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Betty Friedan's Feminist Critique of Suburban Domesticity

Rebecca Jo Plant

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’

For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. Some women, in their forties and fifties, still remembered painfully giving up those dreams, but most of the younger women no longer even thought

*about them. A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.*¹

Published in 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is widely credited with inaugurating the resurgence of feminism in the United States. Just three years after the book's publication, Friedan became the first president of the newly formed National Organization for Women, that sought to combat sexual discrimination, particularly in the workplace. Envisioned as a kind of NAACP for women, NOW went on to become the best known and arguably the most successful feminist organization in post-Second World War America. Because Friedan played such a central role in its founding, accounts of second-wave feminism often draw a straight line from *The Feminine Mystique* to NOW. But, as a careful reading of Friedan's surprise bestseller reveals, to interpret the book in light of subsequent events is to grant it a more radical and explicitly political agenda than it actually articulated.

In fact, *The Feminine Mystique* offers little in the way of a policy-oriented agenda: its appeal lay less in Friedan's blurry vision of the future than in her laser-like critique of the recent past. With the end of the Second World War, she argued, a whole generation of American women, weary of economic hardship and war, had made a 'mistaken choice' (153–72). Turning their backs on the hard-won achievements of the suffragists and early feminists, they abandoned educational and career ambitions, plunged headlong into early marriage and motherhood and produced an extraordinary baby boom. Popular writers and experts of various stripes fuelled these trends by arguing that well-adjusted women derived fulfilment only through motherhood and domesticity. This was the spurious ideology – the 'feminine mystique' – that Friedan sought to demolish.

The first two paragraphs of *The Feminine Mystique*, quoted above, showcase Friedan's effective writing style, preview some of her major claims and expose her tendency to universalize the experiences of suburban wives and mothers. They also gesture towards Friedan's historical interpretation of American women's uneven social and political progress in the twentieth century – an interpretation that would have an outsized impact on the soon-to-emerge field of US women's history. Placed within its broader intellectual, social and political context, this extract introduces the book's central arguments, while also revealing some of its limitations as a foundational text of liberal feminism.²

The very first lines of *The Feminine Mystique* establish Friedan's voice and signal her imagined audience. After identifying an unspoken yet pervasive sense of dissatisfaction afflicting 'American women', the passage immediately shifts to describing the daily routine of a typical 'suburban wife' (9). Employing literary skills honed as a journalist and magazine writer, and drawing on her personal experiences as a suburban wife and mother, Friedan referenced details (peanut butter sandwiches, station wagons and matching slipcovers) that would have been familiar to many of her readers. While this approach lent her work authenticity, her authorial stance as an exposé writer revealing a previously unrecognized social ill seized readers' attention from the outset.

If a wide swathe of American women saw themselves reflected in the book's pages, however, many others did not. By conflating 'American women' with suburban wives and mothers, Friedan seemed to imply that all the nation's women were white and middle class. In one of the many letters Friedan received in response to *The Feminine Mystique*, Gerda Lerner – who would subsequently help to pioneer the field of women's history – praised Friedan's 'splendid book', yet criticized its narrow focus. To leave working-class women and black women 'out of consideration ... or to ignore the contributions they can make toward its solution', she argued, 'is something we simply cannot afford to do'.³ Similarly, feminist theorist bell hooks later noted that Friedan wrote as if working-class women and women of colour 'did not exist', making 'her plight and the plight of white women like herself synonymous with a condition affecting all American women'.⁴

Such critiques are by no means unusual in the history of feminism; many advocates of racial and economic justice have accused feminists of privileging the concerns and interests of white and middle- or upper-middle class women over those of less privileged women. But in Friedan's case, the neglect of working-class women is surprising, given her formative political experiences. As a Smith College student in the late 1930s and early 1940s, she was drawn to left-wing ideologies and supported attempts to unionize the college's workers. Later, in the 1940s and early 1950s, she worked as a journalist for the labour press; among the issues she addressed were the specific challenges facing women workers. Historian Daniel Horowitz has theorized that Friedan purposefully sought to mask this chapter of her past, fearing (not unreasonably) that critics would try to discredit her and her arguments by accusing her of communist sympathies.⁵ Although Friedan herself strongly rejected Horowitz's interpretation, it would help to explain not only her focus

on suburban women, but also her neglect of the economic structures that supported women's relegation to the domestic realm.⁶

