

What's So Great about the Public Sphere? Or, How Third-wave Feminism Didn't Ruin

Everything

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Introduction

Despite the more than two decades that have passed since its beginning, third-wave feminism remains deeply controversial and divisive within feminist theory and politics. Many feminists worry that third-wave feminism, or at least some forms or aspects of it, undermines the very possibility of feminist politics. For example, Linda Hirshman argues that the rise of third-wave “choice feminism” is a betrayal of the obligation to collective change that characterized second-wave; third-wave feminism “tells women that their choices, everyone's choices, the incredibly constrained ‘choices’ they made, are good choices”.¹ According to criticisms like Hirshman's, third-wavers have positioned themselves in opposition to the collective-mindedness of second-wave feminism and questioned the very existence of a unified category of “woman” that could be the subject of feminism, and so are essentially giving up on any notion of politics as a shared endeavor, and with it, on the possibility for larger social changes.

These criticisms are not unfounded; the valorization of “pleasure”, “subversion”, “play”, “non-judgementalness” and “choice” that has been at the core of the third wave risks gaining popular appeal for feminism at the expense critical capacity; it makes feminism into

¹ Linda R. Hirshman, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (New York: Viking, 2006). 1Hirshman, 1.

anything—and thus, in effect, nothing.² And the claims for diversity that this fragmentation are meant to purchase ignore the great diversity with the second wave, and the contributions of lesbians, working-class women, and women of color to second-wave feminism.³ The assumption that second-wave feminism was somehow mired in an essentialist understanding of women that the third wave is freed of is ironic, given that the basis for the valorization of many choices as compatible with feminism is that they are performed by women, which must itself rest upon some sort of essentialism if it is to be coherent.

But while I agree that there many problems in third-wave feminism—especially its anti-political individualism, for example, articulated as rejection feminist judgmentalness and prescriptivism—it is of course necessary to observe that the “third wave” label actually encompasses a variety of theories and practices, some of which are valuable for feminism, and others which undermine it; the same is also true of second-wave feminism—and the first wave,

² Michael L. Ferguson, "Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (2010). A good example of the kind of third-wave support for women's agency absent any notion that those actions could be the products of sexism, and thus detrimental to women is Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen, "Headscarves and Porno-Chic," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13, no. 2 (2006) See, too, Rosalind Gill's critical response, Rosalind C. Gill, "Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and 'Choice' for Feminism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007),

³ "Contrary to many recent claims about the women's liberation movement being middle class, bourgeois, and white, the early formations we uncovered were primarily comprised of Black and poor women and members of Black nationalist or Old Left groups." (Rosalyn Baxandall, "Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 230.)

See, too, Shelley Budgeon, *Third Wave Feminisms and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), ;Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004),

too.⁴ Indeed, my point in this paper is not to argue in favor of one wave or another, for each has its own virtues and vices. My point is to argue for the continuity of the vices across the three waves of feminism. Rather than casting the individualism of the third wave in opposition to the second wave, or as somehow a break with or reversal of it (which is how both proponents and critics of the third wave characterize it), I see the third wave as in many ways continuous with, and even the culmination, of many trends toward individualism and against politics within earlier iterations of feminism. Chief among these is the attempt to deconstruct, in theory and practice, the public–private divide, in order to gain equal access to and participation in the public sphere for women. As Carole Pateman summarizes: “The dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about.”⁵ The path of this struggle from private women to public ones is responsible, I will argue in this paper, for many of the problems that feminism still confronts, including the problems that the second and third waves identify in one another. Feminists’ attempts to access the public sphere have, I argue, imposed requirements on women engaged in politics to adopt certain masculinist traits, most troublingly the kind of individualism and separation from others that is termed “autonomy”, even as many feminists have proclaimed the value of women's differences from men, especially in their performance of care-work that sustain

⁴Like many other scholars, I unify many different types of feminist theory and action under the label "third wave"; despite the vast differences between, say, Rebecca Walker and Katie Roiphe, on the one hand, and Judith Butler and Wendy Brown on the other, their characterization of earlier feminism and of their own work in relation to it—as well as second-wave feminists' reactions to their work—justifies lumping them together. Moreover, my hope is that questioning the account of the third wave as a break with or rejection of second wave feminism—an account both generations agree upon, even if they evaluate it differently—will allow us to rethink the appropriateness of such divisions. For more on the development of the generational, "wave" motif in feminist theory, see Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, and Kimberly Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002).

