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Revisiting The Feminine Mystique

Cynthia Fuchs Epstein¹

The Feminine Mystique, 50th anniversary edition (with an Introduction by Gail Collins and an Afterword by Anna Quindlen). Betty Friedan. New York: Norton, 2013.

I have three editions of *The Feminine Mystique* on my bookshelf—the original of 1963, the 20th, and the latest 50th anniversary edition. It weighs the most with additional pages of Introduction and Afterword by New York Times writer Gail Collins, and former *New York Times* columnist Anna Quindlen, as well as Friedan’s own afterthoughts “Two Generations Later” and her introduction to the 10th anniversary edition. My 20th anniversary edition has another Friedan Introduction entitled “Twenty Years After.” (This later “Introduction” is not in the 50th anniversary edition for some reason.) However, it includes Friedan’s prefaces to earlier editions (10 years after) and an essay written in 1997, “Metamorphosis: Two Generations Later.” Friedan’s later introductions and afterthoughts were important because they emphasized her work in creating a woman’s movement just 3 years after publication of the book in 1963. The text of the book did not note that Friedan died in 2006 but the cover does.

In any case, the history of when the book first appeared (1963) is important because the book not only was a critique of women’s roles in American society and the ideologies supporting these roles, but it also positioned Friedan to organize in concert with women in government and in the academy (Alice Rossi, a president of the American Sociological Association, was one of them) who were poised to take advantage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and recruit many women who were eager to become activists. (For a fuller description of the events of the time, see Lee Ann Banaszak’s book² on this sequence of events.)

What was it about the book that alerted women to the multiple ideologies and practices in the society that were causing them such distress as chronic boredom, alcoholism, obsessive sexual behavior, and drug dependence? The *Feminine Mystique* described the theories and ideologies that stalled women’s movement into the workforce (which had accelerated during World War II when they were recruited into many nontraditional jobs for women to replace

men who entered the armed forces). The book argued against cultural mandates that it was best both for women and the society for them to leave the workplace at marriage, become housewives and mothers of multiple children, and support their husbands' careers (but not have careers of their own).

Although she was a journalist by trade, Friedan had attended graduate school and had been a student of the psychologist Erik Erikson, although like many young women of her time, she was dissuaded from accepting a fellowship to pursue a graduate degree because of her romantic attachment to a man who felt threatened by her achievement. Furthermore by chance, she settled in a community in Sneden's Landing, New York, where a number of Columbia University professors lived and became her friends through their common dedication to left-wing politics. One of these was William J. Goode, a specialist in family sociology (and another president of the American Sociological Association) whose influence in the book is particularly seen in Friedan's chapter "The Functional Freeze" which took issue with Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons's thesis that it was functional for the family when the husband is a breadwinner and a stay-at-home wife and mother serves as the emotional center.³ Friedan brought a scholarly approach to her analysis of the subordination of women in society. She attacked other "scientific" perspectives on the sexist underpinning of the sexual division of labor throughout the world, then currently popular and accepted widely. In the period when Friedan was writing, Freudian theory and psychoanalysis was popular and a dominant ethos among middle-class educated Americans, especially his notion that women were possessed with "penis envy," and that it was women's nature to be ruled by men and their best destiny was to become "a loved wife" as the pinnacle of their existence. This paradigm bled into the popular culture and into the academy widely. It undermined the legitimacy of women's participation in the workforce and their education in the sciences and law, and for those whose education stopped at high school, training in crafts. Thus Friedan also wrote of the prejudices against women in the workforce and the notions that they were unsuited for work in most jobs offering challenge and opportunity to achieve. For example, they could not get jobs in the professions except for school teaching, as managers in organizations, as reporters at newspapers except for contributions to the "women's pages" that covered social events and recipes (suitable for daily living—not the sophisticated coverage food gets today) nor almost any job that had built-in opportunities for autonomy, judgment, and expertise. She wrote of the pressures on young women to marry early, often cutting off their possibilities

for graduate education and entry to jobs that offered career paths. Friedan also was critical of the social science perspectives that argued that women's discontent with the housewife ideal was an outgrowth of neurosis rather than a legitimate complaint against the "biology is destiny" scenario idealizing the nuclear family with its division of labor—women as housewives in the home and men going off to work at a variety of jobs that offered some possibility for accomplishment and skill. (Friedan was aware that poor women didn't have the choice to be the stay-at-home wives and mothers that were idealized in the media and within universities—but that all women internalized the ideology that the perfect life would be to be supported by a male breadwinner so that they could stay home and care for children.)

