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Alice Grissom

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A FEMINIST MIRROR: REFLECTIONS OF THE 1960'S IN BETTY FRIEDAN

by Alice Grissom



Betty Friedan Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Considered by popular culture to be the turning point in radicalism, activism, and sexual liberty, the notorious Sixties clamor for attention in the collective memory of America as a decade that shaped the nation, freeing it from the conformist stranglehold of the 1950's. While this narrative certainly holds the appeal of a redemptive plot with clear winners and losers, it fails to encompass the actual complexity of the 1960's, a time marked as much by conservatism and violence as by liberalism and the peace movement. Of the many major characters of the Sixties, Betty Friedan: writer, feminist, and housewife, conclusively demonstrates this duality through the narrative of her activism in the 1960's, the influences of her life beforehand, and her legacy after. Indeed, in her contrasting appellations of "feminist" and "housewife" she embodies an apparent duality, in that it is commonly, albeit incorrectly,

thought that to remain a housewife one cannot simultaneously be a feminist. Much like the apparent contradictions found in the Sixties as a whole, this supposed paradox is born in the assumption that radicalism cannot coexist with plebian concerns. Though lauded as an instrumental "founding mother" of second-wave feminism and an irreplaceable asset to the women's movement, Friedan's homophobia and racism, inherent in her publications starting with the groundbreaking bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*, imply the progressive façade of the Sixties.¹ More recent scholarship sheds light on Friedan's pre- *Feminine Mystique* past as a leftist activist and radical, demonstrating second-wave feminism's foundation in the radicalism of labor movements of the 1930's and 1940's and thereby the continuity of the activist Left. Regardless of these illuminating connections, her motives in abandoning some of the chief causes she championed earlier in life to promote those of upper-middle-class white heterosexual women must be questioned.

Raised in a middle-class Jewish family in Peoria, Illinois, Friedan (or Bettye Goldstein, as she was then known) faced anti-Semitism from a young age and, as a reclusive and brainy book-lover, didn't truly "bloom" until her days at Smith College. During her years there, Friedan not only developed the school's newspaper into a formidable advocate for workers' rights, but also underwent a period of Leftist radicalization typical of college students.² In the time after graduating and before publishing *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan wrote extensively for several radical unionist newspapers and magazines, including the *Federated Press* and the *UE News*.³ United Electric forced Friedan out of her job at the *UE News* after her second pregnancy, and from that point on she continued work solely as a freelance writer and journalist. While she initially took time off work to

concentrate her efforts on wrangling a now three-child family, Friedan regretted leaving her profession and so began to pursue work as a freelance writer for women's magazines. She used this slight, supplementary income to provide for the childcare which allowed her to continue traveling for work.⁴

Curiously, it is only when she began writing for women's magazines that Friedan adopted her husband's surname, although at this point she had been married for nearly five years.⁵ Another change to note occurs in Friedan's name itself. Betty convinced Carl Friedman to drop the "m" from his name to obscure their Jewish origins and further assimilate into the mainstream culture. This transition from Betty Goldstein, labor journalist, to Betty Friedan, freelance writer for magazines, externally signifies a greater internal transformation as Friedan moved from the city to the suburbs and became a self-proclaimed victim of the "feminine mystique."⁶ The new nomenclature also symbolizes a shedding of the past, and Friedan's distancing herself from her former radicalism. Additionally, the change discourages recognition from her work as a labor union journalist and is therefore both a tangible and metaphorical barrier to the past. Her transformation speaks to the twin powers of words and marketability, forces both Friedan and the consumer-oriented society of the Sixties used to their advantage. By dropping her noticeably Jewish surname, Friedan ensured that her WASP audience would accept her; this is just one step of many she took, whether knowingly or by accident, to assimilate to the predominant culture both in the persona she creates in *The Feminine Mystique* and in her external life.

In 1953, Friedan compiled responses to questionnaires in preparation for the fifteen-year reunion of her graduating class at Smith College. These surveys, sent out to Friedan's cohort, posed questions regarding their current activities, lifestyle, and level of satisfaction. As the story goes, the survey results contained their multitude

of disappointments, prompting Friedan to begin investigating "The Problem that has No Name" and forming the foundation of discussions in *The Feminine Mystique*.⁶ This retelling is somewhat misleading; Friedan had published articles on similar topics in women's magazines for the past several years, but none had the reach or the galvanizing effect of *The Feminine Mystique*.⁷ The "feminine mystique" is defined by Friedan as the cultural concept that "the highest value and only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity." It is reinforced by the ideals of domestic suburbanization: that women should abandon their own careers and dreams to focus on facilitating those of their husbands and children, that this is what would truly make them happy, and that they should expect to be content with such a life.⁸ Friedan argued that the pervasive misery and dissatisfaction she encountered in her classmates stemmed from their inability to pursue the meaningful careers and passions they dreamt of in college. *The Feminine Mystique* mobilized a demographic neglected by the forces of leftist union activism for social change: the middle-class, educated white woman.