⁵ Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). 118. For a history of the historiography of the private vs. public spheres, see Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women: Essays* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). 159–99

human relationships.⁶ Contrary to both liberal and Left accounts of the private sphere as the domain of the individual, and often hierarchical, and the public as that of equality (at least formally) and the common interest; I find that the move toward the public sphere has increased the strength of masculinist ideals of the public person. This ideal posits the public person as independent and detached from others, and freed from material and psychic dependence upon them.⁷ Instead of challenging these ideals, the predominant strains of feminism have, since the first wave, reinforced them. And while many feminists proclaim the value of care in the public sphere, a set of insidious changes have taken place in the opposite direction. The norms of the public have deformed the private sphere and so eliminated many of the systems by which those positive aspects of women's traditional gender roles were possible, and that are valuable as alternative models for democratic theory. Since at least the nineteenth century, the increasing admission of women to the public sphere has eliminated many of the private practices of solidarity and care that women performed among and for one another. For example, nineteenth-century women coped with gender-based restrictions on property ownership and inheritance by working together to secure property for nieces, daughters. The reasons for this are not currently clear, and locating them lies beyond the scope of this paper. It is possible that this has proved the path of least resistance for feminism, or it could be that the masculinist norms of the public sphere are too deeply entrenched to be susceptible to a feminist challenge there. If that is the

⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Jennifer Nedelsky criticizes this discreet-individualist concept of autonomy and attempts to re-formulate one based on humans as unbounded, and so connected with and interdependent upon one another. See Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011),

⁷ This most clearly laid out in Rousseau's assignment of gender roles under the social contract, Hegel's theory of Civil Society, de Toqueville's praise of U.S. women's domesticity, as well as Rawls's original development of the Original Position. See, e.g., Nancy J. Hirschmann, *Gender, Class, and Freedom in Modern Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), and Kerber, *Intellectual History of Women*, esp. 160–2, where she observes that de Tocqueville coined the circles/spheres imagery to describe men's and women's proper areas of life.

case, then alternative sites and practices of feminist, anti-masculinist politics will have to be found. Though, again, I lack the space to sufficiently argue it in this paper, one implication of my criticism here is that the public sphere could be just such a site.

I shall demonstrate both the continuity of the problems with individualism and its relationship to the feminist focus on the public sphere by looking at the fate of motherhood and women's paid employment in second- and third-wave feminism. I shall start with Betty Friedan's treatment of motherhood in *The Feminine Mystique*, and look at subsequent debates over the issue of mothers and their roles in the public sphere. For Friedan, famously, motherhood was to be but one part of a woman's life that, while it could provide satisfaction, should not be given greater importance than it could bear. The problem with the “feminine mystique” of the book's title was that it overstated the satisfaction that women should derive from mothering in order to exclude them from public life. To overcome this oppression and achieve full, public personhood and thus equality with men, women must minimize the amount of time they spend on motherhood and housewifery and pursue their own, self-given ends. While Friedan's argument is part of a much longer history of anti-maternalism within and outside feminism, hers was one of the most popular and influential upon feminism itself; it continues to shape feminist debates regarding not only motherhood, but also the role of paid employment and the problems of class, race, and sexual-identity divisions within the second wave.⁸ Especially important is her emphasis on women's independence as a condition of entrance to the public sphere. Though often assumed to be a product of Friedan's liberalism, the requirement that women eschew maternalism in the name of a separate identity from their families is to be found in other feminist schools of thought,

⁸ On anti-maternalism, see Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). esp. Ch. 6.

including radical and socialist feminisms during the second wave, and even in much contemporary thought that seeks to reconstruct mothering for feminist ends. It is in this contemporary theorization of feminist mothering that the deforming effects of masculinist standards of public personhood upon the private sphere is evident. The rise of third-wave feminism's emphasis on women's individual agency and choices as valuable, and the assumptions that motherhood is the answer to women's dissatisfaction in the workplace relies on the same identification of liberation as the realization of one's desires with its privileging of individual autonomy are central to the masculinist conceptions of personhood in the public sphere.⁹ Most importantly for the purposes of developing a feminist democratic theory, these norms of public life have undermined, and in some cases eradicated, the systems of collective support, resistance, and change that have been a characteristic of women's lives under patriarchy for centuries and that provide a different, anti-masculinist model of democratic politics. Though there is insufficient space to adequately develop it here, women's history—outside the feminist movement and within it—contains numerous examples of private, collective politics grounded in their positions of dependence and privacy, many of which required the private sphere to exist. Although the private sphere has also been one of hierarchy, domination and violence, the history of feminism demonstrates that the public sphere is not free of these problems, nor has it been able to solve them in the private sphere.

