Desperate Housewives or Happy Homemakers?
Historiography of Women’s Roles in the US.

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I. Introduction

The fight for women’s rights in the United States has been categorized into three-waves and between, as a result of or in resistance to the fight for gender equality was the idea of the “cult of domesticity.” Historians have written in depth on the subject of women’s roles and gender equality over the last 100 years, but more so in the last four decades. Throughout that time, the battle amongst historians, whether feminist or not, remains; were women the desperate housewives alluded to in Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique or the happy homemakers celebrated in Catharine Beecher’s work?

From the 1800’s work of Beecher at the height of Domesticity through various peaks in women’s rights movements with Friedman and Welter’s work in the 1960’s through the 1970’s and 80’s, including a rapid rise in the number of historians focusing on women’s history from 1975 to the present, this paper will show what the overarching opinion of the “Cult of Domesticity” was according to the historians that have written about it.

While History is becoming an even ground for the study of women in history, even history itself is an indicator of the perceived inferiority of women in the public sphere. It wasn’t until the occurrence of second-wave feminism that the study of women’s history began to rise. And rise it did, quite rapidly, becoming the fastest growing topic of study among historians from
1975-2005. The start of this rise was important in “remedying the absence of women from historical accounts.”

From the beginning of the concept of history itself there was a focus on the great men; the Gods and Kings and leaders, but little was written about the ordinary citizens and less so, about women. According to Breisach, “with modern trends toward an all-encompassing history, women’s history would have to deal not only with outstanding persons but with the multitude of women of different races, classes, nations, and religions.”

Breisach’s Historiography itself is laden with ancient, medieval and modern historiography but lends less than two pages to the subject of women’s history and gender studies. However, within those two pages he does an excellent job of calling upon the leading historians in the field of women’s history in the twentieth century (especially at the start of the rise in women’s history during the 1970’s) including, “Nancy Cott, Linda Kerber, Gerda Lerner, Kathryn K Sklar, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Joan W. Scott, [and] Barbara Welter,” many of whom are mentioned in the coming pages of this paper as definitive resources on the historiography of the Cult of Domesticity.

One might find it interesting that the resurgence of the feminist movement was coupled with such an influx of new historians focused specifically on women’s studies. According to

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
Breisach, “Conceptual schemes in that phase of women’s history included the ‘cult of true
cwomanhood’ and ‘domesticity,’ both seen as cultural, male-oriented models for defining (and
thereby limiting) women and their roles.”⁵ Although Breisach dedicated little space to the topic,
he made excellent use of it when he further pointed out the main criticisms of the aforementioned
historian’s history of women’s studies and identified the general schools of thought surrounding
the topic (strong empiricist bent, influenced by the *Annales* group)⁶. This paper intends to
examine Breisach’s statements while also expanding upon and defining the specific histories of
the cult of domesticity in light of the following;

Some critics pointed to the initially strong focus on middle-class women and
the loss to direct action brought about by transforming women’s history into an
academic discipline. A broader criticism referred to the tension connected with
the attempt to integrate women’s history into modern social history—the tension
between the claim to be an important separate endeavor and the aim to
demonstrate the commonality of all human experience. It produced calls for
widening women’s history to gender studies…The trend has been to detach all
biological determination from the definition of women and view male/female
differences primarily…as constructions—in the past, by dominant men. That
approach, it has been hoped, would integrate women’s history more effectively
into the whole of historiography and make a more useful instrument in the
struggle for women’s emancipation.⁷

Both Breisach and historian, William Barney (whom shed significantly more light on
women’s history than the former) agreed that with the introduction of additional forms of history
such as social history, the doors were opened much wider for the inclusion of women in the
study of history. Barney wrote, “Social history’s emphasis on ‘ordinary’ people held the
potential to make more women visible, while its insistence that history was made from the

⁵. Breisach, 367.
⁶. Ibid, 368.
⁷. Ibid, 367.
bottom up defined a much broader range of issues as historically significant. From this perspective, both women and their domestic realm became legitimate, historical topics.”

As Breisach might have implied, the historians that wrote about the Cult of Domesticity often did so when discussing Feminist Movements. However, their opinions were varied,

a) The Cult of Domesticity empowered women,
b) The Cult of Domesticity oppressed women,
c) Feminism excluded women still embracing the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity,
d) Feminism was the direct result of the Cult of Domesticity.

Over the course of the initial emergence of the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity during the 19th century and the reemerging ideals in the twentieth century, there were a few historians that played key parts in the historiography of both the Cult of Domesticity and the Women’s Rights Movements. No study of the historiography of the Cult of Domesticity would be complete without examining Barbara Welter’s, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." (1966), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s. *Cult of Domesticity* (1998) and Betty Friedman’s, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Each provides a unique perspective on how the Cult of Domesticity empowered or oppressed women and its relationship with, because of or in opposition to feminism.

