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Author(s): Rachel Bowlby

Source: *Feminist Review*, No. 27 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 61-75

Published by: [Palgrave Macmillan Journals](#)

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Accessed: 16/06/2014 08:17

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'THE PROBLEM WITH NO NAME': Rereading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*

Rachel Bowlby

On an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, 'the problem.' And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. (Friedan, 1963: 15)¹

With its specificity of time and place and its moment of collective realization of the existence of an unnameable something, this little scene could be taken straight out of the opening of a thriller. The fact that it belongs to an argument for feminism, and that a possible word for the mysterious 'problem' turns out to be 'femininity', is suggestive in more than one way. The troubled relations and mutual definitions of feminism and femininity seem to be a never-ending serial, without the promised conclusion ever being delivered. In what follows, I shall attempt to unravel part of the plot, not so much with regard to the particular predicament of 1959, but in terms of the more general 'problem' of feminist argument and feminist ends which this passage, and the book from which it is taken, reveal.

Published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* is commonly regarded both as a feminist classic and as a book which acted as a catalyst to the western feminist movement which began in the mid to late sixties. In the canon of post-war feminist works it sits somewhat isolated, and somewhat incongruously, midway between *The Second Sex* and the outpouring of texts and tracts later on. But the striking gap between 1948 – the date of de Beauvoir's book – and 1963 in fact fits well with one of Friedan's principal contentions. The arguments of almost all feminist social critics, before and after Friedan, involve the presupposition or demonstration that women's freedom either never existed or existed only in the remote past. Friedan, however, argues that women had

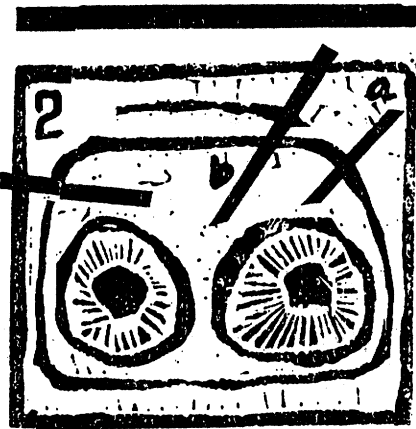
Feminist Review No 27, September 1987

freedom and lost it. And this peculiarity is perhaps a starting point for thinking about some of the echoes and overtones of the unidentified 'problem'. I want to explore some of the twists and turns of this unexpected structure of feminist narrative, and how it is related to Friedan's conceptions of subjectivity, femininity and the American nation. In particular, I am interested in the links that are made between femininity, in Friedan's sense, and the impact of consumerism, and in how these links impinge upon the form of Friedan's argument.

The genealogy of Friedan's particular 'problem' goes something like this. Not long ago, in the time of our grandmothers, strong 'pioneer' women got together to claim their rights to citizenship and equality on a par with men. They won access to higher education and the professions and all seemed set, thanks to their incomparable efforts, for a fair and sunny future for the now fully human second sex. But unfortunately there came World War Two, which brought young and old men flocking home to America with a craving for Mom and apple pie in the form of a wife and lots of children. To serve, or to reinforce, this need, the men of Madison Avenue stepped in. Lest there should be any women unwilling to comply with the scenario, advertising, magazines and the proliferation of domestic consumer goods saw to it that the 'image' of feminine fulfilment in the form of husband, babies and suburbia would be promoted to the exclusion of anything else. Other cultural forces came into play too. The evil prescriptions of a Freud who thought women's destiny was domestic and infantile entered and influenced every American mind. Higher education for women was dominated by a spurious use

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of sociology and anthropology to ensure girls got the message that their 'sex-role' as wives and mothers, and not their 'human' capacity to create and achieve in the working world, was the natural one. In any case, thanks to the bombardment of all these types of influence and suggestion, most of them left college halfway through to get married and reproduce. All the promise of a new generation of potentially free women, the daughters of the 'pioneers', has thus been knocked out of them, and it is now a matter of some urgency to expose the general fraud for what it is: to allow 'the problem with no name' to be spoken.