Part of the data for the book came from interviews Friedan had conducted with graduates of Smith College (her alma mater) in preparation for an article solicited by a woman's magazine and which was rejected by the editors because of its conclusion that the women were largely unhappy with their lives—lonely, bored, and depressed in the suburban developments thousands of them moved to after World War II. But Friedan salvaged her data and wrote a book that went far beyond the interviews, doing academic research seeking the ideological and substantive causes of women's discontent, and more, the retreat of many into drug and alcohol use, their compulsive attention to housecleaning and child supervision. As Anna Quindlen, the former *New York Times* reporter and novelist, noted in her "Afterword" to the 50th anniversary edition, Friedan explained the sense of frustration and anomie reported by the women she interviewed, by noting their embeddedness in a growing consumer-oriented society. (For a window into this environment, check out the Madison Avenue advertising campaigns contributing to this ethos in the TV series *Mad Men*.) The credo of the "Feminine Mystique," she reported, was largely promulgated by corporate interests with seductive advertising campaigns bent on fostering consumerism in society, Freudian theory, and Parsonian "functionalism" that legitimated traditional sex roles and deemed them normal and healthy for the person and for the society.

Friedan's book was published in the middle of a newspaper strike in New York and therefore was not immediately reviewed. Nevertheless, it gathered steam by word of mouth, engaged an audience of tens of thousands of American women, and gave visibility to Friedan countrywide. The book particularly drew attention to a number of government lawyers who were fearful that the newly passed Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination on the

basis of sex as well as race and national origin unlawful, would not be operationalized if there was no activism on the part of women to make sure their issues were not dismissed. Among these women were Pauli Murray, an African American lawyer, and Sonia Pressman, a white lawyer who later married a Hispanic man, who suggested to Friedan that they work together to create an organization to monitor discrimination against women. Thus Friedan connected with them and scores of other like-minded women activists and formed the National Organization for Women (NOW), becoming its first president and the leader of what came to be called second-wave feminism as well as a number of subsequent organizations such as the Women's Political Caucus. Among the initial founding group of NOW was Aileen Hernandez, an African American woman who became NOW's second president. (Thus from the start, NOW engaged the participation of some highly prominent and visible African Americans.)

Friedan soon also became internationally known and engaged with a number of prominent women in other societies as well as in the United States in dialogue on women's issues. Her worldwide influence is barely acknowledged these days, but she played a quite important part in introducing (and sometimes achieving) a women's rights agenda elsewhere in the world. She met with powerful and influential women who held posts in foreign governments and were associated with powerful men. For example, she was invited to meet with Indira Gandhi in India; Jehan Sadat, the wife of Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt; and with Ashraf Pahlavi, the sister of the shah of Iran, who, despite their other agendas were receptive to women's rights issues and supportive of legislation favoring them. She also met with women leaders of the Christian Democratic Party in Italy and with Yvette Routy, who became President Francois Mitterand's minister for women's rights. Friedan also spearheaded a women's movement in Israel in 1984. One of a number of personal experiences I had with Friedan's movement-making was at a conference on "Women and Work" in Israel when I followed her and a group of American and Israeli social scientists and activists as she led a march to a meeting at the King David Hotel where Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres (leaders of their parties who were to become alternate prime ministers) were working to establish a cabinet. Friedan stood aside at the door to the meeting room to pass the baton to Israeli women (among them Yael Rom—a politician in the Haifa City government and the first woman combat pilot in the Israeli air force—to be first in line to engage the male politicians, and Alice Shalvi, an educator

who, literally on the spot, created and mobilized an Israeli women's rights organization, later named The Israeli Women's Network).

The issues Friedan supported in the United States in her work with NOW included creating or protecting childcare support, communal care for dependent older people, training women for nontraditional work, support for women to open businesses, protecting women's rights in the workplace, educational parity, marriage and divorce, equal pay for work of comparable value, flextime, parental leave, and abortion rights. She fought for these issues and more, engaging in legal and political action with like-minded advocates and did so until the end of her life. In her last decade she decided to live in Washington, D.C., and hold conferences (with the support of Cornell University and the Ford Foundation) bringing together lawmakers and social scientists to develop public policies to improve the status and lives of women (and men, as she would point out).