Many of the most prominent historians reflected on earlier works or, as in the case of Welter in her use of Friedman’s *Feminine Mystique*, used the works of others as a model for their own study of the history of the Cult of Domesticity. As Barney said, “Barbara Welter blazed the

way in her influential essay, ‘The cult of true womanhood, 1820-1860’ (1966), which did for the nineteenth century what Betty Friedan had for the twentieth.”9

Historians uncovered the narratives of those previous historians that they sought to understand, and elaborated on their works in light of their characters. Examples, in addition to Welter an Friedan (whom modeled her work after Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex) include Kathryn Kish Sklar who wrote a lengthy biography of Catherine Beecher highlighting Beecher’s own biases that were a stark contrast from what she wrote. William O’Neill’s review of Catherine Beecher’s work and of her biography further elaborates on this phenomenon. Still, others, while not historians themselves, left their mark on the historiography of the cult of domesticity as was the case with political activist and women’s rights advocate, Angelina Grimke in her Letters to Catherine Beecher (1883).

II. Waves of Feminism and the Cult of Domesticity.

First wave of the Cult of Domesticity:

To comprehensively discuss the historiography of the Cult of Domesticity, one must first understand what the Cult of Domesticity was. According to Barbara Welter, the “Cult of Domesticity” or “Cult of True Womanhood”, also known as the “culture of domesticity” was a “value system in place in white upper- and middle- class homes in the United States during the nineteenth century that emphasized women’s embodiment of virtue…women were to uphold the four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.”10

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg further defined the Cult of Domesticity. She wrote;

The cult imposed a highly restrictive series of roles on the new white middle-class woman. To be a True Woman, she must be tender and submissive, self-sacrificing, deeply religious, and untouched by sexual desire. She must be confined to the home, devoted to husband and children, and eschew productive labor and the political arena. African American women, poor women, and immigrant women, compelled by poverty to work, could not be True Women; they and their families were considered unnatural, unfeeling, and sexually depraved.\textsuperscript{11}

The Cult of Domesticity ideals were taught and embraced from 1820-1860. The basis of the Cult of Domesticity was derived from the concept of two spheres, the public and private.

Separate spheres was the concept that men and women had distinct spheres of influence, which left women squarely at home with children and family concerns and men in charge of all activity outside the home. This belief in women’s political inferiority to men had a long tradition and even legal precedent to back it up. The colonists based their legal system on the English common law, or conventions that had been in place for centuries, including that of separate spheres.\textsuperscript{12}

And so the women’s sphere, the private sphere, became known as the domestic sphere.

One of the leading voices advocating for and helping women to ensure their place in the domestic sphere was Catherine Beecher. Beecher was a philosopher and she and her sister,


Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles Of Domestic Science; Being A Guide To The Formation And Maintenance Of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, And Christian Homes* in 1869. From its introduction, one might gain a significant insight into the overall idea of the book;

THE chief cause of woman's disabilities and sufferings, that women are not trained, as men are, for their peculiar duties--Aim of this volume to elevate the honor and remuneration of domestic employment--Woman's duties, and her utter lack of training for them--Qualifications of the writers of this volume to teach the matters proposed--Experience and study of woman's work--Conviction of the dignity and importance of it--The great social and moral power in her keeping--The principles and teachings of Jesus Christ the true basis of woman's rights and duties.13

Beecher and Stowe set out to “teach” women how to be the perfect domestic goddess so that they might become the happy housewives they “should” be. For them, the class oppression of women was a necessary one- for their “protection” and to ensure their happiness. It could be surmised that Beecher would have agreed with Engels’ views on feminism in this manner.

Beecher addressed the first wave feminist movement directly. She wrote,

So much has been said of the higher sphere of woman, and so much has been done to find some better work for her that, insensibly, almost every body begins to feel that it is rather degrading for a woman in good society to be much tied down to family affairs; especially since in these Woman's Rights Conventions

there is so much dissatisfaction expressed at those who would confine her ideas to
the kitchen and nursery.  

Yet these Woman's Rights Conventions are a protest against many former
absurd, unreasonable ideas--the mere physical and culinary idea of womanhood as
connected only with puddings and shirt-buttons, the unjust and unequal burdens
which the laws of harsher ages had cast upon the sex. Many of the women
connected with these movements are as superior in everything properly womanly
as they are in exceptional talent and culture. There is no manner of doubt that the
sphere of woman is properly to be enlarged. Every woman has rights as a human
being which belong to no sex, and ought to be as freely conceded to her as if she
were a man.--and first and foremost, the great right of doing anything which God
and nature evidently have fitted her to excel in. If she be made a natural orator,
like Miss Dickinson, or an astronomer, like Mrs. Somerville, or a singer, like
Grisi, let not the technical rules of womanhood be thrown in the way of her free
use of her powers.  

Still, per contra, there has been a great deal of crude, disagreeable talk in these
conventions, and too great tendency of the age to make the education of woman
anti-domestic. It seems as if the world never could advance, except like ships
under a head-wind, tacking and going too far, now in this direction, and now in
the opposite. Our common-school system now rejects sewing from the education
of girls, which very properly used to occupy many hours daily in school a
generation ago. The daughters of laborers and artisans are put through algebra,
geometry, trigonometry, and the higher mathematics, to the entire neglect of that
learning which belongs distinctively to woman. A girl often cannot keep pace
with her class, if she gives any time to domestic matters; and accordingly she is
excused from them all during the whole term of her education.  

While Beecher acknowledges that women should have rights, it’s clear that she believes
that her place in the home is a domestic one. The remainder of *The American Women’s Home* is
dedicated to the ways in which women could ensure true domesticity. Beecher felt that both
spheres were of equal value because they supported one another.