The dissatisfactions of suburbia centre, for Friedan, around an opposition between 'selfhood' and 'sex-role' – also glossed as 'humanity' and 'femininity'. The long-term planning and 'creativity' involved in a worthy career are valorized by Friedan against the 'stunted' qualities of the woman who remains in a state of little-girl conformity, confined to her reproductive role and to fulfilment in the form of sex, by which Friedan means both reproduction and sexual pleasure. Motherhood, like that suburban wasteland, is a trap: Friedan has vivid metaphors of confinement to express this, including a chapter title of what now seems to be dubious taste – 'Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp'. A frequently repeated image of the apparently happy housewife with 'a stationwagon full of children' is itself used to epitomize 'this new image which insists she is not a person but a "woman" ' (61). Whereas the Victorians' problem was the repression of sexuality, that of the present is 'a stunting or evasion of growth' (69).

The account of socially induced 'femininity' as inhibited growth and as something which necessarily detracts from the achievement of full humanity can be placed in a tradition of feminist humanism which goes back to Mary Wollstonecraft. Friedan's narrative difficulty, however, is that she believes that the battles of Wollstonecraft and her successors, the 'pioneer' feminists, were fought and won, and she tries to explain what she now identifies as a relapse into a situation just as unsatisfactory as the one from which women freed themselves before.

Several culprits, of disparate provenance, are identified; I mentioned some of them at the beginning. One is the spread of psychoanalysis, taken as having reinforced conceptions of women as naturally inferior and naturally destined for merely domestic functions. An *ad hominem* attack on Freud himself, via his letters to his fiancée, is used as the basis for a reading of his account of femininity, and especially of penis envy, as both prescriptive and misogynistic. Freud is effectively likened to a salesman, purveying a false representation of women's nature: 'The fact is that to Freud, even more than to the magazine editor on Madison Avenue today, women were a strange, inferior, less-than-human species' (100).²

Another set of culprits are 'the sex-directed educators', who have betrayed the high ideals of educational pioneers and who now offer courses which are intellectually unchallenging and whose explicit message, in courses with names like 'Adjustment to Marriage' and 'Education for Family Living', is that of the feminine mystique –

Mothers' Studies, perhaps. Such education is in reality 'an indoctrination of opinions and values through manipulation of the students' emotions; and in this manipulative disguise, it is no longer subject to the critical thinking demanded in other academic disciplines' (161). The identification of a conspiracy here does not, however, stop with the professors themselves: they too have been deceived, and Friedan goes on to describe 'the degree to which the feminine mystique has brainwashed American educators' (169).

Even the brainwashers are brainwashed, then: the plot continues to thicken. Closer to home, we find a rather familiar target for blame: the mother. Not, in this case, the current generation of mystified, over-young mothers, but *their* mothers. The nineteenth-century struggle for women's rights was not incomplete. Friedan states clearly: 'The ones who fought that battle won more than empty paper rights. They cast off the shadow of contempt and self-contempt that had degraded women for centuries' (92). But then something went wrong, and it is this which she is at a loss to explain:

Why, with the removal of all the legal, political, economic and educational barriers that once kept woman from being man's equal, a person in her own right, an individual free to develop her own potential, should she accept this new image which insists she is not a person but a 'woman,' by definition barred from human existence and a voice in human destiny? (61)

The next generation did not follow up the victory, but returned to the same domesticated forms of femininity from which their mothers had sought to free them. 'Did women really go home again as a reaction to feminism?' Friedan asks, with no little bewilderment. 'The fact is, that to women born after 1920, feminism was dead history' (93). This is like saying that emancipated slaves go back to their masters when the battle is forgotten, so Friedan adds more. Feminism was not only dead history, or not *dead* history at all, but 'a dirty word', evoking for 'mothers still trapped' and still raising daughters, 'the fiery, man-eating feminist, the career woman – loveless, alone' (93). And this was what they passed on to *their* daughters: 'These mothers were probably the real model for the man-eating myth' (93). After 'the passionate journey their grandmothers had begun' as pioneers of feminism, the subsequent generations were left with no positive image with which to identify. 'They had truly outgrown the old image; they were finally free to be what they chose to be. But what choice were they offered?' (93)

