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29. Housewives' Choice? (2001)

Delilah Campbell

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* has one of the most memorable openings in feminist non-fiction:

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?' (p.13).

Writing well before the advent of the Women's Liberation Movement (*The Feminine Mystique* was begun in the late 1950s and first published in 1963), Friedan analysed what she called 'the problem that has no name': the oppressive emptiness of the life led by educated, affluent suburban housewives. The economic dependence, spatial confinement, social isolation and mind-numbing triviality of the housewife's role became one of second-wave feminism's central targets, along with the unfair division of domestic labour that went with it. For middle-class women particularly, escaping from this role was often an important part of the struggle they engaged in when they took on board the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political'.

Women never did manage to shrug off their disproportionate responsibility for housework, but 'doing housework' is not the same as 'being a housewife'. Today, domesticity is no longer seen as women's natural vocation, and few women under the age of about 60 would label themselves 'housewives' (those who do not work outside the home are more likely to call themselves 'full-time mothers'). But if the housewife has been consigned to the dustbin of history, a new and suspiciously similar phenomenon has recently emerged from that vast recycling bin known as postmodern culture. Welcome — or not — to the 'domestic goddess'.

From housewife to goddess: the new domesticity

I take the phrase 'domestic goddess' from the title of Nigella Lawson's book *How to be a Domestic Goddess*. This is slightly unfair, because the title is clearly meant to be

ironic, and the book itself is basically just a collection of cake recipes. Nevertheless, the title works as irony because it alludes to a recognisable phenomenon, which also has some less ironic recent manifestations.

For example, among the surprise publishing successes of the year 2000 were several 'how-to' books about housework — about starching linen, cleaning windows, scrubbing floors, and generally rediscovering the things your grandmother knew about how to keep a well-ordered house. Another unexpected seller was a new edition of the bible of Victorian domesticity, [Mrs] Isabella Beeton's *Household Management*. Meanwhile, British television brought us documentary series on *The 1900 House* and then *The 1940s House*, in each of which a modern family returned to the domestic arrangements of the past — putting washing through a mangle, preparing meals without modern convenience foods or labour-saving equipment. For the women of the families, domesticity was visibly a fulltime job. And what was notable was their enthusiasm for it. The 1940s House's Mrs Hymer was forthright about the exhaustion it produced, but she also extolled the power of traditional domestic arrangements to bring families together around what really mattered.

In upmarket women's magazines, too, the joys of domesticity have been a popular theme of late. According to an article in *Red*, increasing numbers of women are resigning from their high-powered jobs after concluding that they and their families would be happier if they used their time and talents in the home. The women who were interviewed for the piece were, if not radical feminists, then certainly not doormats. They were self-aware, articulate, persuasive about the decisions they had made. True, in the parallel universe of magazine journalism, two of the writer's acquaintances can be presented as a social trend: how many women are really giving up paid work — or seriously wishing they could afford to — is difficult to say. But even if the answer is 'none', it does not seem insignificant that there is apparently so much interest in *reading* about it. This suggests that there may be, to paraphrase Betty Friedan, 'a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffer at the beginning of the 21st century'. But what women are apparently yearning for now is not an alternative to domesticity. It is more like a return to it.

I use the word 'return' advisedly, for even when it is not an explicit recreation of a bygone age, the new domesticity is strikingly old-fashioned. You can see this by comparing it to the domestic regime championed by popular writers during the 1970s and 1980s. Shirley Conran's *Superwoman*, for instance, remembered for its author's bracing remark that 'life's too short to stuff a mushroom', was all

about making domestic activities take less time and effort. It was realistic about domesticity being women's work, but it assumed their more important sources of satisfaction lay elsewhere. Today's domestic ideal, by contrast, is almost perversely time-consuming. Not only are there no short-cuts, you are meant to derive pleasure from what is by most contemporary standards an extraordinary excess of effort — ironing the duvet cover, taking rugs outside and beating them, cleaning windows with vinegar rather than a proprietary spray.

Betty Friedan makes exactly the same point about the 1950s, observing of American suburban housewives after World War II that

They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. They changed the sheets twice a week instead of once, took the rug-hooking class at adult education, and pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamt of having a career. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: 'occupation: housewife' (p.16).

Contemporary domestic goddesses would not describe themselves, 'proudly' or otherwise, as 'housewives': but their project is very much about making domestic work an *occupation* again, rather than just a collection of tedious low-level chores.

In case anyone thinks I am accusing the women to whom this vision appeals of being brainless fembots, let me confess that I am not untouched by it myself. I was gripped by *The 1940s House*; I have taken to baking cakes when stressed, and have flipped through Nigella Lawson's book in shops to see if I might want to buy it when it comes out in paperback. Worst of all, I quite often fantasise about giving up the rat-race for a spell of fulltime domestic bliss. I imagine myself in a clean and aesthetically pleasing house, cooking wholesome and delicious food, surrounded by other people who I choose to be with and who appreciate my efforts (though I do draw the line at putting a husband into this picture). A few years ago, such a scenario would never have entered my mind. Why am I susceptible to it now? Is the first decade of the 21st century turning into a re-run of the 1950s? And are feminist insights from the mid-20th century worth applying to the conditions of the 21st?