Somehow, few commentators on the publication of the 50th anniversary edition noted the breadth of Friedan's engagement in the public sphere and her many accomplishments there. Perhaps this is because they were not well publicized and because young women, reared to expect the benefits so painfully achieved by Friedan and other activists had lost interest in "the movement" and directed their attention to other issues—the rights of gay people, for example. However, today, as powerful conservative groups have effectively crafted a counteragenda—such as limiting the rights to abortion achieved through the *Roe v. Wade* decision, we are experiencing the kinds of political protests common in the early days of the second stage. Furthermore, even though many role models have been created by women who have achieved positions of power and economic parity at very high levels, a backlash has developed (even among those achievers who "have had it all" but who ruminate on the costs of managing high-level careers as well as being mothers). Strangely, some of these, such as Ann-Marie Slaughter whose 2012 *Atlantic* magazine article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," was reported as being a revelation though it was a position taken many years before. Actually, Slaughter's argument was a bit of a sham because although she wrote of the costs of working as an aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (because she chose to commute from Washington, D.C., to her home in Princeton, New Jersey, where her husband and teenage children decided to remain), had apparently managed quite well when she combined motherhood with being the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. She returned to

Princeton after her time in Washington to resume being a professor at Princeton, apparently managing with this arrangement. Nevertheless, the press seized on Slaughter's article as an important reflection on the costs to women and their families of attempts to aim high and achieve prominent roles.

So there has been something of a revival of a feminine mystique (with an emphasis on motherhood obligations) and a continued reassessment of women's roles and their decisions about how to spend their time. The republication of Friedan's book offers a caution about the tenacity with which social forces are at work to return women to traditional roles one frighteningly sees today, a new kind of feminine mystique. Today's educated women are persuaded (if not commanded by the new gurus of child care) to breast-feed for at least a year (and even beyond), to supervise their children's homework daily, and to attend all of their athletic games and school performances. Workplaces have been set up now to provide women who return to work while their children are infants with rooms where they can breast-feed and thus not separate from their babies during the workday. Today even the most educated women who have careers are not persuaded to immerse themselves in their work if they have children. The encouragement of women to aim high in the workplace draws some skepticism in this environment. A modern-day noted woman of accomplishment, Sheryl Sandberg, CEO of Facebook, has drawn criticism for the thesis of her book *Lean In: Women Work and the Will to Lead*⁴ and has been dismissed by a number of writers who regard her message as running counter to the view that "balance" should be the modal pattern.

Friedan's contribution to the current debate was to note that it was not just cultural ideologies that were emerging from the works of such icons as Freud, and the psychoanalysts who became his followers, but a concerted effort of corporate America to make American women consumers of their cleaning products, appliances such as vacuum cleaners, and large cars and vans suitable for transporting their children to and from their multiple activities after school and on the weekends. Today I know of many young couples who stay close to home on weekends because of children's sports activities (all group activities)—the new compulsory activity. Parents' involvement with their children has become so strong that we even have a term for it: helicopter parenting—always hovering over their children. Who is to blame? The French writer Elisabeth Badinter wrote a book⁵ last year arguing that current American childcare practices (and ideologies connected with them) were

destructive to women and also to their children, who grow up highly dependent.⁶

Thus Friedan's book is as much a caution today as it was 50 years ago. It warned of a psychological enslavement of American women;⁷ it was intended to be a commentary on the ideology of "women's place" and the potential for fulfillment in American society. And it argued for women's right to make their own choices and about commonly held themes that continue to hold women's aspirations and accomplishments in check.

On the other hand, to be fair, much of the impact of Friedan's message has remained and become integrated in the ethos of accomplishment that a substantial subset of American women accepts. And that hard-won legislation has enforced. Women do work in spheres they were excluded from at the time *The Feminine Mystique* was first published. They are doctors, lawyers, Supreme Court Justices, police, construction workers, and bus drivers. Some are regarded as serious candidates to run for president of the United States. At least some of this progress can be credited to Friedan's book, her mobilization of feminists into public interest organizations, her political acumen, and her ability to inspire girls and women to fight for equality in public life and mobilize strength to demand equal rights with men.

As many have commented, Friedan tore away the myths supporting inequality and thus changed the paradigm. In so doing, she changed our lives. In the field of human events, there is no higher achievement.

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² See Lee Ann Banaszak. 2010. *The Woman's Movement Inside and Outside the State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

³ For truth in reporting, Goode introduced me to Friedan because of my research for a book on women's equality in professional life, published as *Woman's Place: Options and Limits in Professional Careers* (University of California Press, 1970). I joined her in establishing the New York Chapter of NOW with a number of others including a number of men including my husband, Howard Epstein; Muriel Fox and her husband, Dr. Shepard Aronson; and Ti-Grace Atkinson, Floryence Kennedy, and Kate Millett.

⁴ Sandberg, Sheryl. 2012. *Lean In: Women Work and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf.

⁵ Badinter, Elizabeth. 2012. *The Conflict: How Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt.

⁶ See Banaszak, Lee Ann. 2010. *The Woman's Movement Inside and Outside the State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ I do not use this term loosely. Recall C. Wright Mills's famous chapter "The Darling Little Slaves" in his book *Power, Politics, and People* (ed. Irving Louis Horowitz) (pp. 340–341)—a discourse on the relegation of women in American society to subordinate roles in society.