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Feminism

Interrogating the Feminine Mystique

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STEPHANIE COONTZ TEACHES history and family studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Dianne Feeley interviewed Stephanie about her new book, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*. Her earlier books on the social history of the family include *Marriage, A History; The Way We Really Are; The Way We Never Were; and The Social Origins of Private Life*.

ATC: Why did you write this book, and what were your reactions to re-reading Betty's Friedan's classic *The Feminine Mystique*?

Stephanie Coontz: I was approached by an editor at Basic Books who said they were doing a series of biographies, not of individuals but of books, and asked if I'd like to write one on *The Feminine Mystique*. Having a distinct memory of reading it in the 1960s, I thought that would be very interesting.

But I hadn't gotten very far in the book when I realized, in fact, that I had never read it. I later found that this was true for many women I interviewed. *The Feminine Mystique* was so talked about, and the title so catchy, in those days before we had words like sexism to describe what we faced, that many women eventually came to believe they'd read it, and used the phrase to describe whatever was bothering them about their situation as women.

So I sat down to read the book and got another surprise: I did not like it. The book was repetitive. It exaggerated the gains of feminism in the 1920s and the hegemony of the anti-feminist homemaker mythology in the 1950s. I was horrified by Friedan's uncritical prejudices against homosexuality and her diatribes against permissive parenting. I thought her focus on educated white women was elitist. And I was surprised to hear how limited her proposals for change were.

I learned from reading Dan Horowitz's marvelous book, *Betty Friedan and the Making of *The Feminine Mystique*: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism*, that she had misrepresented her own political history, but I could also see for myself that she had misrepresented her indebtedness to others. Her only mention of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, for example, to which she was clearly heavily indebted, was a throwaway line in the introduction about how while Friedan on her own had uncovered women's hidden history, this other book did have some helpful comments about French women.

The more I researched the publication history of *The Feminine Mystique* the more I became convinced she had misrepresented that as well, making herself more of a lone and unappreciated "battler for her sex" than she actually was. This was a pattern in Friedan's life, though eventually I came to see it in part as a result of her own battles with the feminine mystique. Afraid she wouldn't be taken seriously, she tended to exaggerate her intellectual originality and political indispensability.

ATC: You said in your introduction and your interview with Terry Gross on "Fresh Air" that eventually you came to really appreciate the book, and that each time you reread it you appreciated it more.

SC: What turned me around was the response I got when I advertised for people who had read *The Feminine Mystique* at or near the time of publication. Their stories were so moving, and the depth of despair they felt so striking, that it made me reexamine the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s.

I came to see that despite the existence of opposition to the feminine mystique that historians such as Joann

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Meyerowitz have documented, there really was something especially demoralizing about that period, particularly for a certain group of women. I began to think of Friedan's main audience as the sidelined wives of the Greatest Generation. Their daughters would probably have found feminism anyway, but many of these women might have been lost "to the movement, to the women's centers and academic departments they often helped found, or even to themselves.

Friedan didn't speak to all women, and initially I was turned off by her focus on white, middle-class housewives. But the more I went back to the period, the more I realized that these women faced some unique problems in this era, and although their material, physical deprivation and societal oppression were clearly nothing like those faced by working-class and minority women, their pain should count too.

The people who got the most from Friedan's book were women who had tried very hard to find complete fulfillment in being wives and mothers but felt there was something missing in their lives. Many had married upwardly mobile men and were seemingly living the American Dream, so they felt guilty for not being more grateful. They thought something must be wrong with them for not being completely satisfied with their lives.

Many of them had more education than the average women in those days, although they often had dropped out after getting their "Mrs." Degree. But unlike today, that very education was in some ways a disadvantage, because they were actually more exposed than working-class women to Freudian ideas that made them doubt their own "femininity" and wonder if their worries were "neurotic."

