The Feminine Mystique, Revisited
NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

Walking to the subway from my old apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn, I used to regularly see a beat-up Jeep with the following message on it: bumper: “Feminism is the radical idea that women are people too.” The message typified the over-the-top and overemphatic political views of my neighbor. (These also included “War is not the answer” and “Doritos Kool-Aid for president.”)

Reading Stephanie Coontz’s new book A Strange Stirring, I was reminded that the slogans “Women are people too” was actually the title of a 1960 Good Housekeeping article by Betty Friedan—the article that fashionshadowed her 1963 bestseller The Feminine Mystique. And while, even in those heightened days, women were not exactly thought of as less than fully human, their status was certainly different. Coontz, a professor at Evergreen State College whose name has become synonymous with groundbreaking research on marriage and family, has attempted to give us a better understanding of what Friedan’s book meant to women at the time and to determine whether the book has any relevance for women today.

The Feminine Mystique, which sold more than 5 million copies when it came out, described what Friedan called “the problem that has no name.” Here is the famous passage in which Friedan introduces the idea and from which Coontz classifies her title:

The problem lay hidden, 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 the meals were set, the beds were made, groceries unpacked, the children put to bed, the women would sit by the window and wonder: “Do you remember what life was like when I was raising you and your brother with no washing machine and a wood stove I had to feed four times a day? Have you ever talked to your mother about what more you would want? What more could you want?” Friedan described the experience of family life in the 1950s: “The women had fought and won, and what more would you want? But there was more to want. It’s important to remember that many of these women had gone to college—at least until they found a husband. Once married, they were told that they should stay at home full time (even after their kids had been born).”

In the years that followed, women all over the country said The Feminine Mystique and expressed a sense of relief that someone had finally explained their feelings. Thousands of them wrote to Friedan, and almost 200 of them described to Coontz and her colleagues their reaction upon reading the book. “Everything just clicked,” Sally A., who read it as a 15-year-old housewife in Kansas, told Coontz.

As Coontz meticulously documents, the household of the 1950s was a time warp. The women of previous generations had the right to vote and gain access to education. But the women of the 1950s seemed to give up on those successes to return to home life. In some ways, their turn inward was understandable. World War II was over, the economy was booming, and advances in technology and transportation had made it possible for huge numbers of Americans to enjoy a comfortable life. “The call for women to return to the home,” Coontz writes, “had tapped into pent-up desire for stability among people whose families had been disrupted by the hardships of the Great Depression and World War II.”

Social forces

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The Feminine Mystique (What would they have made of Friedan’s disparagement of housework and her recommendation that women hire maids while they found more meaningful jobs?) Still, among a fairly wide swath of educated women, lectured by magazines and psychologists and politicians and parents who told them to be satisfied, Friedan’s book did spark a revolution of sorts, however limited.

As Coontz points out, Friedan’s work drew heavily on that of lesser-known researchers, and she did not always credit them. Moreover, her book didn’t do much to address structural inequalities or job discrimination. Wrote Coontz: “She did not advocate that women organize to oppose the multitude of laws and practices that relegated women to second-class citizenship, restricted their access to many jobs, and gave husbands the final say over family decisions and finances.”

Today, of course, the Feminine Mystique would hardly qualify as feminist. It doesn’t say anything about universal childcare or the wage gap. Friedan evolved into a feminist leader, but the book that put her on the map was one in which the personal remained very much personal.

Nevertheless, Coontz thinks that Friedan has something to say to women today. For one thing, she cites evidence that women don’t make up a representative portion of the United States’ C-suite of Fortune 500 CEOs, and concludes: “The glass ceiling is not yet shattered.” In another example even keener book, most statements stick out like obnoxious bumper stickers. Since, as Coontz himself writes, marital quality trends to fall when women work more than 45 hours a week, women may well decide of their own accord to stay out of such high-powered positions.

But Friedan’s theme that women’s choices are heavily influenced by cultural ideals of what they should be is timeless. Although Coontz says that women today don’t have to choose between intellectual fulfillment and marriage—recent research which suggests that the two go hand-in-hand these days—American culture has certainly changed otherwise. Women are told by some that they are nothing but their kids if they work outside the home and by others that they are setting women back generations if they stay at home.

Perhaps the lesson is simply that in a society with a fierce exchange of ideas and a vibrant (and sometimes overwhelming) popular culture, there will always be pressures pushing us in one direction or another. Indeed, for the women who have become obsessed with striking the right work-family balance—feeling guilty about whatever choice they make—maybe Friedan’s best lesson is to skip the therapy.

A Strange Stirring
The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s
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