The model of free choice brings us to the most often emphasized source of the feminine mystique: the media. Advertising, magazines and (to a lesser extent) popular novels and 'how-to' books from Spock to sausage rolls are treated as absolutely central to the propagation of the mystique. Friedan enters into the confessional mode in describing how she herself used to make her living writing articles to order on aspects of housewifery or mothering for magazines like *Good Housekeeping* or

Mademoiselle. At this stage, significantly, it is tracked down as being primarily a male conspiracy,³ and in the height of her crime thriller mode, Friedan devotes a whole chapter to the results of her being given permission to delve into the secrets of an advertising agency's market research files. It is with all the force of a revelation that she points out the importance of advertising and consumption to the social control or the sociological description of American women:

Properly manipulated . . . American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack – by the buying of things. I suddenly realized the significance of the boast that women wield seventy-five per cent of the purchasing power in America. I suddenly saw American women as *victims* of that ghastly gift, that power at the point of purchase. The insights he shared with me so liberally revealed many things . . . (199)

The image of femininity perpetrated by magazines is itself the first example brought forward by Friedan after her opening chapter on the barely articulated 'problem with no name'. She runs through typical articles and stories, showing how they share a common message and injunction to women, that they should seek their fulfilment in the form of marriage and homemaking. But, as with the history of the feminist movement, this present, univocal image is contrasted sharply with a previous phase in magazine publishing when political stories could be part of the contents list, when there were more women writers than now, and when the housewife's role was not the be-all and end-all of the reader's presumed horizons. This earlier 'passionate search for truth and identity' is highlighted by a short story about a girl who secretly learns to fly. This, for Friedan, represents the heights of past achievement and serves as a measure of how far things have subsequently declined: 'It is like remembering a long forgotten dream, to recapture the memory of what a career meant to women before "career woman" became a dirty word in America' (34).

Given the recurrent rhetoric of manipulation and brainwashing, it is not surprising that the marketing case, around magazines and advertising, should be so crucial for Friedan. The fifties model of 'hidden persuaders' (the title of Vance Packard's 1957 book on the advertising industry) – of a barely discernible but thus all the more effective conspiracy – contributes to the mystery overtones of the diagnosis of the mystique and its origins. A distortion or 'blurring' of the image has occurred since the more open days of the flying story, so that false and fatuous models are being perpetrated throughout the land in every sphere of daily life. From education to therapy, to childcare, to journalism and advertising, women are being sold back down the river by the withholding of what ought to have been the fruits of their social emancipation. And crucially, whatever the relative priorities accorded to each of these agencies in perpetrating the mystique, it is the 'sell-out' metaphor of marketing which subsumes them all. The model of the

marketing brainwash, of the insidious manipulation of advertising, is itself taken up as the model for a generalized social persuasion.

The harmful effects of the mystique are summed up by the repeated reference to 'waste'. Waste is what happens when the mystique takes over. The avoidance of waste represents the kind of emotional parsimony and efficient use of available human resources that fits with the paradigm of goal-setting and deferred gratification. The 'waste' is first of female 'human' potential that is going unused or untapped, owing to its deflection on to feminine channels falsely and misleadingly imaged as leading to authentic fulfilment. Friedan is in no doubt as to the relative valuation to be ascribed to domestic and other forms of work: the former can be summed up as 'trivia' (230, 233), to be kept to a functional – waste-free – minimum; the second is characterized by such heady pursuits as 'splitting atoms, penetrating outer space, creating art that illuminates human destiny, pioneering on the frontiers of society' (229).⁴

This unquestioned valorization of high-flying, maximum-penetration activities over their 'feminine' alternatives is worth contrasting with its reversed form in a later feminist writer like Elaine Showalter. Writing in the late 1970s, Showalter blames what she identifies as the theoreticist excesses of literary criticism over the previous twenty years on a kind of masculinist emulation by male critics of their scientific rivals in the era of Sputnik (Showalter, 1979: 139–40). Friedan has human playing feminine as genuine plays trivial, artificial; Showalter makes the 'human achievement' pole explicitly masculine and the alternative an authentic femaleness.