Feminist theory has long been concerned with motherhood, because modern political theory has admitted women to the polity primarily as mothers. As Carole Pateman notes in *The*

⁹ Rosalind Gill's work usefully deconstructs many of the practices that have been championed by third-wave feminists as emancipatory, or even as signs of women's already-achieved emancipation. See Rosalind C. Gill, "Sexism Reloaded, or, It's Time to Get Angry Again!," *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011), and the citations therein. See, too, Budgeon, *Third Wave Feminism*,

Disorder of Women, the ability to give “birth symbolizes the reasons why women must be excluded from political life, but women's natural capacity has also been one of the major mechanisms of women's inclusion into the political order.”¹⁰ The result is women's exclusion from politics; states have an interest in “the quantity and quality of their population and, as mothers and potential mothers, women are the objects of this interest” and so are the objects of state control.¹¹ This is what Andrea O’Reilly has called “powerless responsibility”, and it forms the basis of heteropatriarchal motherhood and women's assigned role in modern liberal politics.¹² The powerlessness of mothers to shape their lives or those of their families is partly a product of the investment the state has in ensuring the quantity and quality of their populations, while also minimizing the demands that this interest places upon it. “Since at least the 1790s, women have demanded that the performance of their duty should be part of citizenship. The performance of women's duty is vital for the health of the state, yet the duty lies outside citizenship—indeed, motherhood is seen as the antithesis of the duties of men and citizens.”¹³ I wonder, though, if this is not a mistaken tactic on the part of women. As we shall see in *The Feminine Mystique* and subsequent responses to its theory of women's liberation, attempts to include women into the public sphere either on the basis of their maternity or on the marginalization of that feature of their lives have not been successful, and have instead resulted

¹⁰ Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*, 11. See, too, Kerber, *Intellectual History of Women*, 41–62; and Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, 2nd Ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993). Ch. 1.

¹¹ Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*, 11.

¹² Andrea O'Reilly, "Introduction," in *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto: Women's Press, 2004), 12–4. O'Reilly develops the concept of “powerless responsibility” from Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 10th Anniv. Ed. (New York: Norton, 1986),

¹³ Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*, 11.

in women who are expected to do it all in order to “have it all”—and to feel fulfilled while they're at it.

Betty Friedan and Liberation from Motherhood

Friedan opens *The Feminine Mystique* with an account of women’s suffering: “The problem lay buried, 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 United States.”¹⁴ This yearning is not, contrary to the prevailing medical, psychological, and popular beliefs at the time, merely the product of women’s maladjustment to their proper roles or their exhaustion from overwork. It is instead a sign of the wrongness of belief in “the feminine mystique”, the idea that women have proper roles to begin with, and that they should be fulfilled by their roles and wives and mothers. The feminine mystique, which Friedan argues existed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only to be resurrected in the 1950s, is an ideology of gender that essentializes certain traits as masculine and feminine, assigning to the latter a restricted set of interests and behaviors within the home: cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and husband.

The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity.... It says this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the roots of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their

¹⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2001). 57. Future references to the book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.

own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. (91–2)

The language Friedan uses to describe housewives' suffering, that of longing, emptiness, desperation, a "dissatisfied voice stirring within" (71) to convey that the problem with the feminine mystique is that it deforms women's ability to properly recognize and act to satisfy their innermost desires when they conflict with the image of womanhood the mystique promulgates. Interests outside the home, according to the feminine mystique, represent a threat to women's femininity and moreover are beyond their inborn capacities, and so are best left to men. Friedan marshals myriad sources to show the origins of the feminine mystique in psychology, education, women's magazines, and the capitalist consumer economy; she also gives a history of previous generations of feminism and of the kinds of stories of women's lives, both historical and fictional, that fought against the feminine mystique and demonstrated women's capacity to pursue meaningful lives outside the home and to contribute meaningfully to the world. All this is to disprove the central tenets of the feminine mystique; to show that women can be (and have been) fully human by pursuing their own, self-given ends; and to argue that doing so will neither compromise their femininity nor leave them as sexually dissatisfied spinsters. Instead, women can and must pursue independent lives, create identities for themselves, and contribute to society in so doing—all of which they are, Friedan asserts, able to do as well as men. Friedan grounds her claims in an assumption that women's suffering is the product of and contributes to women's disenfranchisement from "mainstream society", those endeavors that shape the public's collective lives. It is participation in this public that characterizes the meaning of the fully human

life, and it is denial of this fully human life to women that is, for Friedan, the central problem with the feminine mystique.

The evidence for women's human capacity is the suffering with which Friedan began her critical project. Women are immersed in the feminine mystique, and are told by nearly all authority figures that housewifery is their destiny, that the home is where they should find fulfillment. Indeed, in popular culture and in education, great pains have been taken to inculcate women with the feminine mystique and vilify those women who would flout it:

The new feminine morality story is the exorcising of the forbidden career dream, the heroine's victory over Mephistopheles: the devil, first in the form of a career woman, who threatens to take away the heroine's husband or child, and finally, the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity that must be exorcised to win or keep the love of husband and child." (95; emphasis added)

This vilification of the career women—and, indeed, of the very desire to have a separate career—bombard women from sources throughout society: popular women's magazines, advertisers, educators, psychologists, physicians, and academics in biology and the social sciences alike. And yet, despite their immersion in messages that promote femininity, women still suffer the boredom, desperation and even illness that, Friedan claims, come with the indentitylessness they are supposed to accept. It is this suffering that first demonstrates to Friedan that women are not destined for housewifery, but have the capacity and the nascent desire to become full and independent persons with identities of their own.

