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Betty Friedan(1921-2006) is hailed by historians as a seminal figure in the "Second Wave" of the women's feminist movement. In 1957, Friedan wrote a questionaire for her former classmates at a reunion at the all-female, Smith College. The results revealed that many women shared the same frustrations as her in their roles as housewives and mothers. Friedan's findings provided a clear-eyed analysis of the issues that affected women's lives in the decades after the Second World War, and became the basis for her book, *The Feminine Mystique*. A sensation on publication selling over 3 million copies, it established Friedan as one of the chief architects of the women's liberation movement.A novelist and journalist, Lionel Shriverwas born in North Carolina and educated at Columbia University in New York. Her eight published novels include New York Timesbestseller *ThePost-Birthday World*and international bestseller *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, for which she won the Orange Prize in 2005. Her ninth novel *So Much for That*will be published in 2010. She writes regularly for the *Guardian*,the *Times*,and *The Daily Telegraph*, and has published features, reviews, and columns in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Economist*, among many other publications. She lives in London. Read Online (Free) relies on page scans, which are not currently available to screen readers. To access this article, please contact JSTOR User Support. We'll provide a PDF copy for your screen reader. With a personal account, you can read up to 100 articles each month for free. Get Started Already have an account? 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For terms and use, please refer to our Terms and Conditions Copyright 2015 Frontiers Editorial Collective, Inc. Request Permissions There are several grains of salt that deserve consideration in any discussion of the 50-year-old book's legacy.Feminist theorist bell hooks took Betty Friedan's book to task for its racial exclusion. (bell hooks)Betty Friedan is my favorite feminist. When I read Friedan's seminal 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique* at age 16, it changed my life—for the first time, I understood that feminism could be practical, could be noble, and had radically changed the world I lived in for the better.So, like many Friedan fans, I would love to spend this 50th anniversary of *The Feminine Mystique* just binge-reading my way through all the reverent commemoration—breezing in blissful denial over every retrospective's obligatory "caveat" paragraph designed to remind readers that, well, yes, it did (supposedly) have its flaws.But the truth is that in the years since its publication, other theorists and scholars, feminist and otherwise, have presented grave complications to the legacy of *The Feminine Mystique*, with regard to its scope, its inspirations, and its messages to women—complications that deserve much more than one quick, painless paragraph's worth of consideration.Like any beloved, much-studied text, secular or sacred, *The Feminine Mystique* deserves to be read critically in order to be understood fully. So, lest we get too rosy remembering the achievements of *The Feminine Mystique*, let's review in further detail some of those bubble-bursting, parade-raining criticisms. According to the aforementioned thinkers and philosophers, Betty Friedan's 1963 book is a courageous text with a noble goal, but...It's racist. And it's classist.In 1984, black feminist theorist bell hooks introduced her own book, *From Margin to Center*, with a searing indictment of *The Feminine Mystique*: Though Friedan's book had spawned what came to be known as the second-wave feminist movement, it focused on what wasn't a universal female problem but rather a problem endured only by white, upper- and middle-class mothers and wives. According to hooks, Friedan had written myopically, as though women of other races and classes—those who, she argued, were most victimized by sexist oppression—simply didn't exist.hooks was by no means the first to have a problem with Friedan's white-girl-problems worldview. But her delivery of this particular criticism ranks among the most withering. (Emphasis is my own, throughout.)Friedan's famous phrase, "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. Friedan concludes her first chapter by stating, "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my house.'" That "more" she defined as careers. She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife. ... When Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, more than one-third of all women were in the work force. Although many women longed to be housewives, only women with leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique. ... From her early writing, it appears that 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. Nor did she move beyond her own life experience to acquire an expanded perspective on the lives of women in the United States. I say this not to discredit her work. It remains a useful discussion of the impact of sexist discrimination on a select group of women. Examined from a different perspective, it can also be seen as a case study of narcissism, insensitivity, sentimentality, and self-indulgence, which reaches its peak when Friedan, in a chapter titled "Progressive Dehumanization," makes a comparison between the psychological effects of isolation on white housewives and the impact of confinement on the self-concept of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. It's founded on a lie.Daniel Horowitz further complicated the book's legacy with his 1998 book *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique*. In it, he exposed a startling, weirdly little-known truth about its author: She wasn't who she said she was.In 1963 and the years afterward, Friedan had claimed that she "came to political consciousness out of a disillusionment with her life as a suburban housewife," and in so doing, she promoted *The Feminine Mystique* by marketing its authenticity. But Betty Friedan was not a simple housewife driven to action by her own feelings of domestic captivity. Rather, she was a seasoned radical with years of experience in leftist politics.