A lot of people don't remember that 1950s anti-feminism was directed as much against suburban homemakers as against career women, and many of these middle-class women had internalized the critique of "moms" that was so fashionable at that time.

There is a lot of evidence that although working-class wives and mothers in that era had much tougher lives in terms of economic and physical insecurity, they were actually less likely than middle-class homemakers to second-guess their child-raising and doubt their own normality.

So to have Friedan's book excerpted in three of the most widely read middle-class women's magazines of the time was a godsend to these women. Many could still remember, half a century later, what a relief it was to be told that it was not neurotic to want more out of life than a modern kitchen and a husband who earned a decent living "that the problem they could not name was a result of the way society had constricted their options and identity, not a result of some sexual or gender pathology.

ATC: You also say there are a lot of myths about the origins and history of the book. Can you address some of those?

SC: For many years, until Dan Horowitz published his exhaustive study of the origins of Friedan's views in 1998, people believed Friedan's own claim that she herself was a homemaker who had also been a victim of "the feminine mystique." In fact, she had been a leftist who as a student participated in antiwar activities, civil rights struggles, and campus fights such as trying to organize the maids in the student dorms.

She was already a strong critic of Freudian theories. After graduating, she worked for a leftwing union newspaper, writing articles about working-women's rights, civil rights, and the "struggles of oppressed workers." But she either lost that job or left it after having kids, and though she continued to be active in integration struggles she did move into a more middle-class milieu and tried to develop a career as a freelance writer for women's magazines.

I think it's understandable that she wanted to play down her past in this period of rampant red-baiting, blacklisting and

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guilt-by-association. She wanted to swim “if you’ll excuse the reference” with the current rather than against the current.

But she refused to the end of her life to change her story. And she also perpetuated other myths, such as the idea that she was the one who discovered the discontent of American housewives and that the feminist movement had died out in the 1950s. I explain in my book how much more complex the real story was. Friedan caught a rising wave of discontent with the 1950s ideology about homemaking, and she rode it into shore to much applause, but she didn’t create the wave.

Another myth is that Friedan’s book launched the women’s movement. In fact, the proposals Friedan raised in the book were very moderate, and very much aimed at individualistic solutions, though she did propose a GI Bill for housewives, to provide them with education and job training after their children had gotten to school age.

It wasn’t until three years later that Friedan was invited to join a group of feminists who were already agitating for change and get fed up with working through the existing political channels. Together they formed the National Organization for Women. A few years later, a slightly younger group of women began to build their own organizations and informal groups, largely as a result of their disillusion with the sexism of the New Left. Many of these never even read *The Feminine Mystique*.

But having said all that, it’s important to give Friedan credit for what she did do. She reached out to a layer of women who probably would have slipped through the cracks with her, and many of these women went on to found the first Women’s Studies Departments and Women’s Centers. The women’s Strike for Equality in 1970 was also her idea, and it was a brilliant one. And she did eventually repudiate the anti-lesbian views that marred the early years of her work in NOW.

ATC: What are the strengths of *The Feminine Mystique*? What are its weaknesses?

SC: Friedan was a skilled polemicist. Using the language of the women’s magazines, she reached into the homes of these middle-class wives and mothers, caught between two worlds and paralyzed by the mixed messages they were hearing, and helped them stop blaming themselves for their distress.

Many of the women I interviewed for this book can still remember exactly where they were and how they felt when they read the book. They said it was like a “light bulb,” a “click,” an overwhelming wave of relief. One woman said “I suddenly realized that all the things I thought were wrong about myself might in fact be right about myself.”

Friedan used what have become the classic techniques of self-help books, but she used them to introduce her readers to a political analysis of their pain. So for many, it was not just the first self-help book they ever saw, but the last one they ever needed. And for modern women, it’s a real eye-opener to go back and listen to the voices of these women.