The solution Friedan proposes in the final chapter is escape from suburban domesticity and into "mainstream society"; a woman must seek "a job that she can take seriously as part of a

life plan, work in which she can grow as part of society.” (472) This move from housewife to career women is also the process by which a woman comes to have a life and identity of her own, and thus can achieve instead of living solely as her husband’s wife and her children’s mother, and thus can achieve full personhood. For Friedan, the “problem that has no name” and the crisis in suburban women’s lives it has generated provides just such an opportunity for those women to seek their identities and create themselves as fully human: “I think that women had to suffer this crisis of identity, which began a hundred years ago, and have to suffer it still today, simply to become fully human.” (136) It is this point regarding the nature of “fully human” that is so central to Friedan's feminist theory; Friedan wants to redeem women’s suffering by using it as the motive force for change. The discontent that housewives feel is also the guide for their own liberation; they must pursue their genuine interests, and, in so doing, develop their own unique identity.

But there is a tension within Friedan’s ideal plan for women. On the one hand, it is sensible that Friedan would turn inward to solve the problem of women’s psychological stultification by housework. Part of the problem with the feminine mystique is that it overvalues housework, and tells women that they have the most important jobs in the world; this is part of the way that the mystique works.

Self-esteem in woman, as well as in man, can only be based on real capacity, competence, and achievement; on deserved respect from others rather than unwarranted adulation. Despite the glorification of ‘Occupation: housewife,’ if that occupation does not demand, or permit, realization of woman’s full abilities, it cannot provide adequate self-esteem. (435)

The feminine mystique operates in part by telling women that their role as mothers is the “most important job in the world”. This not only gives them a false sense of self-esteem, but it also licenses both women’s control, as well as the responsibility they bear for the outcomes of their children’s lives, a trend Friedan herself documents throughout *The Feminine Mystique* (and often seems to reproduce). Yet, the solution that Friedan proposes is not to do just anything the heart desires, but something that is of social value. Thus, women are to look inside themselves and discover who they are and what they want to do that fits a certain model of social valuation; but because of the aforementioned problem with the overvaluation of housewifery, some other sign of social value must be found. For Friedan, this means paid employment: “Even if a woman does not have to work to eat, she can find identity only in work that is of real value to society—work for which, usually, our society pays. Being paid is, of course, more than a reward—it implies a definite commitment.” (474) Thus, though Friedan is interested in women’s self-fulfillment, she assumes that this will involve their taking up projects that will contribute to society. For Friedan, there is an assumed relation between paid employment and this is more about the production of a sense of *self-esteem* that women require to ascend to self-fulfillment, the next stage of need. Pursuing sustained interests outside the home, while it allows women to contribute to the world, are primarily beneficial for Friedan because of their aesthetic effects on women. One woman Friedan interviewed,

had made it to the other side, and could look back now and see the problem clearly. Her home was colorful, casual, but technically she was no longer “just a housewife.” She was paid for her work as a professional painter. She told me that when she stopped conforming to the conventional picture of femininity she finally began to *enjoy* being a woman.” (465; italics in original)

Thus, for the modern woman, it is the ability to overcome one's initial state of suffering, to enter into a state of pleasure with one's position that defines feminist success in Friedan's theory.

The consequence of Friedan's theory of liberation through paid employment is woman's self-cultivation as a properly public subject, one that is separate from others and has accepted capitalist labor as the accepted form of societal contribution. For Friedan, the "problem that has no name" and the crisis in suburban women's lives it has generated provides just such an opportunity for those women to seek their identities and create themselves as fully human: "I think that women had to suffer this crisis of identity, which began a hundred years ago, and have to suffer it still today, simply to become fully human." (136) Friedan wants to redeem women's suffering by using it as the motive force for change, but this change is always mediated by the feelings of pleasure that women are to derive from it. "In actual fact, it is not as difficult as the feminine mystique implies, to combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that once was called 'career.' It merely takes a new life plan—in terms of one's whole life as a woman." (468–9) For Friedan, liberation ends where it began: internal to the individual subject, in the form of self-fulfillment, but this time through a career *and* motherhood, even as the latter is to be minimized to make room for the former. Despite the seeming importance of women's contributing to society, the social value of a given pursuit in the form of wages is but a way for a woman to achieve the esteem of others that contributes to her to own satisfaction—a very crude proxy, at best. It also means that Friedan's project of liberation is, from the outset, one undertaken by each woman individually. Women must look inside themselves for the nature of their unhappiness, and look for whatever will make them happy. The end of sexism occurs through the aggregation of these individual choices, and other women can

at best serve to provide information on the nature of the “problem that has no name” (a role that Friedan has already fulfilled). Like the emphases on individual pleasure, play, and choice during the third wave, Friedan also bases her vision of women’s liberation in individuals’ fulfillment through the pursuit of their own, self-given and self-chosen ends.

