over employers (or failed to do so), and made important deals. As an editorial column suggested in the *Washington Post*, “They go out and call on employers and persuade them” not to buy life insurance or encyclopedias, but only “to give older men a chance.”<sup>18</sup>

Commentators emphasized that it was very advantageous for men to help other men via Forty Plus. Instead of going into a job interview alone, aging men benefited from the institutional support and recognition of the club, its identity, and its purpose. Employers were not dealing with only one man; they were dealing with many. Forty Plus Clubs also gave middle-age men a feeling of security and confidence that had eluded them throughout most of the Depression decade. “Members found that selling another man to an employer, instead of yourself, has many advantages,” author Ray Giles observed. “It kills off the nervousness, the over-anxiety, the apologetic attitude or the artificial boldness which afflicts men trying to get a badly needed job.”<sup>19</sup>

Forty Plus Clubs were places where middle-class men—salesmen, bankers, managers, professors—could continue their traditional activities. “Association and mutual helpfulness,” Giles wrote, “gave them the priceless grit to go on making call after call, in spite of discouragement. Their . . . tasks kept them busy every day, and that helped sustain morale and self-respect.” He continued, “The club is hard-boiled, [and] makes no pleas for sympathy.”<sup>20</sup> In a 1941 letter to the *New York Times*, Lucien Dix, who was possibly a member, celebrated their honorable efforts to reclaim jobs in the professional world. The Forty Plus Clubs’ members were not burned-out, “forgotten men,” aging men with sagging shoulders, sullen demeanors, nor tired bodies; they were not the men who languished in breadlines or sold apples on street corners for a nickel. Rather, the men of Forty Plus were “unusually attractive,” vigorously collaborating “in a voluntary association.” In fact, Dix argued that the Forty Plus Clubs’ struggle was comparable to English soldiers’ heroic war against Nazi Germany on the continent of Europe: “I see in

these men mutually striving with courage and patience for victory over the Depression their brethren of Britain facing as gallantly a much more evil foe.”<sup>21</sup>

Forty Plus Clubs certainly were places where struggling staffers and professionals could feel productive again. The Great Depression, as observers liked to point out, may have bloodied the members of Forty Plus, but they were unbowed.<sup>22</sup> Every club designated tasks for their members that gave them a new sense of purpose. “These men don’t sit around and twiddle their thumbs and complain,” the *Washington Post* observed in 1939. “No, indeed. They go into action.”<sup>23</sup> They did not want to think of themselves as unemployed or to be viewed as such; the men of Forty Plus were working at a new white-collar job (albeit without a salary). Every day, in addition to meeting with managers about job openings and placements, these white-collar men wrote and revised resumes and cover letters for out-of-work executives and gave speeches to community groups about the Forty Plus Clubs’ program.<sup>24</sup> The clubs did their best to reconstruct the high-stakes, goal-oriented atmosphere of the office. A lack of productivity or dereliction of duty was not tolerated. If a member skipped meetings or failed to execute his assigned tasks, then he would be summarily “dismissed” and replaced.<sup>25</sup> He would be fired—just like any other executive who failed on the job.

The leaders of Forty Plus envisioned their organization as a place where serious work was done. Even though they called their group a “club,” they did not want their organization to be viewed as a social or recreational site. Forty Plus was about work—not play. It was a “job-getting club.”<sup>26</sup> In a 1938 article in *Reader’s Digest*, Ray Giles noted, “Strictly taboo are social gossip, religious arguments, [and] off-color stories.”<sup>27</sup> Unemployed executives and professionals wanted Forty Plus to be a place where men completed “productive” work. As unemployed men in the midst of a depression, the members shied away from any associations between themselves and any non-work related activity. Forty Plus wanted no part of merriment, fun, or frivolity.

The Forty Plus Clubs of the late 1930s and early 1940s catered exclusively to men. Club members and the journalists who wrote about the group were careful to point out that women were absent from the ranks. Forty Plus was a stronghold of manhood: there were no women to compete with men, nor did men share the club space with women. A newspaper reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* visited the Southern California club, and observed: “Though the office is filled all day with workers, not one of them is a woman.”<sup>28</sup> Forty Plus Clubs guaranteed a solidly male space amidst a broader pattern of uneasiness about manhood and feminization resulting from joblessness during the 1930s.