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
In *Catherine Beecher’s Essays*, Beecher is careful to uphold the Cult of Domesticity ideals in that women should be responsible for teaching children. She further elaborates on the need for American women to increasingly become more educated, if for no other reason than for the importance of educating children. However, she contends that women must stay within their sphere and would be unable to comprehend matters outside it. She wrote;

The field for enterprise and excitement in the political arena, in the arts, the sciences, the liberal professions, in agriculture, manufactures, and commerce, is opening with such temptations, as never yet bore upon the mind of any nation. Will men turn aside from these high and exciting objects to become the patient labourers in the school-room, and for only the small pittance that rewards such toil? No, they will not do it. Men will be educators in the college, in the high school, in some of the most honourable and lucrative common schools, but the children, the little children of this nation must, to a wide extent, be taught by females, or remain untaught… And as the value of education rises in the public mind, and the importance of a teacher's office is more highly estimated, women will more and more be furnished with those intellectual advantages which they need to fit them for such duties ...

The result will be, that America will be distinguished above all other nations, for well-educated females, and for the influence they will exert on the general interests of society. But if females, as they approach the other sex, in intellectual elevation, begin to claim, or to exercise in any manner, the peculiar prerogatives of that sex, education will prove a doubtful and dangerous blessing. But this will never be the result. For the more intelligent a woman becomes, the more she can appreciate the wisdom of that ordinance that appointed her subordinate station, and the more her taste will conform to the graceful and dignified retirement and submission it involves …

An ignorant, a narrow-minded, or a stupid woman, cannot feel nor understand the rationality, the propriety, or the beauty of this relation; and she it is, that will be most likely to carry her measures by tormenting, when she cannot please, or by petulient complaints or obtrusive interference, in matters which are out of her sphere, and which she cannot comprehend. And experience testifies to this result. By the concession of all travellers, American females are distinguished above all others for their general intelligence, and yet they are complimented for their retiring modesty, virtue, and domestic faithfulness, while the other sex is as much
distinguished for their respectful kindness and attentive gallantry. There is no other country where females have so much public respect and kindness accorded to them as in America, by the concession of all travellers. And it will ever be so, while intellectual culture in the female mind, is combined with the spirit of that religion which so strongly enforces the appropriate duties of a woman's sphere.

It should be noted here that Beecher was, in a sense, hypocritical. As the Biography of Beecher by Kathryn Kish Sklar demonstrates, Beecher herself lived in many ways in stark contrast to the Cult of Domesticity. She was educated, professional and in some cases defiant. Kish Sklar wrote,

Much of the effectiveness of the Beecher family lay in its ability to seize the power of social definition during a time of widespread change. Very early in life Catherine was attracted by and became adept in using this power…torn constantly between her evangelical loyalties and her personal needs, she mixed innovation with conservatism, honesty with dissemblance and feminism with antifeminism in her life work. Yet what concerned her most was the power of social definitions and their ability to affect behavior. Catharine Beecher’s female identity constantly intruded into her consciousness and her career… she accumulated a tremendous amount of animus against male cultural dominance, but she usually expressed this anger indirectly. Her political assumptions led her to oppose the women’s rights movements.17

Kish Sklar discussed the impact of the Cult of Domesticity on the family’s role and in terms of the social changes occurring in the United States during Beecher’s lifetime. She pointed out how domesticity might have backfired. Further, she stated;

The tension inherent in a society that rapidly extended new opportunities to men, but sought severely to limit those open to women, could not be completely obscured by ideological justifications, no matter how compelling. Historians have noted the ways women subtly subverted their assigned roles, but we are still far from understanding the origin or consequences of their resistance. Much of the

ideology of domesticity is still with us. Perhaps the most powerful tenet supporting it today is the principle of female self-sacrifice…As American culture developed new forms of self-realization in the nineteenth century, it attached a male label to these experiences and called women selfish and unnatural of they wanted the same set of personal goals…self-sacrifice…informed both the triumphs and tensions of nineteenth-century womanhood, and Catherine Beecher was its major theoretician. In the recent reassessment of the historical experience of women the middle decades of the nineteenth century have emerged as a critical period. Here the first movement for women’s rights was born.18

Perhaps the most definitive voice on the Cult of Domesticity is Barbara Welter. Welter’s historical position on the Cult of Domesticity was from a feminist’s perspective. Welter was heavily influenced by Betty Friedman’s work which has been credited with sparking second-wave feminism. Friedman will be discussed in depth later. However, it should be noted now that Welter used Betty Friedman’s work about the resurgence of the Cult of Domesticity as a model for her own work in writing about the ideals of the 19th Century.

In a sense, Welter’s historical position relative to her definition of the four ideals, or pillars, of the Cult of Domesticity could be likened to Marx’s mode of production. Women’s importance was defined by their support of their husbands during an industrial period in America. Their job was an important one and was an infinite part of the social order that allowed men to perform their duties in the public sphere.