Parallel to the idea of personal waste is that of national waste. Here Friedan introduces a full-scale narrative of imminent cultural decline precipitated by the menace of the marauding 'mystique'. This argument acquires an urgency distinct from the argument about women's individual waste. Friedan refers not only to 'the desperate need of this nation for the untapped reserves of women's intelligence' (357), but also to a generalized domestication of all American people, men and women. After the war, she says, 'the whole nation stopped growing up' (178) and it suffers now from 'a vacuum of larger purpose', from 'the lack of an ideology or national purpose' (179). So now the infantile and non-goal-oriented attributes of image-dominated women have been transferred to Americans in general. And here, instead of women being the victims, they are identified as the source. Friedan provides a whole gallery of monstrous females, chiefly in the form of the over-dominant mother who won't let her sons grow up and separate from her. An ideology of domestic 'togetherness' in marriage has made men so passive that even though their wives are at home all day with nothing better to do than get on with the chores, they still get drawn into the trivia of washing up, vacuuming and the rest in a way that their fathers did not.

There are indications in these sections of a nostalgia for a more authoritarian community and family structure, with mother and father each in his and her proper, traditional place and with the domestic sphere relegated to its rightful secondariness in relation to the public

world of national achievement.⁵ It is interesting to note the difference here from arguments in the seventies about the desirability or imminent emergence of 'the sensitive man' formed from a happy blend of 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities – first, because clearly he figured a lot earlier, and secondly because at this stage in feminist argument he's represented as thoroughly feeble. It's not that Friedan wants to keep women in the home; rather, she thinks the home and its tasks should be reduced to a minimum so that both sexes can fulfil a genuinely 'human' function in the outside world.

More dramatically, Friedan sees 'frightening implications for the future of our nation in the parasitical softening that is being passed on to the new generation of children'. Specifically, she identifies 'a recent increase in the overt manifestations of male homosexuality', and comments:

I do not think this is unrelated to the national embrace of the feminine mystique. For the feminine mystique has glorified and perpetuated the name of femininity and passive, childlike immaturity which is passed on from mother to son, as well as to daughters. (263)

A little further on, this becomes 'the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky smog over the American scene'. What is striking here is not only the imagery of infection – the murky disease and the clean, almost Jamesian 'American scene' – but its manifest link to a process of cultural feminization. Male homosexuality as the end-point of the feminine mystique is not just artificial, a regrettable but accidental distortion of the reality it overlays: it is a sinister source of cultural contamination. This 'murky smog' is the final smut, the last 'dirty word' in the story of the mystique: that clean, feminine exterior is now found to hide a particularly nasty can of worms. Marketing and the mystique are together leading to 'bearded undisciplined beatnickery' (273) and a 'deterioration of the human character' (274).

Male homosexual activity is further identified as 'hauntingly "feminine"' in its 'lack of lasting human satisfaction' (265). Friedan establishes a clear category of what she calls 'pseudo-sex' (265), as engaged in by bored housewives, teenagers and male homosexuals. Again, it is interesting to note parallels with recent arguments seen as a backlash to the liberalization of sexual mores in the wake of the 1960s: here is Friedan making a case in 1963 for the return of real sex between real, whole people (of different sex) against a hypothetical backcloth of generalized promiscuity and a lowering of moral standards: 'For men, too, sex itself is taking on the unreal character of phantasy – depersonalized, dissatisfying, and finally inhuman' (263). The censure of 'the stunted world of sexual fantasy' (263) is exactly parallel to the criticism of the stunted image of the feminine mystique. At the same time, the obsession with sex – or with pseudo-sex – is regarded as the focal point for the diversion of women from their true selfhood. Like a Victorian moralist, or a 1980s Victoria Gillick, Friedan asks: 'Why is it so difficult

for these youngsters to postpone present pleasure for future long-term goals?" (269).

And yet the argument about sexuality is not as straightforward as it appears. Friedan devotes some pages to the Kinsey reports on sexual behaviour which came out in the 1950s, and which in their revised form suggested a correlation between educational level and sexual fulfilment. She argues against pseudo-sex not on the grounds that it is immoral – though there is a didactic tone to the prose – but on the grounds that it isn't as good as it could be: 'Sex, for them [young girls] is not really sex at all. They have not even begun to experience a sexual response, much less "fulfilment"' (265).