In subsequent feminist theory, Friedan has served largely as an object lesson in second-wave narrowness and false universalization of the experiences of a small subset of women to all. And, indeed, Friedan's rejection of motherhood for liberation through paid work is a problem for the many reasons that other critics have pointed to. She does indeed marginalize maternal care work and housework, but she is also aware that this labor needs to be performed. As bell hooks observes, the women discussed in *The Feminine Mystique* were “housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life.”¹⁵ For hooks, these women “were so blinded by their own experiences that they ignored the fact that a vast majority of women were (even at the time *The Feminine Mystique* was published) already working outside the home, working in jobs that neither liberated them from dependence on men nor made them economically self-sufficient.”¹⁶ In fact, she says, “many women longed to be housewives,” a fact that Friedan ignored; Friedan “never wondered whether or not the plight of college-educated, white housewives was an adequate reference point by which to gauge the impact of sexism or sexist oppression on the lives of women in American society.”¹⁷ Friedan also replicates the hierarchy that she seeks to free middle-class, white housewives from by displacing the labor onto other, already-marginalized groups, including the undereducated, the working

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 1st Ed. (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984). 1

¹⁶ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 95

¹⁷ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 2

class, and the disabled. “Some decades ago, certain institutions concerned with the mentally retarded discovered that housework was peculiarly suited to the capacities of feeble-minded girls. In many towns, inmates of institutions for the mentally retarded were in great demand as houseworkers, and housework was much more difficult then than it is now.” (359–60). Because the women in these groups cannot be full participants in the public sphere, according to Friedan, nothing is lost if their lives are given over to the drudgery and stultification of housework.

These problems in Friedan’s theory are often dismissed as endemic to liberal feminism such as hers.¹⁸ But there are reasons to doubt that this is the case. First, from Friedan’s own life and in the arguments of *The Feminine Mystique* itself, we can see traces of other, non- and anti-liberal understandings of what the public sphere requires of women if they are to participate in it fully. Friedan herself indicates that she draws primarily upon humanistic psychology and existentialism for her understanding of human nature that informs her criticism of housewifery; both movements have strong criticisms of liberalism. And Daniel Horowitz's definitive biography of Friedan likewise her familiarity with Marxist theories of labor through her activism in labor groups in the decades prior to her publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and simultaneous disavowal of any connection to or sympathy with the American Left.¹⁹ Finally, we can see, for example, in her approach to consumption and the notion that “housework expands to fill the time available”, even despite the rise in labor-saving technologies, a strongly marxian analysis of the consumption side of capitalism.

¹⁸ See, for example, Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, Ch. 6.

¹⁹ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War, and Modern Feminism*, Paperback Ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000),

Second, in Friedan's argument that women's entry into the public sphere requires overcoming their status as mothers and wives in order to pursue their true, self-given interests, we can see echoes of other theories of personhood and the public sphere from the mid-twentieth century. Both Simone de Beauvoir's theory of transcendence and in Hannah Arendt's (non-feminist) theory of action require, like Friedan's theory of self-realization, that women eschew private concerns and minimize their material labor that takes place therein in order to pursue the kinds of "greater goods" that many men pursue. Performance of care- and housework come at the expense of public citizenship, (just as working-class men and women are excluded from the public sphere because of their performance of imminent labor).²⁰ Finally, in radical feminist theory, too, there is worry about the conflict between citizenship and motherhood. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, the most fully developed theoretical articulation of radical-feminist theory, Shulamith Firestone argues that women cannot be free until human reproduction takes places outside their bodies. The lack of separate personhood that biological motherhood requires, and its consequences for the gender division of labor, mean for Firestone that motherhood is the primary form that gender inequality takes, and thus is the most important for women to overcome if they are to be equal with men.²¹

My point in these citations is to show how, far from being unique to liberal feminism, the masculine ideal of the public, autonomous and discreet individual was to be found in second-

²⁰ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992); Simone de Beauvoir, *The second sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf, 2009), ;Andrea Veltman, "The Sisyphean Torture of Housework: Simone de Beauvoir and Inequitable Divisions of Domestic Work in Marriage," *Hypatia* 19, no. 3 (2004)

²¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The dialectic of sex: the case for feminist revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970), Though she argues that suffrage undermined the more radical elements in first-wave feminism, there is still a strong public orientation, and a strong masculinist individualism, in Firestone's politics. Astrid Henry also chronicles the anti-maternal sentiment that was central to second-wave radical feminists' self-positioning vis-à-vis liberal feminists, especially Friedan. Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, 69–72.