The feminine mystique revisited

The Feminine Mystique is a liberal text, but you could not call it wishy-washy. It contains, for instance, an entire chapter denouncing Freud and his latter-day followers for their ridiculous patriarchal doctrine of 'penis envy', and two more dripping contempt for functionalist social scientists and those who applied their teachings in programmes of domestic education for girls. It also offers a critique of the media which anticipates later feminist scholarship. Friedan herself wrote for women's magazines: *The Feminine Mystique* was partly inspired by the extreme dissonance she perceived between what women were actually telling her, and the picture of domestic paradise she was expected to paint in her journalism.

Friedan shows that in the decade after the war, women's magazines became progressively more domesticated. Whereas the *Ladies' Home Journal* and its ilk during the 1930s and 40s had featured stories about 'new women' with careers and pilots' licenses, as well as reports on politics and science, by the mid-1950s

their pages were full of stories about housewives (or women looking for husbands so they could become housewives) and articles on domestic pursuits. Women whose contributions to magazine journalism had been valued because of their distinguished reputations in other fields were now forced to reinvent themselves as 'ordinary' wives and mothers, 'revelling in a comic world of children's pranks and eccentric washing machines and parents' nights at the PTA' (p.50).

This is uncomfortably close to some present-day realities. In the past few years, glossy magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *She* have abandoned their previous image as reading matter for intelligent 'career women' and cultivated an altogether fluffier image. Newspapers are awash in 'lifestyle' features, whose writers once again get paid to chronicle the ups and downs of life at home — the breakdown of domestic appliances, the amusing dramas of getting three children ready for a family outing, the horror that is a teenage boy's bedroom.

But if there are echoes of the 1950s and 60s in contemporary popular culture, there are also some differences between then and now. Today women who embrace domesticity do so by choice rather than compulsion. Though Betty Friedan emphasises the voluntarism of post-war women's surrender to the domestic ideal, she also shows that educated middle-class women in the 50s did not have the alternative options available to their counterparts today. On the other hand they did face relentless pressure towards domesticity from all kinds of 'experts', from the media and from their peers. Today, by contrast, it is the decision *not* to take up a profession, or to leave it permanently when she marries or has children, that educated women have to justify.

Another difference is that the new domesticity is not, or at least is never presented as, an exclusively female preserve. Some of its prominent media representatives are gods rather than goddesses, like Nigel Slater and Jamie Oliver. Male journalists are also well represented among the authors of the many newspaper columns now devoted to chronicling the mundane details of domestic life. The existence of the 'domestic god' who does not just pontificate on domesticity (as male experts have done for two centuries) but is seen to embrace it fully and enthusiastically, suggests to me, not that domesticity has become genderless (structural inequalities still have a bearing here: since men usually earn more, if one member of a heterosexual couple is going to give up paid work it will often make financial sense for it to be the woman), but that the desire for domesticity has some purchase on both sexes. It can't be explained, that is, as a simple desire to return to traditional, 1950s-style gender roles or as a reaction against feminism. (After all, men doing domesticity is very much in the spirit of a certain sort of feminism.) Though I will suggest later that it is still a feminist issue, arguably the

rise of the new domesticity has less to do with gender *per se* than with a more general search for meaning in contemporary life: it is a reaction to, or against, current trends in both paid work and consumer culture.

Getting a life: the problem of work

Betty Friedan repeatedly opposes the confinement of the suburban housewife to the freedom of the woman allowed to pursue a career. Mainstream liberal feminism has always maintained something similar to this position: the keystone of women's equality is access to the world of work, especially to the middle-class professions, and the key feminist issues are therefore things like sex discrimination in employment, sexual harassment in the workplace, equal pay, and the 'glass ceiling'.

Indisputably these issues remain relevant; but the celebration of waged work as inherently liberating for women, and inherently less oppressive than domesticity, seems increasingly out of touch with the experience of many 'career women'. In the accounts of those who have 'downshifted' to part-time jobs or fulltime motherhood, there is, on the contrary, a consistent focus on the all-consuming, but at the same time unsatisfying nature of much contemporary work. And when paid work is experienced as oppressive rather than fulfilling, the domestic sphere, popularly conceived as 'the opposite' of work, starts to look less like a cage and more like the refuge whose idealisation Friedan deplored.

It has been calculated that workers today spend more hours working than any group of people in recorded human history except factory hands in the early, unregulated phase of the industrial revolution. This affects women particularly adversely, precisely because they continue to be responsible for most of the domestic labour that is needed to maintain their households. Women with jobs have to come home and work a 'second shift'. Add to this the fact that many professional women are in working environments which are particularly stressful — women are, for instance, over-represented in public sector occupations like nursing, education and social work where they must constantly try to compensate for a chronic lack of resources — and it becomes easy to see the attraction of jacking in the day-job.