Indeed, for all its rhetorical punch, *The Feminine Mystique* is clearly a reformist rather than a radical work. This is apparent when one compares the book to an earlier feminist classic, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a sprawling analysis of women's subordination that weds existentialist philosophy to a particular interpretation of Marx (See chapter 17 in this volume).⁷ Though Friedan read *The Second Sex*, which was translated into English in 1953, she did not adopt its arguments concerning economic dependence as a central component of women's subordination. Instead, she was primarily drawn to de Beauvoir's existentialist interpretation of housework. The French philosopher portrayed housewifery as repetitive, unrewarding labour that produced nothing and achieved nothing beyond sustaining daily existence. Friedan did not go quite this far, but her book's protagonists – mired in the quotidian details of homemaking and haunted by the question, 'Is this all?' – were clearly afflicted with a form of existential dread. According to Friedan, the women who experienced such emptiness would find relief only by making a 'lifelong commitment to an art or science, to politics or profession' (287). Yet, while she urged women to seek employment outside the home, Friedan never argued that they needed to be economically independent of men to be truly emancipated. Nor did she suggest that women's emancipation depended on the overthrow of capitalism.

Friedan did, however, explore the ways in which businesses benefitted from the media construct of the ideal American housewife. She devoted much attention to describing how advertisements in women's magazines created absurd expectations in regard to homemaking. (Her derisive comments about advice to housewives concerning 'how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands', are a case in point (9).) Because advertisers and their clients benefitted when women embraced the consumer-oriented role of housewife, she argued, they tried to make housework expand to 'fill the time available'. Yet, if Friedan astutely critiqued advertisers' attempts to mystify domestic labour, she did not ask why it was women who were held responsible for homemaking in the first place. Nor, aside from promoting publicly funded childcare, did she resurrect the arguments of early-twentieth-century feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who thought that domestic labour should be collectivized, professionalized and outsourced.⁸ In other words, Friedan wanted suburban women to be less

consumed with housewifery, but she did not broach fundamental questions about the private character and gendered construction of domestic labour.

Friedan's emphasis on cultural messages aimed at women (rather than the economic or legal aspects of women's oppression) situates her within a long tradition of feminist criticism, dating back to at least 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (See chapter 6 in this volume). Wollstonecraft decried the inferiority of girls' education, arguing that it produced vain, vapid women who threatened to stymie the 'progress of knowledge and virtue'.⁹ Similarly, Friedan lambasted social conditions that she saw as fundamentally corrosive of women's mental health, but she ended up portraying those she hoped to liberate in strikingly harsh terms. For instance, she reiterated the claims of post-war psychiatrists who blamed American mothers for everything from the mental problems of US veterans to 'the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky fog over the American scene' (267). By warning against the dangers of maternal psychopathology, Friedan hoped to forward a feminist agenda: she argued that husbands and children also benefitted when women pursued work and interests beyond the home. But, her highly unflattering depiction of the typical suburban housewife offended many women, and scholars have subsequently critiqued *The Feminine Mystique* for perpetuating mother-blaming and for stigmatizing homosexuality.¹⁰

Friedan's extensive appropriation of psychological and social-scientific findings regarding maternal pathology is at odds with her reputation as a trenchant critic of post-war expertise on women and the family. To be sure, she was highly sceptical of psychologists who courted a popular audience by advising women on everything from 'how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training' to 'how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents' (9). She reserved particular animus for those who invoked Freudian concepts to define femininity in a manner that stigmatized women with ambitions beyond the home as 'neurotic, unhappy, and unfeminine'. Arguing that the feminine mystique 'derived its power from Freudian thought', she devoted an entire chapter ('The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud') to exposing Freud as a 'prisoner of his time' when it came to his views on women (166–95).

Yet, Friedan always differentiated between Freudian theory and its clinical application, and her disdain for popularized Freudianism never translated into a wholesale rejection of psychoanalytic therapy or psychological

thinking. *The Feminine Mystique* cites the work of numerous psychological experts, but it is particularly indebted to the psychoanalyst Abraham Maslow. Extending his notion of 'self-actualization' to women, Friedan insisted that a woman could become truly self-actualizing only by escaping the culture's narrow definition of femininity. Such arguments reflect her extensive and long-standing engagement with psychological thinking and therapeutic culture.¹¹ After majoring in psychology at Smith College, Friedan spent a year (1942–1943) in a graduate programme in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied with psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. She also twice underwent psychoanalysis, first in the 1940s and again in the 1950s, which she found immensely helpful. Indeed, among the most fascinating revelations in Friedan's autobiography is that she initially asked her former psychoanalyst if he would collaborate with her on what became *The Feminine Mystique*, believing that the name of an 'eminent male psychoanalyst' would lend the book 'more authority'. In the end, her editor ruled out the idea.¹² But, this little-known detail should lead scholars to reassess Friedan's relationship to psychological expertise, for it flies in the face of her reputation as an ardent foe of psychoanalysis.