wave feminism of all types. This is not to argue that all second-wave theory was premised on individualism, however. Some of the most important examples of private politics come from the second-wave, most notably in the forms of women's collectives and consciousness-raising groups, activities that have their counterparts in the third wave. But the prevalent idea that the third wave marks a departure from, rather than continuation of, the collective-mindedness of the second wave is unjustified. For example, in her polemic against the rise of what she terms "choice feminism," Linda Hirshman draws upon Friedan to claim that women must return to the workplace not just for their own sakes, but for those of other women. Third-wave feminism poses a new danger for Hirshman precisely because it eliminates the possibility of politics at every level of women's decision-making. " 'Choice,' or even its pumped-up cousin 'personal choice,' does not remove decisions to a special realm where they cannot be judged.... A woman who decides staying at home with her children matters more than the fate of other women ought to be prepared to defend that position."²² Even if she is correct that the language of choice has had a pernicious effect upon women's conceptions of feminism and their relationship to whatever shared interests they may have with other women, Hirshman is mistaken to think that Friedan's theory is a good resource to counter claims of individualism and pleasure and to forward those of duty and collective-mindedness. As we have seen, Friedan's theory is oriented not toward the greater good directly, but rather assumes that the greater good will come about through the accretion of individual women's choices. There is no room in Friedan's theory for duty to other women, insofar as her primary emphasis is the production of *self*-satisfaction.

Autonomy Invades the Private Sphere: Motherhood in the Third Wave

²² Hirshman, *Get to Work*, 26.

We can see the consequences of the second-wave's emphasis on autonomous public personhood most directly in the way that scholars and activists have developed feminist theories of mothering during the third wave; these indicate not a resistance to masculinist norms of personhood, but rather their adoption as the basis for emancipated personhood. For example, in her book on maternal guilt, Diane Eyer disclaims the tendency to hold mothers almost wholly responsible for their children's misbehavior, and by extension, the broadest possible range of social ills: "Mothers, I began to realize, are encumbered with the burdens of a society unwilling to carry its own weight."²³ (xii) Toward that end, she likewise questions the gendered distribution, both in material and affective terms, of responsibility for the quality of childcare and the societal outcomes that it is held to produce. Eyer questions why it is only mothers who are blamed and made to feel guilty, despite the disproportionate amount of work they do and the frequent absence of fathers from either housework or emotional care-work.²⁴ This kind of criticism could be one that challenges the kind of positivist cause-and-effect that is the heart of masculine forms of knowledge, and that assumes the ability to assign blame for a state of affairs to a discreet individual or group, based on their direct actions. This would question the very notion of individualized blame and responsibility as politically operative concepts, and in so doing, would undermine the kind of material and psychic independence that form the masculine ideal of politics and that serve as prerequisites for public political participation. While she insists that we "recognize that our children are ourselves" and on collective responsibility for children's welfare, these all end up as forms of self-interest.²⁵ Our children are only ourselves indirectly,

²³ Diane Eyer, *Motherguilt: How Our Culture Blames Mothers for What's Wrong with Society* (New York: Times Books, 1996). xii.

²⁴ Eyer, *Motherguilt*, 147–8.

²⁵ Eyer, *Motherguilt*, 229.

mediated through the provision of future material goods that we will rely upon in our old age. Moreover, it is through mothers' freedom from guilt and other bad feelings, that we will come to know whether or not their project has been successful. Evers argues that women should not feel guilty, because they have not done anything wrong to harm their children or society; in the Introduction, she admits that "I had a great deal of trouble understanding why the working mothers I encountered were feeling so guilty. It seemed to me they had done nothing wrong."²⁶ Instead of challenging the relationship between guilt and individual responsibility, Evers merely reproduces it in the domestic sphere. Evers reproduces the detached-individual model of personhood onto women in order to eliminate the feelings of guilt, rather than challenging, for example the distribution of those feeling across society. This would require identifying the problem not in the feelings of guilt themselves, or in the ways those feelings and the gender division of labor inhibit women from realizing their true selves; instead, it would require seeing the *telos* of personhood as the creation of suitably public subjects to which both mothers and their children are supposed to conform, and so must exist independently of one another and without the forms of dependence that guilt indicates.

This same trend is also visible in the academic literature on "empowered mothering"; echoing Friedan, scholars like Andrea O'Reilly, Fiona Green, and Erika Horwitz all promote an understanding of empowerment that is premised on the retention of the mother's separate identity in order to allow women to pursue their own desires and interests.²⁷ Horwitz, for example, argues that "Unlike the myth that posits that being a mother is fulfilling on its own... mothers also need

²⁶ Evers, *Motherguilt*, xi.

