

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Betty Friedan. *Beyond Gender: The New Politics of Work and Family*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997. x + 120 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-943875-84-2.

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Published on H-Women (May, 1998)



Betty Friedan's *Beyond Gender* (with editor sociologist Brigid O'Farrell) sets out to explore the economic climate of the 1990s and commence a dialogue on possible cures for the high level of stress and often less-than-adequate wages in today's workplace. Working out of the insights of her previous works, including the *Feminine Mystique* and *The Fountain of Age*, Friedan searches for a "new paradigm," a new way to envision economic life. Although Friedan was a pivotal leader in 1960s "identity politics," she now asks her readers to search for a new understanding of all American groups rather than just those to which one belongs.[1] Only by working together, she suggests, can we overcome the present problems of employment. She explains, "What I sense is the need for a paradigm shift beyond feminism, beyond sexual politics, beyond identity politics altogether. A new paradigm for women and men" (p. 2).[2]

In the summer of 1994, Friedan relocated to Washington D.C. to begin to develop the New Paradigm Seminar Series through the Woodrow Wilson Center. Heidi Hartmann, economist and director of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, served as co-chair of the series. In the fall of 1995, Friedan launched a second seminar series, seeking to reframe the question of family values. *Beyond Gender* combines insights from participants in the seminars, Friedan's reflections on the issues and the workings of the seminar, newspaper clippings, and charts and tables related to the 1990s economy in a unique volume.

Friedan's motivation to launch the series and write the book stemmed from the harsh economic realities of the early 1990s. Moved by the Census Bureau finding that white, college-educated, male, middle-managers age

forty and over encountered a decline in compensation of twenty percent between 1986 and 1992, and sensing the "angry white male" backlash at this decline (a backlash aimed at women), Friedan wanted to build consensus across identity groups. Some rhetoric in the media blamed women for the men's sliding wages; women had entered the workplace in record numbers and had experienced a slow but steady rise in income. The majority of women's jobs fall in the service sector of the economy and thus do not contribute to the decline in men's corporate wages, but the forces behind the mid-1990s backlash did not heed this reality. Friedan concluded that men and women often made up the same families, so women needed to be cognizant of men's concerns, and vice-versa. She asks, "If women are winning, and men are losing now, how long can we really win?" (p. 13). Friedan steps back from her identity as a feminist and says, "There's been a false polarization between feminism and families" (p. 83).

*Beyond Gender* fails to deliver much in the way of statistical analysis, but does include some pieces of the lively debate fostered by the new paradigm seminar. The reasons for the less-than-vigorous economy of the time and the possible solutions are confronted in the text by some American leaders in economic thought. Employers, like the American Association of University Women, explain some of their successful shifts from the traditional five day work week. Commentators worry that without a lessening of the hours spent on the job, more and more Americans will find themselves without work. Those who remain in positions will be over-stressed by the added duties and time pressures. Yet other voices argue that part-time work cannot provide a solution for those who need full-time pay and benefits.

Friedan's argument that all Americans must work together to solve the troubles of the modern workplace are well taken. Any backlash against women for their entry into the workforce needs to be solidly rebuked. Similarly, Friedan's assertion that identity politics cannot provide the answers for our economic future rings true. Women's quests for economic equality are hampered by systems that do not tolerate creative solutions to the standard work schedule (telecommuting, job sharing, and a flexible work week among the possible solutions). These innovative approaches must be available for men as well as women, childcare and home responsibilities now being better understood as the province of both sexes. It remains to be seen if the present growing optimism regarding the American economy can be translated into some positive changes in the workplace.

*Beyond Gender* does not answer all the questions it sets out to address. If it had, of course, Friedan would have worked a miracle. While the reader would have liked to see some concrete solutions to modern day economic difficulties, substantive answers could not really be expected from the volume. Still, the way in which the book wanders between its various formats proves confusing and unfulfilling. The vitality of the commentary on the new paradigm seminar especially leads to questions regarding the overall concept of the book. Fuller

transcriptions of the seminar itself would have been very interesting. As it remains, the short passages of thought by the many noted commentators of the seminar give only a glimpse of the rich contributions of participants. Given the brevity of the book, we do not even see Friedan's full conception of the American economy. *Beyond Gender* is not an academic treatise, nor is it claiming to be. It opens a window of discussion on a timely and vital subject, but does not provide us the broad view of the current rhetoric that would have considerably furthered our discussions on the topic of the future of the American workplace.

#### Notes

[1]. Friedan utilizes insights from her works, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) and *The Fountain of Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

[2]. Friedan's call for a new paradigm was in part motivated by her reading of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

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**Citation:** Lisa Krissoff Boehm. Review of Friedan, Betty, *Beyond Gender: The New Politics of Work and Family*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

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