As all this suggests, the transformations that Friedan called for in *The Feminine Mystique* were largely personal and psychological ones; the book does not explicitly call for a feminist revival. In fact, Friedan's chapter on the US suffrage movement strikes a curious note. Here she challenged the 'unquestioned perversion of history' that led many Americans to view the suffragists as 'man-hating, embittered, sex-starved spinsters' (134). Emphasizing the fact that many of the movement's leaders were wives and mothers, she repeatedly referred to their feminine attributes, describing Antoinette Brown as 'pretty', Lucy Stone as 'a little woman, with a gentle, silvery voice', Angelina Grimké as 'lovely' and Julia Ward Howe as 'beautiful' (137–65). Needless to say, such conventional praise of feminine charm is unexpected in a book devoted to critiquing the ways in which American culture pressured women to embody 'femininity'. Moreover, whereas Friedan clearly wanted to recover and celebrate the history of the suffrage movement, she did not argue that a new generation should take up the unfinished work of these political foremothers.

Yet, just three years after publishing *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan drafted NOW's original Statement of Purpose, which detailed the ways in which American women remained oppressed and outlined how true equality could be achieved. To anyone familiar with her book, the document would have a familiar ring. It asserts, for instance, that women should have opportunities

to 'develop their fullest human potential' and denounces the 'false image of women now prevalent in the mass media.'¹³ But at the same time, the NOW Statement of Purpose reflects how much had changed in the intervening years. With the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in employment based on race, colour, religion, sex or national origin, American women had unexpectedly gained a new tool to challenge inequality in the workforce – a tool that many had readily seized. This helped to introduce new concepts and phrases such as 'sex discrimination', which appear in the NOW manifesto but have no antecedents in *The Feminine Mystique*.

The NOW Statement of Purpose also challenged the notion that any problems a mother and wife might experience in trying to simultaneously manage her domestic responsibilities and participate in the larger social and economic order were 'the unique responsibility of each individual' to solve. Yet, this was essentially the message that one would derive from reading the final chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, tellingly entitled 'A New Life Plan.' Friedan did look hopefully to a future when women with children would begin demanding 'maternity leaves or even maternity sabbaticals, professionally run nurseries, and other changes...necessary' to facilitate their greater participation in the workforce. She also proposed the notion of a government programme similar to the GI Bill to provide assistance to homemakers wanting to return to school (370–78). But most of the chapter consists of stories of remarkable women who had independently figured out ways to pursue fulfilling careers without forgoing marriage and motherhood. Friedan seemed to be suggesting that, with ingenuity and determination, her readers could reject society's definition of femininity and forge new and more rewarding paths for themselves without the assistance of government programmes.

To the extent that people mistakenly remember *The Feminine Mystique* as calling for a new political movement to redress women's oppression, its influence on second-wave feminism has been somewhat exaggerated. But, it would be hard to overstate the book's impact on the then still nascent field of US women's history. Based on her analysis of popular women's magazines, Friedan argued that images of plucky and self-sufficient women had been commonplace in the 1930s and early 1940s but declined sharply after the Second World War. Numerous historians subsequently adopted Friedan's chronology and her interpretation of the post-war era, portraying it as a time of backlash against women's social and economic gains. But in the past twenty-five years, scholars have questioned the accuracy of this narrative. Historian

Joanne Meyerowitz has shown that many women's magazines celebrated not only homemaking, but also 'non-domestic activity, individual striving, public service, and public success', while Eva Moskowitz has unearthed a 'discourse of discontent' that anticipated Friedan's arguments in *The Feminine Mystique*.¹⁴ In sum, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the numerous ways in which the book echoed and built upon ideas and arguments already circulating within American culture.

Still, it would be wrong to downplay the powerful – in some cases, life-changing – impact of *The Feminine Mystique*.¹⁵ Today, Friedan's ideas may appear less original than long assumed, but she made the case against post-war domesticity and in favour of women's pursuit of meaningful work more powerfully than anyone before her. There is no denying that the book helped to raise many women's consciousness about the insidious cultural messages directed at them, while also validating their desires for a life beyond the home. As for Friedan herself, she quickly moved beyond the biting critique of the 'happy housewife heroine' that made *The Feminine Mystique* such a sensation. By the time she penned NOW's founding manifesto, she believed that women's advancement would require not only incisive social criticism and personal transformation, but also collective political action.