²⁷ See Andrea O'Reilly, ed. *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2004).

other experiences to feel fulfilled."²⁸ In drawing upon Friedan's language of "fulfillment", however, Horwitz does not specify that these other experiences should come in the form of paid work outside the home. Instead, it is more about women's subjective re-orientation away from "the expectation that mothers should be ever-present and available" to tend to their children's needs.²⁹ Indeed, the expectations that women can be both full-time mothers and career-women is part of the problem; the goal of empowered mothering is instead to develop "a mother's ability to negotiate her way through motherhood without feeling guilty, deficient, depressed, or stressed."³⁰ For Horwitz, this is primarily achieved by distancing oneself from the societal demands that mothers put their children above all else, which leads to these negative affects. In concrete terms, this means prioritizing one's own needs and desires in defiance of those demands. This resistance can take many forms, even something as simple as "a young mother [who] described how she chose to paint her nails while her baby cried in her crib for a few minutes."³¹ Horwitz characterizes episodes, acts of resistance "destabilizing the dominant discourse," in which "mothers redefined... their roles as mothers."³² Yet it remains unclear either how, in the absence of Horwitz's recounting of it, this mother's painting her nails instead of tending to the crying baby actually destabilizes the dominant discourse, insofar as it is the actions of a single individual acting alone. Though this act may reflect an attitude change on the part of the mother who will then pass that along to her children, Horwitz does not make that connection. Moreover, even

²⁸ Erika Horwitz, "Resistance as a Site of Empowerment: The Journey away from Maternal Sacrifice," in *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto: Women's Press, 2004), 47.

²⁹ Horwitz, "Resistance as Empowerment," 45.

³⁰ Horwitz, "Resistance as Empowerment," 45.

³¹ Horwitz, "Resistance as Empowerment," 45.

³² Horwitz, "Resistance as Empowerment," 47.

assuming that child-rearing is the way that Horwitz connects this individual action to changes in larger discursive patterns and societal norms, I read the new norms that it offers as equating freedom with the satisfaction of desires, and unfreedom as any restriction, internal or external, as a restriction on that satisfaction. But contrary to Horwitz's reading of it, this is not a new understanding, but rather a classic liberal understanding that lies at the root of the liberal public-private divide.

Andrea O'Reilly draws on Horwitz's example of the nail-painting mother to argue that "The theory and practice of empowered mothering recognizes that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy."³³ This list of "a"-terms demonstrates just how far the liberal ideal of the autonomous and separate individual has crept into the private sphere. Indeed, for O'Reilly, women's ability to separate themselves from their roles as mothers, and thus from their children, is part of what enables them to become political. Her concept of empowered mothering, "in emphasizing maternal authority and ascribing agency to mothers and value to mother-work, defines motherhood as a political site wherein mother can affect social change through the socialization of children, in terms of challenging traditional patterns of gender acculturation through feminist child rearing and the world at large through political-social activism."³⁴ To be sure, there is much in this to like: to combat sexism, as well as homosexuality, classism, and racism, it is important to de-essentialize the role and nature of mothering, which will, as O'Reilly observes, open up new forms of family and redistribute the burdens of

³³ Andrea O'Reilly, *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006). 45.

³⁴ O'Reilly, *Rocking*, 45.

childcare. So, too, is it necessary not to see mothering as apolitical, but rather already defined by and contributing to politics; feminism must fight the norms of motherhood that oppress women, often politically disenfranchising them. I question why this must come in the form of redefining mothering as autonomous individuals, rather than making politics the object of redefinition to do away with the requirement that participants conform to such masculine ideals.

It is my contention—and it remains, at this point, merely contended—that such a transformation in politics and the notion of the political subject cannot happen within the public sphere. In the case of motherhood, O'Reilly does not just repeat Friedan's language, but she fights the same battle as Friedan did a half-century ago, and as Pateman observes, women have fought for centuries now: a way for women to redefine themselves as more than mothers, to be able to be treated as not characterized by their bodies, their emotions, and their families. And, while women are no longer defined solely as mothers, their admission to the public sphere has not alleviated the disproportionate amount of care work they continue to do, nor are they freed from the blame if their children somehow turn out to have problems. Motherhood remains a condition of powerless responsibility. It is time, then, to question the desirability of the public as the site of feminist politics, and public personhood as the model of liberation.

Motherhood beyond Autonomy: Toward a Private Politics

Motherhood's ability to challenge our widely held notions of the bounded and discrete individuals is a valuable resource for some feminist theories. For example, Jennifer Nedelsky argues that the mother-child relationship provides a good model of the kind of mutual dependence that should redefine how we think of people, especially women, as political agents, but also should cause us to rethink a wide variety of policy issues, from welfare provision to

property distribution. It is also the case, she observes, that the desire for separate personhood is a form of matrophobic sexism; there is “a connection between the fear of women, the fear of the collective, and the fear of the ‘oceanic feeling’ ... which is associated with the mother.”³⁵ If feminism is to challenge sexism, it must question the ideal of autonomy, with its requirement for independence, rather than attempting to develop a notion of liberation from it.