The further development of this occurs when Friedan suggests that real sexual fulfilment requires the other sort – 'human' fulfilment – as a condition of possibility and therefore, implicitly, that if you want good sex you should see to your achievement in other areas first. Quoting the findings of 'Professor Maslow', Friedan concludes: 'It seemed as if fulfilment of personal capacity in this larger world opened new vistas of sexual ecstasy' (311). Friedan has not herself shifted the terms from those of the mystique itself. While she accuses it of diverting women, and perhaps men too, from full human achievement to merely sexual preoccupations, her own argument is effectively to say: 'That is pseudo-sex. Free yourself from the mystique and you can have the real thing.' So sex remains at the centre; it is not so much displaced as the excesses of a passion that detracts from rationality, but rather reinscribed as an even more fulfilling by-product of personal growth.

This brings us to another equivocation in Friedan's text. She describes, as we have seen, the various institutions and agencies which might be identified as responsible for the propagation or infliction of the mystique, whatever their motives or interests. She does not really explain why the mystique appeals, why it sticks, given the prior history of tough feminist values developed and put into action in the past. The only reason, ultimately, is a negative one: women obeyed, or adopted the mystique, because nothing better was on offer. Feminism was 'dead history' or even 'a dirty word', and a female member of the next generation was stuck 'for lack of an image that would help her to grow up as a woman true to herself' (67; cf. 355). Or in the passage quoted earlier: 'They had truly outgrown the old image. They were finally free to be what they chose to be. But what choice were they offered?' (93).

Always there is the same humanist appeal to a pre-existing individual self, embryonically there from the start and available for a development which can be straight and true or may, by extraneous social influence, deviate from its natural course. A girl either grows – grows up, tall and strong – or else she is warped and stunted and remains in a state of immaturity or corruption. Friedan claims on the one hand that the 'lack of an image' of what she might be caused the fall-back into the error of false femininity: without the good model, there is no way for the girl to grow. On the other hand, because she conceives of the person as there all the time, she also appeals repeatedly to a 'basic'

or 'hard core of self' which is called upon to resist its own feminization:

By choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity, by never achieving the hard core of self that comes not from fantasy but from mastering reality, these girls are doomed to suffer ultimately that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, non-existence, non-involvement with the world that can be called *anomie*, or lack of identity, or merely felt as the problem that has no name. (172)

Here, it is the girl's own active 'choosing' of the femininity which then makes her passively 'doomed to suffer'. She begins as a fully rational subject and condemns herself to the utter passivity of 'non-existence'. There is a hesitation as to victimization or agency in relation to which, in other cases, Friedan sometimes privileges one side and sometimes the other. To take another instance:

In the last analysis, millions of able women in this free land chose, themselves, not to use the door education could have opened for them. The choice – and the responsibility – for the race back home was finally their own. (173)

In this example, free choice is real: in 'this free land', women are ultimately free to choose 'themselves', and responsible for the mistakes they make. Home is the prison they preferred to the open, outside world of education and opportunity. In the earlier example – 'finally free, but what choice were they offered?' – choice is seen as limited by what is offered. No image available, therefore no possible identification with a self to match up to the free, or freed, 'New Woman'.

This oscillation recurs throughout the book. There is the 'inner voice' within that is the germ of an authentic protest; at the same time, there is the clear statement that the image conforms in a sense to what women want: 'This image . . . shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams' (28–9). In other words, the 'image' imprints itself in such a way as to be indistinguishable from those other dreams characterized as more primary and more true to the inner, human self. Friedan is constantly caught in this contradiction, which can be smoothed over only by accepting the arbitrary distinction between true and false dreams – between those that are from within and correspond to 'human' potential, and those that are from without and are imposed by the manipulators of the 'feminine' mystique.

Much of the difficulty stems from the fact that the language for each alternative is identical, having to do with wanting (or 'yearning'), choice and fulfilment. Friedan tells the story of the first feminist movement, whose emergence was prompted by a situation of confinement to the home and to a state of infantile underdevelopment similar to the one she identifies in the present. The problem for a woman then was that 'she could never grow up to ask the simply human question, "Who am I?"