Welter wrote in such a way that it was easily understood that she was biased against antifeminism and the overall ideals of the Cult of Domesticity. Her analysis came at a time when, although the first wave feminist movement was in the distant past, and women’s suffrage

18. Ibid.
granted, second wave feminism was fresh in her mind. One can immediately sense her distaste in her first paragraph which was laden with sarcasm. She wrote,

The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forbears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt that he had turned this new land, this temple of the chosen people, into one vast counting house. But he could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage, not only to fortune, but to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly. Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home.19

Welter examined a number of women’s magazines and books and discussed each in terms of how they taught women the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity. And, how they made women feel less than they were should they choose to live a life outside of these values—such as in pursuit of a career rather than a marriage. Simultaneously, Welter explained how the literature of the early nineteenth century impressed upon women the value of bowing to the four pillars. For example, Welter wrote,

Nursing the sick, particularly sick males, not only made a woman feel useful and accomplished, but increased her influence. In a piece of heavy-handed humor in Godey’s a man confessed that some women were only happy when their husbands ailing that they might have the joy of nursing him to recovery ‘thus gratifying their medical vanity and their love of power by making him more dependent upon them.’ In a similar vein a husband sometimes suspected his wife ‘‘almost wishes me dead—for the pleasure of being utterly inconsolable.’ In the home women were not only the highest adornment of civilization, but they were supposed to keep busy at morally uplifting tasks. Fortunately most of housework, if looked at in true womanly fashion, could be regarded as uplifting.20

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20. Ibid.
One of Welter’s greatest contributions was her discussion, albeit subtle, of the impact of The Cult of Domesticity on women in a time of social and economic influx in American. One example is the following:

In the nineteenth century, any form of social change was tantamount to an attack on woman’s virtue, if only it was correctly understood. For example, dress reform seemed innocuous enough and the bloomers worn by the lady of that name and her followers were certainly modest attire. Such was the reasoning of only the ignorant. In an issue of The Ladies’ Wreath a young lady is represented in dialogue with her ‘Professor.’ The girl expresses admiration for the bloomer costume - it gives freedom of motion, is healthful, and attractive. The Professor sets her straight. Trousers, he explains, are ‘only one of the many manifestations of that wild spirit of socialism and agrarian radicalism which is at present so rife in our land.’ The young lady recants immediately: ‘If this dress has any connection with Fourierism or Socialism or fanaticism in any shape whatever, I have no disposition to wear it at all…no true woman would so far compromise her delicacy as to espouse, however unwittingly, such a cause.’

Welter ends her essay much like Beecher with the mention of feminism moving into the Cult of Domesticity’s realm. Although, as Welter noted, Domesticity based literature made attempts to save themselves by demonstrating that women’s virtue could be balanced with power while still living within the ideals of Domesticity, the first wave of feminism was beginning to be the end of the hold the Cult of Domesticity had on women;

But even while the women’s magazines and related literature encouraged this ideal of the perfect woman, forces were at work in the nineteenth century which impelled woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society. The movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, the Civil War—all called forth responses from woman which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree. The very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For, if woman were so very little

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things.\textsuperscript{23}

In what might have been a twist of fate and the epitome of irony, Beecher herself might have created the leading feminist of her time in Angelina Grimke who wrote a series of letters to and in response to Beecher’s \textit{An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with reference to the Duty of American Females}. Grimke wrote;

\begin{quote}
Measure her rights and duties by the unerring standard of moral being… and then the truth will be self-evident, that whatever it is morally right for a man to do, it is morally right for a woman to do. I recognize no rights but human rights – I know nothing of men’s rights and women’s rights; for in Christ Jesus, there is neither male nor female. It is my solemn conviction, that, until this principle of equality is recognized and embodied in practice, the Church can do nothing effectual for the permanent reformation of the world. I believe it is the woman’s right to have a voice in all the laws and regulations by which she is to be governed, whether in Church or State: and that the present arrangements of society, on these points, are a violation of human rights, a rank usurpation of power, a violent seizure and confiscation of what is sacredly and inalienably hers.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Grimke’s response to Beecher’s Essays- sparked the first wave feminist movement. Laura F. Edwards also discussed how domesticity resulted in the ironic twist that ended in women’s suffrage. She wrote,

\begin{quote}
Domesticity thus launched white middle-class women into politics and public life. Eventually, domesticity also led many into woman suffrage. Frustrated with their inability to effect social change indirectly and insulted at their exclusion from formal politics, they demanded inner access. Here again, white women reformers couched their demands in the language of domesticity. ‘We are told that the first duty of woman is as mother, and the highest sphere of woman is in the home…and it is that which places upon woman the obligation to enter into the life
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
23. Ibid.
\end{flushright}
of her community, and nation, and help to make them a fit home for her children and her family. It is the right woman to use not only the power of persuasion, but the power of the ballot, to protect herself and her children.\textsuperscript{25}

While that notion was likely a legitimate one, early women’s rights activists during the first wave of feminism in the early nineteenth century made a mistake that was repeated in the twentieth century by activists during the second wave feminist movement- they spoke for \textit{all} women and occasionally experienced a backlash from those that still wished to practice the ideals of domesticity and others that wanted not to categorize themselves in either camp.

\textbf{Second wave of the Cult of Domesticity:}

After the 19\textsuperscript{th} amendment passed on the tails of World War I, feminist activism settled down for some time. Women who had chosen lives outside their homes had the freedom to pursue careers. Although there were ups and downs in terms of women’s rights, and women continued to be viewed as less than their male counterparts, women continued to live in a balance between domesticity and outside the home.