This redefinition, I posit, will have to occur in the private sphere instead of the public. Exactly what a private politics and a feminine political subject that operates therein would look like requires greater explication than I have space for here. But there are numerous examples of women coming together privately to find ways to resist and even fight the inequality that defined their lives. In recounting them here, my aim is to demonstrate that women have been able to demonstrate the kinds of political agency within the private sphere and not characterized by the need for separate identities, but rather by working through their extant identities as mothers, sisters, friends—and even victims of violence—in private. Many of these forms of life ceased to exist as women gained greater access to the public sphere. For example, Linda Kerber discusses the ways that nineteenth-century women in the U.S. worked among themselves to provide for relatives under property laws that restricted women’s ownership to married women:

In such a legal context... there was a good economic reason for women to work energetically to establish and maintain networks of female kin.... In an era when alimony was rare, women who wished to divorce their husbands leaned on female kin for support. A woman who faced early death from childbirth counted on her sisters to protect her children from mistreatment by possible future stepmothers. Young widows turned to their female kin to sustain them and their children;

³⁵ Nedelsky, *Law's Relations*, 112.

elderly widows counted on their daughters and daughters-in-law to nurse them in reciprocity for earlier care.³⁶

With the end of restrictions on women's inheritance and property ownership, this private, collective resistance became obsolete. "As patriarchy [in property relations] eroded, social reality involved unattached individuals, freely negotiating with each other in an expansive market."³⁷

Instead of being a means of solidarity among women, property ownership became a means of individuating them from one another, and of vesting them in the system of independent personhood; this formed the basis for later arguments, like Friedan's, that women needed to secure her own income and property in order to maintain independence from men.³⁸

Rosalyn Baxandall gives a brief look at black mothers who came together for mutual support during the 1960s and formed organizations such as The Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, Mothers Alone Working (MAW), and the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle women's group; these groups focused on the helping poor and working-class women, often women of color, to negotiate welfare and obtain food stamps, to attain childcare and improve school quality, and fight for access to birth control. Baxandall contrasts the emphasis on childcare with white feminists' attempts to escape such duties:

Black women in groups like MAW and Mount Vernon/New Rochelle were far more centered around their role as mothers and the responsibility and power that goes along with motherhood than their counterparts in predominantly white women's liberation groups.... The women of color groups generally

³⁶ Kerber, *Intellectual History of Women*, 177–8.

³⁷ Kerber, *Intellectual History of Women*, 176.

³⁸ My argument here is similar to that of Shulamith Firestone and other radical feminists that the attainment of suffrage actually hurt the feminist movement by mooting claims for more radical changes. See Firestone, *The dialectic of sex: the case for feminist revolution*, 19–26.

defined motherhood more broadly than white groups. Motherhood for them encompassed caring for all the children of their community as a way of fighting for the future of their community and themselves.³⁹

This emphasis on childcare and motherhood as central to women's freedom within their communities provides a useful counter-example to Friedan's and later white feminists' portrayals of motherhood as a burden to be changed. Much of the differences between the two groups come from different material and ideological histories, and it is important not to somehow see African American feminists as a panacea for the ills of white feminism. Indeed, several of the groups Baxandall cited relied heavily on the language of individual self-determination and autonomy; elsewhere, Rebecca Walker recounts the anti-maternal feminism and behavior of her mother, Alice Walker.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Baxandall's examples disrupt the orientation toward the public sphere that has dominated feminism of all three waves, and with it, the narrative that is crafted on the changing means of accessing the public sphere.

My objection to the public sphere, or to feminists' attempts to gain access to it—even when this entails reshaping it—is the deformations to the private sphere that occur simultaneously. There is an intrusion of publicness, and public models of life, into the private sphere that, I have argued, also constitute serious losses of potentially liberatory models of citizenship and politics, free of the masculinist requirement of autonomy. No doubt, some of these changes are good ones: greater potential for equality in the private sphere and an understanding that private issues are of collective concern have eroded the sacrosanctity of the liberal private sphere that has justified men's oppression and violence against women, and has

³⁹ Baxandall, "Early Second Wave African American Feminists," 238–9.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Walker, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (New York: Riverhead, 2001),

decreased the inequality of the gender-division of labor (though not nearly to the point of equality). Nevertheless, the myth of the third wave as somehow more individualist—or, in their own more favorable evaluation, as more attentive to diversity—ignores the problems that have persisted in feminism's transgenerational privileging of the public as the site of liberation. Questioning the prevailing account of the wave metaphor better enables us to see both this trend, as well as the alternative forms of private politics and resistance that has occurred in the first, second, and third waves alike and that can serve as resources to rethink feminist politics.

Bibliography

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