For most women, however, that is a fantasy. For working-class women the 'choice' not to work for wages was always constrained by economic realities; now the same is true for middle-class women, since contemporary middle-class lifestyles can rarely be maintained on a single income. This is what gives resonance to contemporary buzzphrases like 'the work-life balance', in which 'life' essentially means home and family. The new domesticity gives the illusion of a 'balance' by encouraging women who cannot escape either waged work or domestic work to

redefine their relationship to the latter: instead of being merely a 'second shift' at work, it becomes more like a hobby, a creative activity offering the pleasure and satisfaction which today's stressful paid jobs often do not.

Saving our souls: the problem of consumerism

'The problem that has no name' emerged at the beginning of the great western post-war consumer boom. This is relevant to what could be seen as a major shortcoming of Friedan's book, its exclusive focus on white middle-class suburban women. In fact, though, part of her point was that 'the problem' affected these privileged women most severely. They were the beneficiaries of the new affluence and the labour-saving products which reduced the drudgery of housework. But consequently, the occupation to which their gender consigned them no longer occupied the time they had to spend on it, nor demanded any real skill. From the interviews Friedan quotes, it is evident that many women's malaise — continual sleepiness, inability to concentrate, depression — had its origins in a kind of pathological boredom. Old-style domestic work was composed of repetitive and often menial tasks, but it did not leave the housewife with so many empty hours or so much surplus physical and mental energy.

What was supposed to fill the time freed up by the end of domestic drudgery? According to a fairly standard sociological-historical account, the real job of the post-war housewife was to *consume* — to buy things, especially non-essential or luxury items. The post-war period marked a new and decisive stage in the long-term process whereby the household shifted from being the key site of production in the pre-industrial era, to being a site almost exclusively of consumption. This historical account provided the basis for a marxist (and marxist feminist) critique of the modern housewife's role. The housewife was performing a vital service to capitalism: as well as reproducing her husband's labour power by feeding, clothing and nurturing him, she was redistributing his earnings back into the capitalist's coffers by buying things she did not need, but was induced to want by consumerist culture.

The classic marxist view of domestic consumerism has been criticised on many grounds — as patronisingly sexist (it portrays women as dupes of capitalism), as puritanical (it does not acknowledge the pleasures of consumption) and as insufficiently attentive to the gendered power relations inside households. However, it seems pointless to digress into this argument, because just as we are almost all wage-workers now, so we are also all defined, to a greater or lesser extent, by our habits and practices of consumption. For members of modern societies, of all

classes and generations, and of both genders, buying goods and services is both a leisure activity and a form of self-expression. Few of us are so poor that we have no choices at all. And even fewer of us have the time or the skills to produce our own food, clothing and entertainment.

But the extent to which we are caught up in consumerism has generated a backlash. The radical end of this is the anti-corporate, 'No Logo' movement; the more mainstream expression of it involves not alternatives *to* consumption but alternative consumption practices, such as buying organic and fair-trade, or choosing 'green' household appliances. This accepts the general premise that consuming is a meaningful act, and uses it to express alternative meanings, such as 'I care about saving the planet/improving life for workers in the third world'.

The new domesticity is part of this trend. Among the meanings it expresses are 'I do not think it is more important to make money for my employer than to make life pleasant for my family'; 'in the past people had less money but a better sense of values'; and 'shopping, cleaning and cooking are more satisfying when they take time and effort and skill'. Whether engaged in actively or vicariously, by reading and watching the TV gods and goddesses, the new domesticity marks out a sort of alternative space for the expression of individuality and the affirmation of non-market values.

So where, you might ask, is the harm in that? If domestic goddesses no longer have to be financially dependent on or subservient to their husbands, if domesticity is not a calling but just a hobby, then why not just let people (women, and a few men) indulge their taste for ironing sheets and baking sponges?

On reflection, though, it is difficult to see domesticity as a hobby like any other, particularly for women. Most women are obliged to practise domesticity in some form or other; aspiring to the status of a domestic goddess is making a virtue of necessity. Until housework really is shared equally between women and men, until women do not have to work a 'second shift', it will be hard to see domestic goddesshood as an uncoerced choice.

Another problem with the new domesticity is the idealisation of *family* life that goes with it. Domestic goddesses are propagandists for the idea of the family as the only real haven in a heartless world. You no longer have to be either female or straight to buy into this, but you do have to gloss over some of the less pleasant aspects of family life (the abuse of women and children that goes on behind closed doors). You also have to be willing to abandon three decades of feminist effort to create meaningful relationships outside the family, and community beyond the home. A feminist approach to the 'work-life balance' would not just be about having

enough time to spend with your family, but would also take account of women's need and desire for friendship, for educational and cultural activities, for involvement in community groups and — not least — for political activism. These things too provide a space for the affirmation of non-market values; they benefit both the people who engage in them and society at large.

Finally, there is (still) the problem of domesticity itself — what it actually consists of. For 200 years, people (usually people who didn't have to do it themselves) have tried to invest the job of running a home with meaning, status and glamour. They have made it into a science, eulogised it as an art, represented it as a career and now they are selling it as a fulfilling leisure pursuit. But the unchanging reality of domestic labour is that it is boring, thankless, and as a full-time occupation, soul-destroying. No attempt to disguise that reality has ever succeeded for long.

References

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