However, following World War II, there was a resurgence of the Cult of Domesticity ideals. Elaine Tyler May gave an insightful description of this renewed value on domesticity. She wrote,

\begin{quote}
In the early years of the cold war, amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure, private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world. The message was ambivalent, however, for the family also seemed particularly vulnerable. It needed heavy protection against the intrusions of forces outside itself. The self-contained home held out the promise of security in an insecure world. It also offered a vision of abundance and fulfillment. As the cold war began, young postwar Americans were homeward bound. Demographic indicators show that in this period,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{25} Laura F. Edwards. \textit{Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore}, 184.
Americans were more eager than ever to establish families...the marriage rate went up, divorce rate down and birthrates soared in the baby boom...Scholars frequently point to the family boom as the inevitable result of a return to peace and prosperity...The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that postwar American society experiences a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men.26

Andrew Meyers elaborated on Tyler May’s discussion of the resurgence of the Cult of Domesticity. He said, “Elaine Tyler May... argues that the reinvention of domesticity was, at least in part, a response to Cold War anxieties over the spread of subversive communism and the power of the atomic bomb,”27 citing the following:

Professionals attempted to promote a vision of the family that would contain the social, sexual, and political dangers of the day and would root the revitalized home in time-honored traditional values. Although conditions had irreversibly changed, Americans refused to abandon the values of the past. So they contained the new realities within the boundaries of old structures. . . . For policymakers concerned with domestic as well as diplomatic issues, containment was the order of the day. Subversives at home, Russian aggressors abroad, atomic energy, sexuality, the bomb, and the "bombshell" all had to be "harnessed for peace."28

Tyler May also discussed the reaction of the baby boomers that ironically led to the second wave feminist movement which went in opposition to their parents renewed sense of domesticity and focus on family life.29 Andrews gave additional insight here as well,

Several interpretations of women's experience in the 1950s and the rebirth of feminism in the postwar period have emerged that add nuance to the conventional assessment of domesticity and discontent in the 1950s. Betty Friedan and the feminist movement she helped to create have undergone particularly intensive

28. May, Elaine Tyler, (112-13).
29. Ibid.
scrutiny. Both Sara Evans, in *Personal Politics*, and bell hooks, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, look at the ways in which mainstream feminism was constrained by assumptions grounded in the white, middle-class culture addressed in *The Feminine Mystique*.  

**Historiography of the Cult of Domesticity:**

The following will attempt to explain how historians have developed, refined, and changed their approach to the topic of the Cult of Domesticity over time. Betty Friedan herself, her work and those that wrote about each of those aspects deserves an in-depth discussion to help identify this historiography.

To better understand Betty Friedan’s efforts in *The Feminine Mystique*, one might look to her inspiration, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir’s socialist feminism came some time before Friedan in French but was soon after translated into English. In fact, Friedan gave credit to *The Second Sex* as her source of inspiration in the form of the book’s dedication to Simone de Beauvoir.  

*The Second Sex* has been noted as the more powerful of the two books, citing Friedan’s political power as the reason her book is most notoriously tied to the feminist movement in the United States. Charles Lemert, Harvard graduate and social theorist and sociologist delved into the relationship between Friedan and Beauvoir in his essay, “Slow Thoughts for Fast Times: Betty Friedan & Simone de Beauvoir.” He wrote,

Friedan and Beauvoir will forever be linked in the collective memory of those days. They were, though very different kinds of public intellectuals, points of

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reckoning for a rethinking of woman's position in the scheme of social and cultural things. Second Sex was, by far, the more complete philosophical critique. Against it, Feminine Mystique will always appear the more dated and flimsy. Still, Simone de Beauvoir, when asked many years later about the role of her book in the subsequent feminist movement, said without a hint of false modesty that she thought it had no influence whatsoever. Friedan, by contrast, may not have written the more enduring book, but her political force would linger as a clear and certain factor in feminist politics in the United States. In this respect, Friedan was the public intellectual more in keeping with political troubles that predominate in our time.\footnote{Ibid.}

Even while Beauvoir inspired Friedan, the two women were very different and each wrote from not only geographically different locations (Beauvoir from France and Friedan from the United States), but from very different political and visionary placements as well. Nikolai Brown discussed Friedan and Beauvoir’s conflicting ideas on women’s empowerment stating,

The seminal works of both Friedan (The Feminine Mystique, 1963) and de Beauvoir (The Second Sex, 1949) relate to women’s empowerment but in different manners and contexts. Betty Friedan refers solely to a subject of a specific social background: predominantly white middle-class women in the United States. From this perspective, empowerment is sought in a narrow context, at the expense of wider struggles against oppression and at the expense of oppressed peoples generally. On the other hand, while Simone de Beauvoir uses the French woman as a focal point for her work, the ideas in The Second Sex are broad and transcend single identities and social contexts. Through her existentialism, a wider philosophy she subscribed to, herself being one of its more radical proponents, de Beauvoir constructs a notion regarding gender that is relatable and at times analogous to wider forms of prevalent social inequality and oppression.

For feminists such as Friedan, empowerment for women has meant securing a portion of the female sex as more equal members of the group of immanent exploiters: to get white, middle-class women out of their kitchens and homes and ultimately onto a more equal position to that of their male counterparts. With its limited goals, narrow ideals, and neglect of outstanding oppression, Friedan and the feminism she espoused is marked both by its acquiescence to larger systems of oppression and its quiet yearning for equal membership in the club of oppressors.

Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas occupy a different set of feminist ideas: specifically those implicitly related to the larger systemic oppressions which are ignored in Friedan’s work. In The Second Sex, though she is dealing with gender
specifically, she frequently refers to larger ideas regarding agency and power. For Beauvoir, immanence describes a state under which one’s power and agency is severely limited and expressed in petty, often symbolic ways. Transcendence describes its opposite: the result of empowerment and the state of autonomy. The notions employed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* amount to much more than these two ideas, yet this is the basic framework through which she interprets human behavior and relationships.

For de Beauvoir, the goal is not empowerment for females as part of a dominating group in society, but the expansion of positive agency, i.e. transcendence, for the sex most routinely and thoroughly stripped of it. In this regard, whereas Friedan is individualist and reformist, de Beauvoir is socialistic and politically radical.33

Brown certainly was not the first to note Friedan’s focus on middle-class white women and exclusion of women in other classes and races during the 1950’s renewed cult of domesticity. In fact, much of the controversy surrounding Freidan is based specifically on that fact. Friedan herself, as well as her work, was criticized by a number of historians and other writers including; Daniel Horowitz in *Betty Friedan and the Making of "The Feminine Mystique": The American Left.*, Judith Hennessee’s *Betty Friedan: Her Life*. Joanne Meyerowitz, *Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958*, Rebecca Jo Plant’s *The Transformation of Motherhood In Modern America*, Rachel Bowlby’s *"The Problem with No Name: Rereading Friedan's The Feminine Mystique* 1987, Eva Moskowitz’s *It's good to blow your top’: Women's magazines and a discourse of discontent*, 1996, Joanne Meyerowitz’s *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, 1994, Rosemarie Tong’s *Feminist Thought*, 1998, Sara Evans, *Personal Politics*, 1979 and perhaps most famously, bell hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2000.

Bell hooks was a leading figure in establishing ‘third-wave feminism’: a philosophical and practical branch of feminism centered around the history, experience, and interests of ‘women of color.’ Her writings are directly critical of previous feminist movements which favored white middle-class women, and she is generally critical of the standard feminist framework while finding cause in altering the scope of its discourse. Her central thesis in Feminist Theory, from Margin to Center is that the objective of feminism is not simply for equality between sexes but for an end to sexist oppression and the broader “ideology of domination” which supports it. In the process, she gets many things right in regards to the struggle against oppression while bringing a lot of detail and nuance into the discussion. In some regards, her critiques of feminism are applicable to nominally left-wing movements in the US today. Yet her explicit understandings of larger economic questions are lacking. Though she raises many salient points, these ideas are best understood as part of a broader yet more incisive critique of general social practice and relations between classes and groups.34

According Bell hooks’ Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center the issue with Friedan’s Feminie Mystique was that;

"the problem that has no name," often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life. . . . She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a baby-sitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife. . . . Friedan was a principal shaper of contemporary feminist thought. Significantly, the one-dimensional perspective on women’s reality presented in her book became a marked feature of the contemporary feminist movement.35


Daniel Horowitz wrote about Betty Friedan at length using Friedan’s own writing as reference, including much that had never been published. In Horowitz’s *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War, and Modern Feminism* readers are introduced to a full-spectrum Betty Friedan including her earliest years of childhood through the second-wave feminist movement.

Horowitz also put into context *The Feminine Mystique* as far as its political repercussions and where Friedan fall in the midst of it all. Horowitz exposed a very different Friedan than she herself portrayed. This is important to understand given the impact that Freidan had on the historiography of the Cult of Domesticity and women’s rights.

In 1951, a labor journalist with a decade's experience in left-wing movements described a trade union meeting where rank-and-file women talked and men listened. Out of these conversations, she reported, emerged the realization that the women were "fighters- that they refuse any longer to be paid or treated as some inferior species by their bosses, or by any male workers who have swallowed the bosses' thinking." The union was the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, commonly known as the UE and one of the most radical American unions in the postwar period. In 1952, that same journalist wrote a pamphlet, UE Fights for Women Workers, which in 1993 the historian Lisa Kannenberg, then unaware of the identity of its author, called "a remarkable manual for fighting wage discrimination that is, ironically, as relevant today as it was in 1952." At the time, the pamphlet helped raise the consciousness of Eleanor Flexner, who in 1959 would publish Century of Struggle, the first scholarly history of American women. In 1953-54 Flexner relied on the pamphlet when she taught a course at the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York on "The Woman Question." Flexner's participation in courses at the school, she later wrote, "marked the beginning of my real involvement in the issues of women's rights, my realization that leftist organizations parties, unions-were also riddled with male supremacist prejudice and discrimination." The labor journalist and pamphlet writer was Betty Friedan.

Yet in 1973 Friedan remarked that until she started writing *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) "I wasn't even conscious of the woman problem." In 1976 she commented that in the early 1950s she was "still in the embrace of the feminine mystique." Although at one point in the 1970s she alluded, in often vague terms, to a more radical past, even then she left the impression that her landmark book
emerged principally from her own captivity by the very forces it described. When she entered the limelight, Friedan was careful about her autobiographical revelations and how she connected her past to her present. Her claim that she came to political consciousness out of a disillusionment with her life as a suburban housewife was part of her reinvention of herself as she wrote and promoted The Feminine Mystique. When I use the term reinvention I refer to the process, which all of us carry out to a greater or lesser extent, of developing a series of narratives of our lives that are, in turn, shaped by how events and memory influence us.