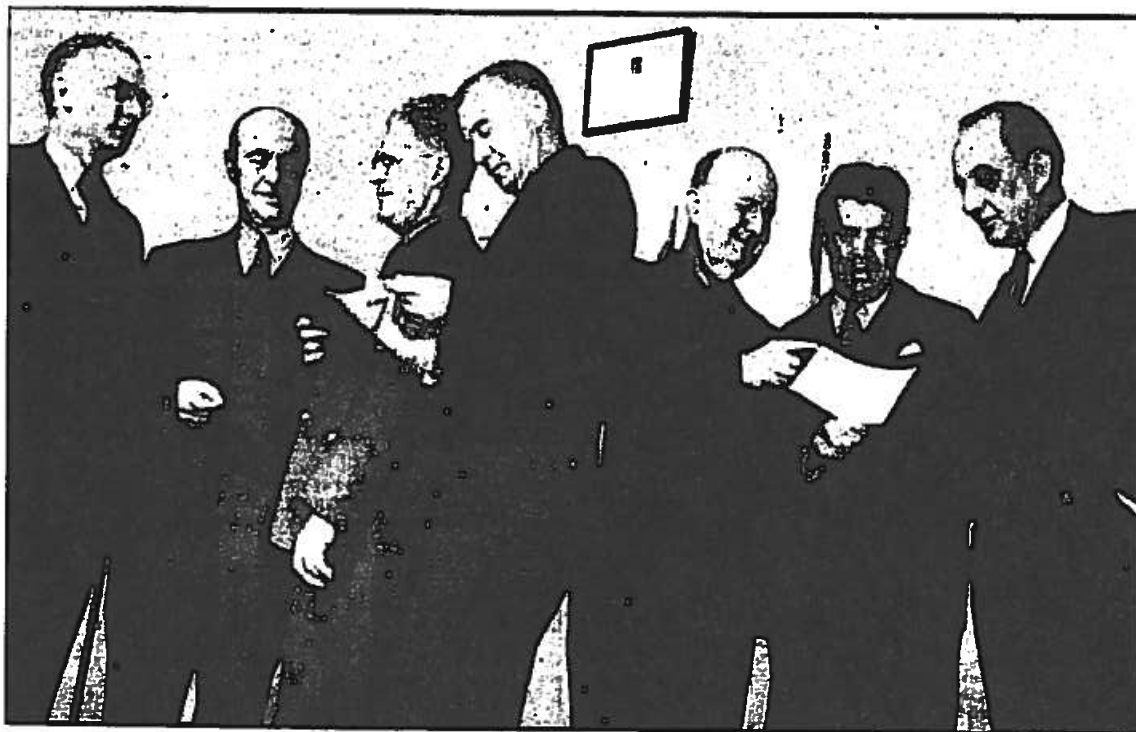
Despite men’s preeminence, Forty Plus was never completely free from the feminine connotations of work activities that were historically associated with women. In the early-twentieth century office, assumptions about gender defined the range of acceptable work activities for men and women, as well as corporate hierarchies themselves.<sup>29</sup> While men dominated the leadership positions within corporations, women worked in clerical jobs. White-collar men perceived these occupations as “feminine,” and thus less important than men’s work. Women typed, filed, and shuffled paper for the men they worked for. However, since women could not participate, the men of Forty Plus were responsible for their own secretarial work. “Men do all the typewriting and telephone answering,” the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out.<sup>30</sup> The unemployed men in the Forty Plus Clubs could not

perfectly recreate the environment of the male-dominated office, where they once gave orders to female subordinates. Rather, these executives now had to manage clerical tasks on their own.

White-collar men also looked to physical appearances to affirm their masculinity. The white-collar dress code of dark suits and ties provided a convenient and immediate way to affirm the professional identities of white-collar men, even in unemployment. The look of the suit visually obscured Forty Plus members' actual status as unemployed workers, especially since it was common for white-collar men to wear their suits both in and outside of the workplace.<sup>31</sup> Despite the lack of formal employment, business suits provided the men of Forty Plus with a way to challenge the idea that unemployment meant the end of their former lifestyles and professional identities.

Available photos of the organization in action pointed to the importance of physical appearance in the organization's culture. In a 1940 *Los Angeles Times* photo, for example, the photographer was careful to represent Forty Plus Club members in a scene reminiscent of their earlier days as busy executives (see Figure 1). Instead of depicting unemployed men who were actually battling to find jobs, the photo shows hard-working veteran executives, clad in suits and ties, engaged in what looks like company business. We see two groups of men in conference, examining what could have been memos, contracts, reports, or orders to be given to subordinates. On the wall behind them, a college diploma or a certificate honoring an earlier achievement adds to the office environment that the Forty Plus organization wanted to recreate for its members. Furthermore, the display of the diploma binds the men to a legacy of professional success and accomplishment.

**Figure 1.** Forty Plus Club members in Los Angeles



Timothy Turner, "For Men Above Forty," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 February 1940, 15.