What do I want?" (74). But what is wrong now is articulated in terms which seem to correspond to this acknowledgement of wanting, to a search for identity and fulfilment: 'Women who suffer this problem, in whom this voice is stirring, have lived their whole lives in the pursuit of feminine fulfilment' (22).

This double premise – first, that there is a basic 'core of self' which ought to develop according to its nature and to resist extraneous influence, and second, that without an external image there is no possibility of achieving a full identity – accounts, I think, for a final twist in the form of Friedan's argument. For it is as if the entire book is there to lay out the missing image of human selfhood excluded by the mystique, but that this can only be done by repeating exactly those forms of persuasion from outside which are identified as the insidious techniques of the mystique which is thereby displaced and excluded in its turn. Be a whole person, achieve your human potential, and you can have even more than is presently on offer.

This is not to dismiss the book of *The Feminine Mystique* as an advertisers' con on a par with that of the feminine mystique it takes as its object. It is rather to suggest that the denunciation of 'brainwashing' and 'manipulation' in the name of a suppressed authenticity may mean that the authenticity claimed instead is rhetorically just as suspect. Friedan counters the mystique's representation of the natural woman with her own, and lays her argument open to the same critique in the name of another feminine – or human – nature. (And this, as we shall see, is precisely what happens when she revises her own argument eighteen years later.) In the second chapter she cites as an example of the spuriousness of contemporary women's magazine journalism an editor who was heard to demand: 'Can't you dream up a new crisis for women?' (32). Friedan's next chapter is entitled 'The Crisis in Women's Identity'.

In rereading – or reading – Friedan twenty or more years on, it is relatively easy to point out aspects which now seem anachronistic, either because they refer to demands which no longer seem pertinent or because they appear unacceptably narrow or biased. In the first category – demands no longer relevant – would appear, for example, the fact that western nations are not much worried by high birthrates any more, or the fact that in a time of high unemployment it is no longer feasible to marshal an argument that women are a wasted asset for the state.

In the second category – demands that now appear prejudiced – would be placed the heterosexist assumptions, not only in the representation of male homosexuality as a cultural symptom but also in the premise that the normal woman is heterosexual: Friedan refers, for example, to the 'perversion' of history by which nineteenth-century feminists are represented as 'man-hating, embittered, sex-starved spinsters' and proceeds to show, on the one hand, that many famous feminists 'loved, were loved, and married', and on the other that the cause was great enough to lead to a temporary abandonment of womanliness:

Is it so hard to understand that emancipation, the right to full humanity, was important enough to generations of women, still alive or only recently dead, that some fought with their fists, and went to jail and even died for it? And for the right to human growth, some women denied their own sex, the desire to love and be loved by a man, and to bear children. (74)

Here there is, clearly, a conception of natural sexual difference operating alongside the claim for recognition of women's humanity; and that difference consists in a heterosexual, childbearing destiny which would radically separate Friedan from many of her feminist successors. Her argument is that marriage and motherhood should be kept in their secondary, 'sexual' place, not that they are to be questioned in themselves as part of what she calls the 'life-plan' for women.

Also featuring in this category of now unacceptable assumptions would be the middle-class, professional focus which is implicit throughout and which occasionally shows another negative side. It is in the following terms that Friedan denounces the distorted evidence used to build statistical proof that working mothers are bad for children's development:

How many women realize, even now, that the babies in these publicized cases, who withered away from lack of maternal affection, were not the children of educated, middle-class mothers who left them in others' care certain hours of the day to practice a profession or write a poem, or fight a political battle – but truly abandoned children: foundlings often deserted at birth by unwed mothers and drunken fathers, children who never had a home or tender loving care. (185–6)

The asymmetry here between 'unwed' and 'drunken' is perhaps even more interesting than the vignette itself, with the two culpable parents stumbling around in their different states of post-natal incapacitation to throw out the baby 'at birth'. And interestingly, the 'home and tender loving care' which measure the extent of the foundling's deprivation figure here not as the false image of domestic happiness perpetrated by the feminine mystique, but as just what a baby deserves.