Friedan's version of her life, which historians and journalists readily accepted, hid from view the connection between her union activity of the 1940s and early 1950s and the feminism she articulated in the 1960s. Her story made it possible for white suburban women readers to identify with its author and thereby enhanced the book's appeal. The narrative she offered also reflected shifts in Friedan's political commitments that involved some repudiation of her radical past. Friedan's knowledge of the dangers of McCarthyism of the 1950s prompted her to minimize her work as a labor journalist. In the short term, her misery in the suburbs may have prompted her to write The Feminine Mystique; a longer-term perspective makes clear that the book's origins go back much farther-to her youth in Peoria, her education at Smith College, and her experiences with labor unions in the 1940s and early 1950s. Although in the end it might be possible to reconcile Friedan's and my version of her life, in important ways they diverge. An exploration of her experiences as a young radical and activist are crucial to understanding Friedan's life and the history of modern feminism.36

In terms of Betty Friedan’s overall place in historiography, Horowitz too provided an in-depth understanding of Friedan along with placing her work into context. He wrote,

As much as any book written in the middle of the twentieth century, The Feminine Mystique helped transform the course of America’s political and social history. Historians view its publication as marking the beginning of the modern women’s movement. Despite an initial printing of only three thousand copies, it eventually sold millions and millions. Though the women’s liberation movement doubtlessly would have merged without the book, The Feminine Mystique nonetheless defined the perspective of a generation of white middle-class women with its argument that what trapped them was sexual passivity, limited career ambitions, and identify crises. By raising the consciousness of legions of women,

Friedan helped lay the groundwork for their participation in the feminist movement that emerged with increasing force in the late 1960s.\textsuperscript{37}

Horowitz further elaborated on Friedan’s work and overall contribution to the feminist movement from a historiographical perspective as well as suggested that women’s historians were wrong about the history of women’s history. He also discussed how Friedan herself was not merely the “desperate housewife” she made herself out to be in *The Feminine Mystique*. He wrote,

I found papers Friedan had written in an undergraduate course on socialism and workers, an FBI report concerning her alleged activity in the early 1940s, scores of articles in the labor press in the 1940s and 1950s signed by Betty Goldstein (Friedan’s maiden name) and evidence of Friedan’s participation in a rent strike in the early 1950s. The significance of what I discovered gradually dawned on me. Though most women’s historians have argued that 1960s feminism emerged in response to the suburban captivity of white middle-class women during the 1950s, the material in Friedan’s papers suggested additional origins- antifascism, radicalism, and labor union activism of the 1940s.\textsuperscript{38}

Horowitz later describes Friedan as a Marxist and highlighted her relationship with Freud, psychology, communism, anticommunism, feminism, and perhaps also antifeminism.

The Feminine Mystique played a critical role in reshaping the ideology and social composition of the American left. Along with other others, such as Herbert Marcuse, Friedan was exploring how to ground a cultural and social critique by rethinking the contributions of Freud and Marx. What Marcuse did in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955), Friedan did almost a decade later: respond to the cold war by attempting to minimize her debt to Marx even as she relied on him. For her solutions, if not her analysis, she relied on psychology. In the process, she recovered the lessons of the discipline in which she majored at college, joining others such as Paul Goodman, [David Riesman, Margaret Mead, Erik Erikson, and Erich Fromm in using humanistic psychology and neo-Freudianism to ground a powerful cultural critique at a time when other formulations were politically discredited. In her 1963 book, Friedan was reshaping American social criticism by focusing not on the working class and the processes of US History Since 1945! The Fieldston School Andrew Meyers

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\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
production but on the way changes in consumer culture were reshaping the lives of the middle class.

This revision of Friedan's past sheds light on the history of women and second-wave feminism by enriching our sense of the origins of what happened in the 1960s. It offers vivid proof of the intertwined processes of containment and resistance of women in the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, it suggests that we think of Friedan, at some crucial points in her life, as a "left feminist" and a crucial link between generations of advocates for women's advancement. American feminism, most historians agree, emerged in the 1960s from two sources: white, professional, and well educated liberals, including Friedan and a few acknowledged union activists, who relied on a Washington-based approach as they called for national legislation; and a diverse group of women, shaped by the civil rights movement, who worked from the grass roots to shape a more adversarial insurgency. However, if Rosa Parks refused to take a seat at the back of a segregated bus not simply because her feet hurt, then Friedan did not write The Feminine Mystique simply because she was an unhappy housewife. Nor Friedan alone. Gerda Lerner, Bella Abzug, Eleanor Flexner, and Milton Meltzer are among those active in the labor movement in the 1940s who would emerge in the 1960s as people who helped shape post-1963 feminism. Once we recover the stories of their counterparts among middle-class activists across the nation (perhaps, like those discussed above, predominantly Jews) and among working-class and African American women, the importance of the 1940s in the history of American feminism will be clearer.  

Linda Gerner was also quite in tune with Betty Friedan’s work and how it was a part of the overall historiography of the feminist movement, but not without criticism. She also was in agreement with Horowitz’s observation that while Friedman was correct about the feminine mystique, her timing was off. Lerner argued that Fridman’s “feminine mystique” of the 1950s and 190s was not a new problem. Rather, according to Lerner, it was one that “developed in the antebellum era of industrialization not updated by consumerism and the misunderstood dicta of Freuedian psychology.”

