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Sylvie Murray. *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. viii + 252 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3718-4.

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Women, Activism, and the Model Citizen of the Suburbs

Sylvie Murray's book *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965* seeks a new approach to the study of middle-class, white women. Murray expects her book to be "part of the broader reexamination of the immediate post-World War II period currently under way in the historical profession and, one hopes, among a more general public," and she clearly places the work in the context of modern historiography (p. 5). The title is somewhat misleading, however, for the bulk of the research is not focused on the "housewife" over twenty years, but on white, middle-class civic and political participation in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Readers seeking a narrative about suburban housewives will be disappointed, but this book is useful in four ways: it gives a detailed community study of postwar Queens that includes intercity migration, real estate development, ethnicity, religion, and politics; it offers a carefully constructed illustration of postwar civic participation; it provides historiographical contrast/context to May, Swerdlow, and Meyerowitz; and it generates thoughtful questions about postwar scholarship. Like all scholarly work, it does have flaws, including awkward chronology, uneven treatment of race and racial issues, broad conclusions about the behavior of the general population, tackling too many themes, and the "suburban" characterization of Queens. *The Progressive Housewife* is not a book one would sit down and casually read, but it does take a fresh approach to white, middle-class women that will appeal to students of the era.

The book is presented in three parts, with the first section devoted to the development of the postwar Queens community, the second looking at political culture and consciousness, and the third focusing on gender and racial issues. Although the "study stems from a set of questions about women's public activism in the 1950s, and a conviction that it coexisted with postwar domestic ideology," Murray is more concerned with the public and political than the private and domestic (p. 2). Her central argument focuses on proving "the model of citizenship embraced by middle-class citizens, based on the assumption that one has a right to a residential community of quality and that both citizens and the state were obligated to the community's welfare" (p. 13). This argument seems to battle for supremacy with her additional themes, some of which are tantalizingly clever, but not deeply investigated. She has an ambitious agenda and as a result the three sections seem somewhat disjointed as she attempts to integrate political and gender analysis.

The first section is the strongest and most cohesive. Based on a thorough community study that utilizes local newspapers, magazines, organization records, census data, government documents, real estate developer reports, bank materials, and advertising, Murray illustrates the evolution of "suburban" Queens through the 1940s and 1950s. She does an excellent job of recreating the physical and social environment, and includes maps and statistical data that clarify the ideas. Murray cleverly utilizes Betty Friedan's own Queens neighborhood of the 1950s to refute the idea that being "family centered, homebound, and apolitical, 'most American women' had fallen victim to the postwar ideology of passive femininity" (p. 6).

While she refutes the stereotype of "most American women" quite well, she lets the clever insight into Friedan herself disappear. The depth of the community study offers a unique insight into the development of *The Feminine Mystique*, but Murray largely limits her investigation to two of Friedan's early articles, leaving the reader wanting more.

The next two sections offer a strong argument about the importance of civic participation in Queens' culture, but fail to convince the reader about the universal progressiveness of the Queens housewife. Murray carefully illustrates the ethnic, racial, religious, and political diversity of the area, and stresses that individuals devel-

oped personal ideologies within this framework. With that caveat, she largely bases the model middle-class citizen on the evidence found in community newspapers and the records of grassroots organizations. She establishes that the ideal of civic participation was of great importance to these sources, but does not fully link them to the community as a whole. She mentions throughout the text that the Jewish population of New York had a reputation for political activism, and then cites Jewish civic groups to support her model of good citizenship. The research clearly demonstrates that men and women of certain groups–journalists, civic organizations–prized the ideal of middle-class activism, but does not establish that individuals outside these groups enjoyed the same style of participation, nor that the majority of the Queens population was equally involved. Although not entirely convincing, the salient points involving the gender analysis of postwar political activism create some fresh questions for scholars.

Murray offers a compelling counterpoint to Elaine Tyler May, Amy Swerdlow, and Joanne Meyerowitz. Her research can be utilized in conjunction with these other authors to create a richer picture of postwar America. The women of Murray's study were politically active in a way that defies the white middle-class containment stressed by May. Meyerowitz is still the premier source for a multicultural portrait of postwar America; although *The Progressive Housewife* does include a picture of diversity, it focuses on United Nations employees and African-Americans without offering a robust analysis of either.

In particular, Murray offers a contrast to Swerdlow's monograph *Women Strike for Peace.* Murray contends that the activism of Queens housewives in the late 1940s and 1950s was most often gender neutral, and that "female community activists in Queens downplayed gender differences and their feminine identity, and privileged a communal form of group-identification when intervening on the public and political scene.

It was as home owners, tenants, taxpayers, parents, or community members, not primarily women, that they presented themselves" (p. 118). This conclusion opposes the vision of white, middle-class activism presented by Swerdlow. Looking at essentially the same demographic, Swerdlow's group actively promoted their status as mothers and women. Taken together, these books show an evolution of both postwar gender roles and modern historiography.

The Progressive Housewife is a carefully researched resource for those interested in white, middle-class activism. It offers a clear picture of gender and political participation in Queens and presents a cogent, thoughtful analysis of citizenship in the postwar era. Sylvie Murray has indeed written a book that can be placed within the "broader reexamination" of the era, and this book will appeal to those seeking a new perspective and approach to white middle class women in the 1940s and 1950s.

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