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.Horowitz's book revealed that Friedan, then known as Betty Goldstein, had become involved with radical leftist activism during her years at Smith College from 1938 to 1942. At Smith, she was editor of a college campus paper that argued for non-intervention in WWII and unionization of the maids on campus.From 1946 to 1952, she wrote for the *Federated Press*, America's foremost leftist news service at the time, and for six years (1946 to 1952) she wrote for *UE News*, the news periodical of the radical-aligned United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America union. There, she wrote pamphlets calling for equal pay and an end to discrimination. According to Horowitz,She emphasized how discriminatory practices corporations used against women hurt men as well by exerting downward pressure on wages of all workers. ... Friedan set forth a program that was, [historian Lisa] Kannenberg has noted, "a prescription for a gender-blind workplace."Somewhat ironically, given the criticism she received from bell hooks and others,She highlighted the "even more shocking" situation African-American women faced, having to deal with the "double bars" of being female and African American.So even though, as Horowitz puts it, "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—anti-fascism, radicalism and labor union activism of the 1940s."And while Friedan did have a big house, a breadwinning husband, and three children, she was never anybody's typical, cooped-up suburban housewife. She enjoyed a successful side career as a freelance journalist, and often traveled for her reporting.It's founded on a lot of lies.Several of Betty Friedan's fundamental arguments in *The Feminine Mystique* are based on source materials by Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and Bruno Bettelheim—three thinkers whose most famous conclusions have since come under serious critical questioning. As Alan Wolfe wrote in *The Atlantic* in 1999, that fact raises "the uncomfortable question of whether a book can arrive at the larger truths if the bricks on which it is built won't stand up to time."For instance: Friedan drew on Mead's early findings from her anthropological studies in Samoa to argue that sexuality was shaped by culture, rather than nature, and that guilt over promiscuity was a social construct. Unfortunately for Friedan, Mead was later discovered to have been hoaxed by her Samoan research subjects. According to Wolfe,In *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research* (1999), [Mead's critic Derek] Freeman shows in detail how Mead's most important informant, a young product of a culture that placed great emphasis on female virginity before marriage, was so embarrassed by Mead's probing that she responded in typical Samoan fashion by jokingly telling Mead the opposite of the truth.Then there was Alfred Kinsey, a sexuality scholar whose 1950s studies suggested there were surprisingly large numbers of gay men in America, and "found homosexuality most common among men who do not go beyond high school, and least common among college graduates." Friedan, who was deeply mistrustful of homosexuality (more on that later), used this as evidence that the "murky smog" of homosexuality was spreading across America. But Kinsey's biographer James H. Jones revealed big problems with his research methods. According to Wolfe, the methods would be considered unscientific today: Kinsey's interview subjects weren't from random sample groups but rather were men he'd found in prisons and bars, and for that reason, his theses on the nature of sexuality should never have been viewed as representative of all humans.And Friedan also cited psychologist Bruno Bettelheim's writings about his experience in Nazi concentration camps in her chapter "Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp." Friedan was clear that women in the U.S. had it much better than the Nazi prisoners of the Holocaust, but as Wolfe put it,Friedan could not give up the analogy. Like Bettelheim's fellow inmates in Dachau and Buchenwald, suburban women had "learned to adjust" to their biological role, " had "become dependent, passive, childlike," had "given up their adult freedom of reference to life at the lower human level of food and things." Maybe the world so chillingly brought to life by Bettelheim was not so different from suburbia after all.But there were big problems with basing these comparisons on Bettelheim's writings. As Wolfe discovered by reading biographies of Bettelheim, there were reasons to question the veracity of his accounts. He had a history of fabrication, starting with the academic credentials that qualified him for his first teaching job, and even plagiarism (allegedly). And even more problematically,Bettelheim's authority as an expert in the psychology of extreme situations was derived from his accounts of his experiences at Dachau and Buchenwald. Were those accounts also fabricated? At the edges they certainly were. ... In particular, Bettelheim's portrayal of his fellow inmates as childlike has been challenged, especially by those who insist—with considerable justice—that it was the Nazis, not the Jews, who were their worst enemies. ... (As [biographer Richard] Pollak points out, the story actually originated with Eugen Kogon, and was retold by Bettelheim.)As Wolfe ultimately concludes, "The *Feminine Mystique* spoke truthfully enough to inspire many women both at the time and since. Yet in the longer run the faults of the book loom large. If the pursuit of a good cause is accompanied by too much bad testimony, the social critic will eventually lose the trust of the very readers she wants to influence."It's homophobic.In her 1992 book *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis*, cultural-studies scholar Rachel Bowly gives eloquent voice to the concern that Friedan's book is not just heteronormative but at times even downright homophobic.Friedan sees "frightening implications for the future of our nation in the parasitical softening that is being passed on to the new generation of children." Specifically, she identifies "a recent increase in the overt manifestations of male homosexuality," and comments: I do not think this is unrelated to the national embrace of the feminine mystique. For the feminine mystique has glorified and perpetuated the name of femininity and passivity, childlike immaturity which is passed on from mother to son, as well as to daughters. A little further on, this becomes "the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky smog over the American scene." ... Male homosexuality as the end-point of the feminine mystique is not just artificial, a regrettable but accidental distortion of the reality it overlays: it is a sinister source of cultural contamination. This "murky smog" is the final smut, the last "dirty word" in the story of the mystique: that clean, feminine exterior is now found to hide a particularly nasty can of worms. Marketing and the mystique are together leading to 'bearded undisciplined beatnikery' and a 'deterioration of the human character.'Friedan even went on to coin the phrase "Lavender Menace" in the late 1960s in reference to the threat that lesbian feminists supposedly posed to NOW and to the feminist movement as a whole.But in 1977, she acknowledged her error at a women's conference in Houston by pledging support for lesbian rights. According to Bhaskar A. Shuka's 2007 book *Feminism: From Mary Wollstonecraft to Betty Friedan*, "When Betty Friedan took the microphone to pledge her support for the lesbian rights motion, women cheered, some cried, and all around the venue, thousands of lavender balloons rose from the floor, drifting triumphantly towards the ceiling."

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