"HER TRANSFORMATION SPEAKS TO THE TWIN POWERS OF WORDS AND MARKETABILITY, FORCES BOTH FRIEDAN AND THE CONSUMER-ORIENTED SOCIETY OF THE SIXTIES USED TO THEIR ADVANTAGE."

The resulting movement, denoted as "second wave feminism" because of its difference in goals and methodology from the suffrage-focused women's movement of the early 20th century, changed the face and focus of social activism. Previously, working-class unions led the battle for social justice; with the mass awareness caused by *The Feminine*

Mystique, middle-class women began taking part. As they did they brought their personal interests center stage. Friedan spurred second wave feminism to focus on contestable issues such as pay disparity, women in the workplace, childcare, and familial roles. The Women's Liberation Movement, as it was then known, effected fundamental changes to American society throughout the 1960's and 1970's. Changes included bringing attention to causes such as workplace discrimination and the penalization of pregnancy, both legal and de facto gender-based inequality, and taking steps to reduce the prevalence of these injustices. The National Organization for Women (NOW), founded by Friedan and other leading feminists in 1966, played a major role in attaining these gains and is still operational and contributing to the feminist fight ("Founding").⁹

However, within both Betty Friedan and second-wave feminism as a movement, as with the Sixties as a whole, there flows an unaccepting undercurrent pregnant with biases persisting from a previous time. In Friedan's feminism, intersectionality is unheard of, the working class is ignored, and lesbians are outcasts. In an article for *New Politics*, Joan Boucher writes that "Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique* epitomize [a] ... less sophisticated and less inclusive version of feminism. It is the feminism of a white, privileged middle-class woman who was unaware of the lives of women outside the confines of safe and prosperous suburbs," despite Friedan's evident knowledge of these problems from her days as a labor journalist.¹⁰ In fact, as a labor journalist, Friedan often wrote in support of worker's rights and the rights of African Americans, two groups of women that *The Feminine Mystique* neither acknowledges nor applies to. Notable feminist theorist bell hooks rebukes Friedan bitterly for her lapse, writing in *Margin to Center* that

She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access

with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife.

Those who will benefit from Friedan's feminism do so at the expense of marginalized groups like African Americans or working-class women and mothers, who have neither the resources nor the leisure time to participate in the Women's Movement or seek greater fulfillment. They are the ones who will pick up the slack left by middle-class white women who, after returning to a career that stimulates them (rather than one of drudgery and necessity), realize their families need someone to care for them.



Betty Friedan (seated right) poses with other activists beside a suffragette - Courtesy of Harvard University

Second-wave feminism as a movement focuses on those near the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs rather than addressing the more basic needs of disadvantaged groups.¹² By concentrating its efforts on a demographic that is middle-class, college-educated, and white, second-wave feminism takes

an easier route. Although this group of women begin with more social clout and are subject to fewer prejudices than marginalized women, they prioritize their own needs rather than provide a platform for those society subjugates. It caters to the dominant minority of white, college-educated, middle-class housewives. This is indicative of the duality of the Sixties in proclaiming itself to be progressively benefitting everyone, but in reality fails to do so and fails even to acknowledge those it harms or leaves behind. This reflects many popular movements in the Sixties and today that profess to be for the benefit of a group or in the interests of a group but in reality appropriate that group's culture for their own benefit, as well as pop cultural trends that do the same – specifically, in the 60's a renewed exoticism and a fascination with Native American cultures.

Although some will make apologies for Friedan's dismissal of African Americans and the working class on the basis of her past history advocating for them and the capitalistic forces associated with book distribution, no similar claim can be made regarding her viciously homophobic comments and exclusionary practices towards lesbians in the woman's movement. It is worth noting that, in the Sixties, although the gay rights movement was beginning to gain visibility with the Stonewall riots of 1969, homosexuality was still very much a social taboo. This is yet another way in which outwardly progressive Friedan mimics the conservative culture. Labelling lesbians “[d]isrupters of the women's movement,” Friedan used divisive tactics, such as negatively accusing lesbians of “constantly advocating ‘lesbianism and hatred of men’ ... with the encouragement of the FBI and the CIA” to demote lesbians to a fringe group of second-wave feminism and to blatantly ignore their interests and concerns.¹³ In this statement specifically, she appeals to two prevalent categories of fears amongst her audience: the common perception of feminists as lesbians and “man-haters,” and a fear of government involvement and espionage. Utilizing fearmongering rhetoric in this way, Friedan successfully pushed lesbians out of the feminist mainstream, despite their desires to be

positively involved. Friedan's activism continued past the Sixties and in later years she relaxed her vehement homophobia. In 1977, Friedan openly supported lesbian rights for the first time.¹⁴ However, she never regained the pro-worker radicalism that characterized her early labor union journal writings.