The 1940 photo of the productive men in Forty Plus differed greatly from other Depression-era photographs of the unemployed. While the *Los Angeles Times* framed the men of Forty Plus as authentic working white-collar executives, the federal government's Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers, for instance, framed the unemployed man as a shattered victim of chronic joblessness. Most famously, Dorothea Lange's images of displaced migrants from rural Oklahoma (the "Okies") in California became synonymous with the human devastation of the Great Depression. As historian Linda Gordon wrote about Lange's photography, viewers typically saw former-working men who had been robbed of their identities as workers, breadwinners, and patriarchs by drought, employer disinterest, and extensive mechanization of farm labor. Lange typically suggested that unemployed men were "dejected": their expressions indicated sadness and isolation, while their bodies showed signs of fatigue, hunger, dirt, grime, and old age (see Figure 2). Photos showed men's hands jammed into the pockets of their overalls, no longer using farming implements or factory tools. Wholly inactive, they now leaned idly back against dusty buildings. After years without steady work, there was little reason men should have hope or take action: "Everywhere are idle groups of men in conversation . . . The men appear by the sides of the empty, silent main streets. They are all thin . . . Many attend morning movies because there is nothing else to do."<sup>32</sup> Photographers who documented the men of Forty Plus, on the other hand, called attention to the Forty Plus members' professional dress and deportment; the *Los Angeles Times* photographer allowed the unemployed white-collar men of Forty Plus to avoid the negative associations that seemed to define the struggling men in the Farm Security Administration's photographs.

While they were limited in scope, Forty Plus Clubs across the United States placed significant numbers of members in new positions. In 1939 alone, Forty Plus of Chicago placed 115 middle-aged executives into new jobs. In Kansas City, Missouri, 45 members moved on to new positions. In Pittsburgh, 41 of 175 executives found full-time work. Between 1938 and 1941, the size of the Forty Plus Club in New York City steadily declined as the organization found work for 275 unemployed businessmen. Only 70 men were still on the active membership list in 1941, leading the group to boast that it had reached a "low water mark." An estimated 60 percent of the first cohort who joined the Los Angeles club found employment in the first year, 1939.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the popular Forty Plus Clubs, numerous smaller organizations appeared in New York City, Boston, and other cities. To combat what newspapers called "Fortyphobia," aging professional men drew on Forty Plus's model of organization and formed a variety of groups such as "Life Begins at 40 Leagues," "The Job Hunters League," and "The Foundation for Americans of Mature Age," among other organizations.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the clubs' popularity between 1938 and 1942, the widening of white-collar employment opportunities and increasing prosperity during and after World War II halted the expansion of Forty Plus. The clubs became redundant, as men in white-collar jobs enjoyed new jobs, rising incomes, expanding benefits, and increasing employment stability. Executives no longer needed the sanctuary provided by Forty Plus Clubs.

Forty Plus did continue to exist, on a much smaller scale, throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. They even allowed women to join. In fact, when author Barbara Ehrenreich went undercover in the early 2000s to study white-

collar unemployment, one of her stops included the meetings of a Forty Plus Club. However, what was once a vibrant group was now a dumping ground for a minority of frustrated job seekers, as she suggested. Years later, however, the message of the Forty Plus Clubs remains the same: “job searching is not joblessness; it is a job in itself and should be structured to resemble one.”<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 2.** Dorothea Lange photograph of unemployed men in San Francisco



Dorothea Lange, “‘Skid Row,’ Howard Street, the street of the unemployed in San Francisco, California” (1937), LC-USF34- 016158-E, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, jobless white-collar men had been able to successfully use the Forty Plus Clubs to blur the boundaries between the unemployment-employment divide that greatly determined the social and economic status of males. In the years *after* the Depression decade, when employment became steadier and more lucrative, white-collar men actually became more uneasy about manhood. Men now worried about the deadening effects of too much comfort: they worried about how to remain manly in an era that was now defined by an emphasis on conformity, a lack of physical effort, and suburban luxury.<sup>36</sup> How could males be “men” without struggle? While this period of soul-searching in the history of manhood in the United States has also been described as yet another crisis of masculinity, it was really a period of bored



reflection on long-term white-collar employment and subsequent uncertainty or even disbelief—rather than a substantive social and economic crisis. The 1950s were good times for male professionals and executives who worked in offices.

The crisis of masculinity is widely used in historians' writings about manhood; however, it oversimplifies the varieties of manhood at a given historical moment and the many varieties of men's responses to questions about work and gender. During the Great Depression, Forty Plus Clubs offered a way for white-collar men to address their worries about the loss of masculinity amidst massive unemployment. Forty Plus aggressively tried to place men into new jobs, as well as reconstruct the working environment of the office—thus preserving and continuing the foundations of white-collar masculinity. The decade's discourse about the jarring loss of manhood, powerfully explored by sociologists such as Mirra Komarovsky, did not neatly apply to white-collar men. The members of the Forty Plus Clubs transformed unemployment—the source of the decade's masculinity crisis—into a condition that did not necessarily undermine manhood.

## NOTES

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