39. Ibid.
Lerner felt that “Friedan ignored the need for institutional solutions to the problems of women and ignored how working women, especially Negro women suffered from the more pressing disadvantages of economic discrimination.” Lerner, like many of Friedan’s critics claimed that Friedan completely missed the mark when she focused solely on white middle class women.

While Friedan received the most criticism on for whom she felt was oppressed, not everyone believed that Friedan’s “problem without a name” was a problem at all. In fact, long before Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, for Mary Ritter Bead, the entire issue of women’s oppression was nothing more than a myth. Jean Baker explained,

While both Friedan and Beauvoir adopted the oppression model of women in history, Mary Ritter Beard thought differently. In 1946 she published *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (Macmillan; out of print). In this powerful reconstruction of the history of women from prehistoric to modern times, Beard argued that women, especially through equity law, were active agents of their own lives. For Beard female oppression was a myth, but it was an enduringly destructive one that needed revising as women instead discovered their accomplishments through the study of history.

Filling in the Gaps in the Historiography of Domesticity:

As many of Friedan’s critics have pointed out, there has been a consistent lack of focus of the historiography of domesticity and women’s studies outside of the context of white middle-class women. Future work in this area might help give us an understanding of whether or not all women felt oppressed or desired to be homemakers.

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41. Ibid.
Both Friedan and Beaufort wrote about women’s oppression from a Marxist point of view. Welter followed suit when she modeled her discussion of the Cult of Domesticity before the first-wave feminine movement after Friedan. Further, it would be interesting to see additional historiography of the subject written by men and or those who aren’t identified as feminists. Now that there has been some separation between the radical feminist movements of the 1960s and a number of years have passed, further discussion might uncover less biased, more separated schools of thought on the topic.

III. Conclusion.

One of the most interesting facets of the overall historiography of the Cult of Domesticity and women’s history is the various chunks of unilateral information. Because women’s history is relatively new, and because the majority of that history was written during the peak of the second-wave feminist movement, there is little history to be found without a significant magnitude of bias.

Women’s history was often written by women fueled by their desire to see women’s history become equal to men’s, to give women a voice. Simultaneously, those women wanting to give women that voice were the biggest proponents of gender equality.

Additionally, while women’s history has come quite far it tends to be biased in the ways that Bell hooks pointed out and with the exception of few historians like her- there is still a strong tendency to discuss the historiography of the Cult of Domesticity only in terms of middle-class white women.
The topic of the Cult of Domesticity is far from one that exists only in the past. Now, in the 21st Century, there has been a new wave of women advocating for a return to their domestic roots and to preserve almost extinct domestic customs from the pre-feminist era such as canning, and cooking and child-rearing. As both men and women start to embrace a culture where busy is not cool and begin to look back at the rise in technology that has overtaken simple living and society moves toward a more self-sufficient lifestyle.

Just last year, Emily Matchar introduced her new book, *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity*. The book’s description quickly implies that we are looking at an upcoming third-wave of the Cult of Domesticity.

Amid today’s rising anxieties—the economy, the scary state of the environment, the growing sense that the American Dream hasn’t turned out to be so dreamy after all—a groundswell of women (and more than a few men) are choosing to embrace an unusual rebellion: domesticity. A generation of smart, highly educated young people are spending their time knitting, canning jam, baking cupcakes, gardening, and more (and blogging about it, of course), embracing the labor-intensive domestic tasks their mothers and grandmothers eagerly shrugged off. Some are even turning away from traditional careers and corporate culture for slower, more home-centric lifestyles that involve “urban homesteading,” homeschooling their kids, or starting Etsy businesses. They’re questioning whether regular jobs are truly fulfilling and whether it’s okay to turn away from the ambitions of their parents’ generation.43

Is Machar the new Catharine Beecher? Will she become a part of the historiography of the Cult of Domesticity in the future, discussed among Welter and Friedan? Only time will tell. As women continue to compete with one another in social media and on domestic goddess showcasing social sites such as Pinterest, will the “problem without a name” cease to be a problem at all? As working women struggle to balance careers with families and economic

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troubles are eased by self-sustaining homesteads, what does the future hold? Were the voices crying out against Friedan hushed by those that cried out for equality?

Over the course of this paper one common theme has emerged, that is the cycles of domesticity versus feminism. From 18th century expected domesticity to 19th century women’s rights movements, followed by a second wave of domesticity and then second wave feminism through to today with near equal rights for women and those that are opting not to exercise them.

In this changing cycle, who remains oppressed? If history is any indication, Machar just may be on to something. But, if the point of history is to learn from the truths of our pasts so as to not repeat the same mistakes, then perhaps a new phase will emerge to break the cycle. A phase in which no woman is oppressed and each are entitled to live the life that works for them without political backlash or animosity from their peers. Perhaps the United States has progressed enough to where this phase will be one simply built on each of us having the freedom to live out our lives as we please regardless of our gender, race, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation.

If we should learn anything from the historiography of the cult of domesticity and gender studies, isn’t it that there shouldn’t be this back and forth fight between what women as a group should do or be- that each and every woman now has the right to choose on an individual basis?
Bibliography