Why, then, did Friedan steadfastly ignore the myriad demographics untouched by an exclusive model of feminism? At the basic, capitalist level (because, despite the Sixties' hippy movement and Friedan's own communist-tilting radicalism, capitalist values are very much inscribed in both), Friedan's “change in the focus of her writing ... resulted from the necessity to use her skills as a writer to generate income. She cast *The Feminine Mystique*, and her situation in the world it described, as part of an effort to enhance the book's popularity and impact”; in this period, a book sympathetic to minority groups such as African Americans or drawing attention to the working class would not perform as well amongst an audience of white, middle-class Americans, who are the consumers with purchasing power.¹⁵ Friedan's utilitarian choice, then, to refine her feminism and attract a middle-class audience finds its foundation in her desire to be heard; to ensure that her work reaches the widest audience, she shifts her personality as presented in *The Feminine Mystique* and rearranges her past to more closely align with that of her prospective reader:

“Yet, though she claimed that she shared so much with her suburban, white, middle-class sisters in the postwar world, during much of the two decades beginning in 1943 Friedan was participating in left-wing union activity, writing articles that went against the grain of cold war ideology, and living in a cosmopolitan, racially integrated community.”¹⁶

Friedan's decision, conscious or otherwise, to narrow her scope of grievances to those afflicting middle-class, white, suburban housewives can be viewed as paralleling the trend of advertising in the Sixties to capitalize on the appeal of a new group, trend, or movement and repurpose it for its own

means. Furthermore, it matches the broader trend of prominent 1960's political and pop cultural figures who avoid references to the darker side of America, which encompasses poverty, inequality, poor working conditions, and racism in favor of focusing on the positive aspects of society or popular counter-culture movements. By avoiding discourse on these topics, individuals can promote a favorable view consistent with their ideologies, rather than address more fundamental predicaments, especially problems with solutions that would entail a reassessment and rearrangement of the status quo, or come at a significant cost to the dominant social classes.

Much as the Sixties are remembered for their contribution to activist causes across the spectrum, so too is Friedan. Her legacy consists of six books contributing to the furtherance of second-wave feminism, a lifetime of activism, and perhaps most impressively, NOW and all of its achievements. She is widely remembered for her unswerving dedication to her cause, a devotion at once admirable and ruthless. While neither Betty Friedan or second-wave feminism were perfect, both contributed majorly to the advancement of the position of women in American society and brought the matter of gender inequality into the public eye and to the forefront of national attention. Notable among Friedan's later achievements are the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus and the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, both of which are still active today in helping secure women's rights.¹⁷

Betty Friedan's rise through the women's movement in the 1960's is marked, much like the decade itself, with the bright successes of progress and the dark falls of prejudice and a myopic worldview. Although she deserves recognition and fame as an instigator of second-wave feminism, it should not be without qualifications, or without understanding of the complex motivations and attitudes that charged her work, including the dismissal of working-class, concerns of African Americans or lesbians, and the necessity of politicization and profit, as well as the pressures of mass appeal. Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique* represent the duality of the 1960's by embodying both the positive qualities and the unmitigated flaws of the 1960's through the juxtaposition of liberal activism and a conservative mindset.

¹Joanne Boucher, "Betty Friedan and the Radical Past of Liberal Feminism," *New Politics* 9.3 (2003): n.p., <http://nova.wpunj.edu/newpolitics/issue35/boucher35.htm>.

²Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and the Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1996): 10-11., www.jstor.org/stable/30041520.

³*Ibid*, 11-12.

⁴*Ibid*, 18, 20-21.

⁵*Ibid*, 18.

⁶Susan Ware, "Friedan, Betty," *American National Biography Online*, last modified April 2014, accessed March 26, 2017, http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03896.html?from=../15/15-01372.html&from_nm=Tillmon%2C%20Johnnie.

⁷Horowitz, 20

⁸Ware.

⁹"Founding," *National Organization for Women*, last modified July 2011, accessed 29 Mar. 2017, <http://now.org/about/history/founding-2/>.

¹⁰Boucher.

¹¹Ashley Fetters, "4 Big Problems With The Feminine Mystique," *The Atlantic*, February 12, 2013, accessed 29 Mar. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/02/4-big-problems-with-the-feminine-mystique/273069/>.

¹²Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370-96. The hierarchy of needs postulates that physiological, or "basic," needs will take precedence over social or self-actualizing needs and that higher needs cannot be attained until the basic needs are met.

¹³Horowitz, 27.

¹⁴Fetters.

¹⁵Horowitz, 23.

¹⁶*Ibid*.

¹⁷Ware.