In academic circles, Friedan's humanist premises and triumphalist rhetoric of emancipation do now seem rather old-fashioned. The current emphasis on sexual difference as the starting point for questions, rather than as an ideological confusion masking women's full humanity, has the effect of relegating a perspective such as Friedan's to the status of being theoretically unsophisticated as well as historically outdated. But to fail to consider her on these grounds is to accept precisely those assumptions about concepts of progressive liberation and enlightenment, collective and individual, which the later models have put into question. The point is not to reject Friedan from some point of advanced knowledge either as simply 'of her time' – an argument for the early sixties of no interest now, or as benignly prejudiced – good liberal as

she was, we've come a long way since then. Rather, the very twists of her argument, with all the oddity of its details and contradictions, as seen from more than two decades later, may themselves suggest a different perspective on current feminist preoccupations and assumptions and current versions of feminist history and feminism's destination.

Friedan's basic theory of historical, as of individual, development is one of evolutionary maturation – from 'primitive' to civilized cultures, via the agency of pioneers, in the feminist movement as in American history. In this scheme, the present form of femininity is but a moderate deviation, to be ironed out – if the image is not too domestic – by a final mobilization of latent energy:

In the light of women's long battle for emancipation, the recent sexual counterrevolution in America has been perhaps a final crisis, a strange breath-holding interval before the larva breaks out of the shell into maturity. (363)

But elsewhere, Friedan half hints – and half despairingly – that there may be a structure more cyclical than progressive in the history of feminist argument. For instance:

Encouraged by the mystique to evade their identity crisis, permitted to escape identity altogether in the name of sexual fulfilment, women once again are living with their feet bound in the old image of glorified femininity. And it is the same old image, despite its shiny new clothes, that trapped women for centuries and made the feminists rebel. (94)

From femininity to feminism, to the forgetting of feminism to a return to femininity, to feminism again – and so on. Such would seem to be the sequence identified by this description, leaving no suggestion of a possible outcome of full feminist, or human, identity for women, since the story never ends.

This difficulty is highlighted by Friedan's own explicit shift of position since 1963. *The Second Stage* (1981) reads uncannily like a reversal of the terms of *The Feminine Mystique*. In place of the silently suffering, affluent housewife, we are here introduced to the secretly unfulfilled female executive who has taken on wholesale the offer of success in a man's world but is now experiencing the effects of the 'denial' of what turn out to have been valid feminine feelings. Where 'femininity' was the false image in the first book, its negative effects to be cured by feminist consciousness, 'feminist rhetoric' has now become the stale and stultifying demand, to be cured by the recovery of a measure of femininity. Rather than the feminine mystique, it is 'the feminist mystique' which is 'the problem'. Two halves assuredly make a whole, and balance will only be attained by acknowledging the importance of those traditionally female nurturing qualities and 'needs' which the first stage of feminism forced them to repudiate.

The role of the false, distorting image played by femininity in the earlier book is thus taken over in *The Second Stage* by the 'stunting' excesses of a feminism 'blind' to the caring, family values it had to reject in order to make its initial point. In arguing that the time has now come to 'transcend' the polarization of men and women, Friedan relies on the same types of double premises as in *The Feminine Mystique*. From one perspective, the new problems are generated by economic and national necessities (because of inflation and dwindling growth, women have to go out to work to balance the domestic budget; by the same token, macho masculinity *a la* John Wayne is no longer viable in post-Vietnam America). But at the same time, the solutions appeal to first principles: men are now able to put off what turn out to have been their own 'masks' of hyper-masculinity, to discover their underlying feelings; women, meanwhile, have got past the point of needing to assert themselves according to values now seen not as the 'human' norm but as excessively masculine. Femininity is now valorized as a buried potential, where previously it was regarded as a fabrication.

All this leaves open the whole question of what actually constitutes the difference between the sexes. Too much of either masculinity or femininity is bad for men and women, which suggests that they are not qualities tied to either sex: women must not get too much like men, any more than men should repress their feminine side. And yet, the whole aim of 'the transcendence of polarization' is that, in the words of the book's final sentence, we will all be 'spelling out own names, at last, as women and men'. The goal of feminism, having passed through all its 'evolutionary' stages, then, would be to make true men and women of us, while at the same time the attainment of such identities is predicated on a fusion of masculine and feminine qualities. Transcendence might be another impasse after all.