And for another group of women “women who had just tentatively started to break with the ideology of the day, who were gathering the courage to defy the pressures on them” Friedan’s research into how women were manipulated by the advertising industry and misled by psychiatrists and sociologists was just the ammunition they needed. “I carried that book around me like a shield,” said one woman who was resisting her parents’ pressure to take “ladylike” subjects in college and focus on finding a husband.

ATC: Many people believe the book is irrelevant to working women, and especially to African-American

Women. Do you agree?

SC: That's true in some ways, though I found some fascinating research into the psychological reactions of working-class women in this period, both homemakers and employed, that complicates this question. But Friedan did ignore the issues facing women who worked at demeaning, low-quality jobs. At the same time, ironically, she underestimated the rewards and self-confidence that women could get from jobs that she dismissed as "beneath" her target audience.

The book's neglect of Black women is striking, and really sad, given her own history of support for the civil rights movement. But I have a different take than those who have argued that "Black women would have loved to be homemakers."

Yes, many Black wives and mothers had to work, and at jobs that were truly horrible. But the upper middle-class wives and mothers who were least likely to have to work for financial necessity were already "long before this was also true of white women" the most likely to work, suggesting that something more than dire necessity was involved. And Black leaders of both sexes had a long tradition of supporting women's roles as co-providers for their families and as activist leaders of the community.

So I argue that although Friedan's discussion of work was indeed elitist, the biggest problem with her book's neglect of Black women is that she missed the chance to show her white middle-class audience that some women were able to combine their identities as wives, mothers, family co-providers, and activists with interests beyond the home.

ATC: How does the movement today stand on Friedan's shoulders? Move beyond her?

SC: Women have educational and career opportunities that were unthinkable in the 1950s and early 1960s. More women graduate from college than men, and women recently pulled ahead as recipients of Ph.D.s as well. In 1972, only three percent of licensed attorneys were female; today women represent one-third of all practicing attorneys and half of all law students.

The stay-at-home housewife has also benefited from feminist reforms that gave her a legal claim to share the income her husband accumulates while she is raising the children, keeping the home, and otherwise supporting his career.

Single women and lesbians have more options than in the past, but marriages have also become more equal. As late as 1980, 30% of wives reported that their husbands did no housework. By the early 21st century, this had shrunk to 16%. Thirty-four percent of wives now say their husbands do half or more of the childcare. Domestic violence has fallen dramatically over the past 45 years, although the financial strain of the recession may have produced a recent uptick.

On the down side, women pay a higher price for having children than men do. One study found that more than 25% of women who quit work for family reasons were unable to find jobs when they returned to the job market. Others had to settle for part-time work even though they wanted fulltime. Even women who regained fulltime jobs in their own field never caught up to their salary and promotion schedule.

Another study found that among women with identical resumes in all respects but one "membership in the PTA (a sign that these women had children)" the mothers were much less likely to be offered a job than the other women, were less likely to be recommended for promotion, and were held to higher performance and punctuality standards than non-mothers.

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The flip side of discrimination against mothers is a different kind of bias against fathers. Even when men have formal access to family-friendly policies, they are looked down upon if they use them. Because of these pressures, men are now even more likely than women to report high levels of work-family conflict.

Another down side is that even as the marriages of college-educated couples have become more stable and more egalitarian, marriage has begun to seem less achievable “and more fragile” for working-class men and women.

This raises the issue that in retrospect is the most glaring omission in Friedan’s book, and still gets lost in many discussions of women: the issue of class. Overall, gender is no longer such a powerful master category for assigning status and options as it once was. Up until 1970, gender outweighed education and class background in the average distribution of wages. Not any more.

Just as Michael Omi and Howard Winant talk about a newly “messy” hegemony when it comes to race, gender hierarchies are also messier and less clear-cut than they used to be. There are more complex interactions between gender dynamics, class constraints and family situations.

This is one reason why low-income males have higher rates of educational failure than low-income females. So we really have to pay more attention to the class differences among women that create different strategies for coping with gender vulnerabilities or concerns.

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