This problem can be seen from another angle in the work of Nancy Chodorow, who in 1978 put forward an influential argument that makes women's mothering the central problem for feminism. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow proposes that the differentiated psychic development of men and women in patriarchal society is assured through the fact that it is women, not men, who raise children. Change the social structure of parenting so that it is equally shared by both sexes, and you would change the psychic structure according to which boys grow up by taking a distance from women and from feminine qualities associated with them, and girls grow up ready to reproduce the asymmetrical structure by seeking compensation for their lack of power in the extra-familial world through becoming mothers in their turn.

The difficulty with this analysis is that on the one hand sexual difference becomes only an effect of differential social structures, and is implicitly effaced into nothing more than a symmetrical oscillation between mutually defining orientations towards autonomy or dependence (a man is what is socialized into separateness, a woman is too embedded in relationships). On the other hand, it is presupposed as basic to psychic identity. As Chodorow says in her 'Afterword': 'Equal

parenting would not threaten anyone's primary sense of gendered self (nor do we know what this self would look like in a nonsexist society)' (Chodorow, 1978: 218).

This is exactly the problem. If sexual difference is defined only in terms of social roles, then a society in which roles were not allotted according to sex (which would be implied by a 'nonsexist' society) would presumably not mark out a distinction between masculine and feminine at all. But then it is not clear where the 'primary sense of gendered self' would come from, or why there would be any identity as male or female to be threatened.

This is analogous to the double bind of *The Second Stage*, where an acceptance of identification as a woman is thrown into question by the theoretical abolition of any basis for sexual differentiation. Just as *The Feminine Mystique* fails to ask whether there is a difference, so *The Second Stage* assumes it and at the same abolishes it. The straightforward goal of independence put forward in the early book as women's means of becoming equal to men is simply replaced by a unisex goal of enough independence plus enough dependence. The possibility of attaining the well-adjusted harmony of the whole human self, however defined, is not questioned in either case.

And it is this impasse which takes us back to what is still the unresolved mystery of *The Feminine Mystique*. In setting up feminism as a freedom gained and lost, Friedan makes problematic the easy conceptualization of feminist progress, of the setting and resetting of agendas in view of the attainment of a known goal. The contradictions in her models of the self, of free choice and femininity indicate all kinds of questions left unresolved. *The Second Stage* effectively acknowledges that the first stage went too far, and scored an own goal by positing its aim in terms of what is now seen as women's acquisition of a purely masculine identity. In drawing attention to the inevitability of such unequal and unpredictable developments in the histories of feminism and its definitions of femininity, Friedan shows how unresolved questions may themselves be the most suggestive clues to what remains 'the problem with no name'.

Notes

Rachel Bowlby is a lecturer in English in the School of Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University. She is the author of *Just Looking*, a book on women and shopping in turn-of-the-century fiction, and also of a forthcoming book on Virginia Woolf.

- 1 All further quotations will be given as page numbers without additional specification.
- 2 A full critique of Friedan's account is given in Juliet Mitchell (1973).

3 This too is recounted in the detective mode:

I found a clue one morning, sitting in the office of a women's magazine editor – a woman who, older than I, remembers the days when the old image was being created, and who had watched it being displaced. The old image of the spirited career girl was largely created by writers and editors who were women, she told me. The new image of woman as housewife-mother has been largely created by writers and editors who are men. (47)

4 It is intriguing that Friedan ends up recapitulating one of the central imperatives of the ideology of housework: Waste not, want not.

5 See, for example, the section on the neurosis-free Massachusetts community of Polish immigrants described by the sociologist Arnold Green:

Green wondered. Why didn't those children become neurotic, why weren't they destroyed by that brutal, irrational parental authority? They had none of that constant and watchful nurturing love that is urged on middle-class mothers by the child psychologists. (191).

It is as if Friedan needs to swing the pendulum all the way from maternal over-attention to (the relative sanity of) parental/paternal brutality.

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