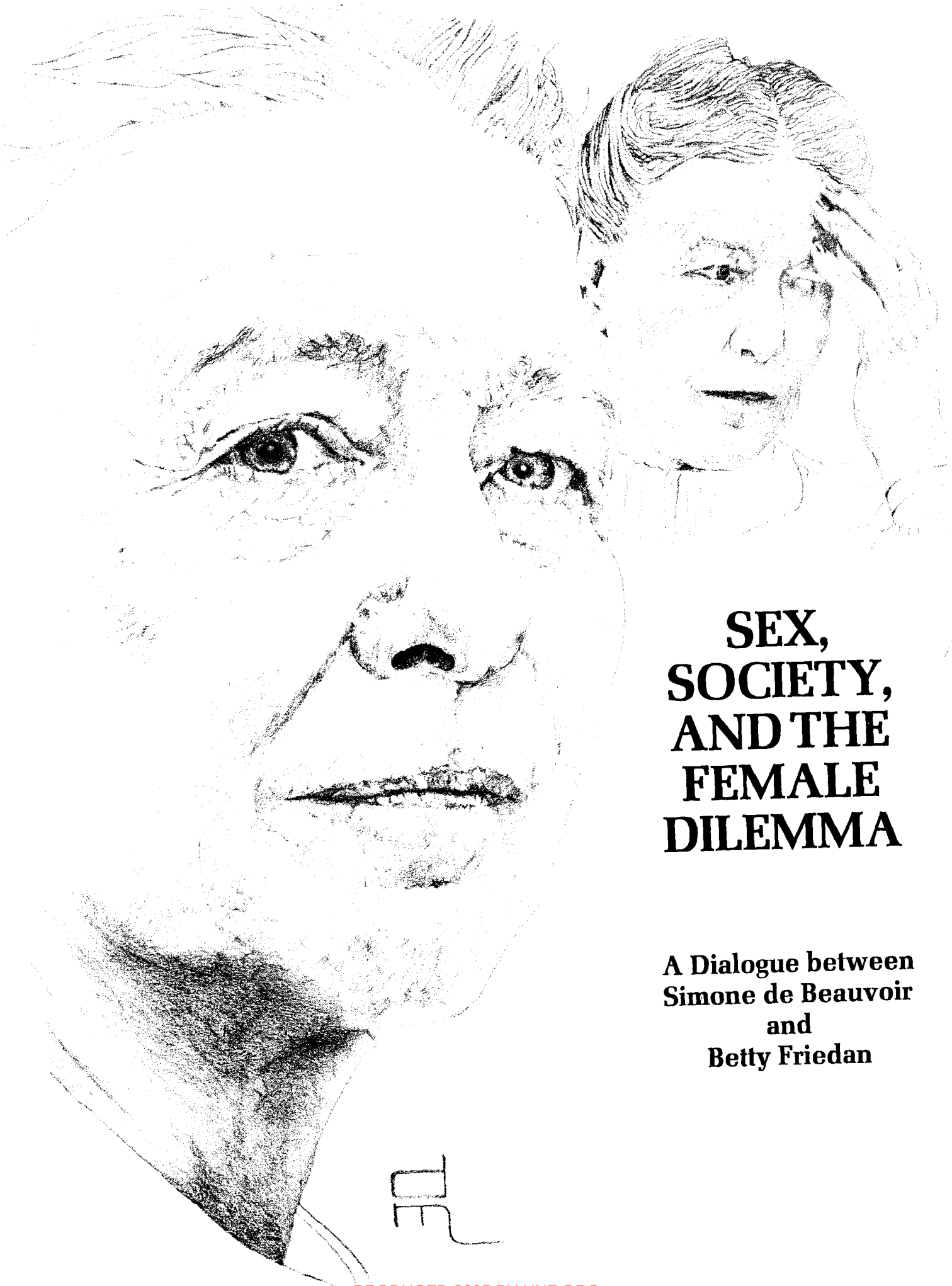

SEX, SOCIETY, AND THE FEMALE DILEMMA

A Dialogue between
Simone de Beauvoir
and
Betty Friedan

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vid Millman

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Sex, Society, and the Female Dilemma

The following dialogue was sought by author Betty Friedan for the purpose of "sharing with someone wiser, older . . . my own groping fears that the Women's Movement was coming to a dead end."

Friedan: I thought that it might be important for us to have a dialogue now for this reason: the Women's Movement, which I think we have both helped to influence by our books and through our thinking, has emerged as the largest and fastest-growing—perhaps, the only vital—movement for basic social change in the Seventies. But it has reached in America and, to some extent, in the world, a kind of crest and now it is floundering a little on a plateau.

de Beauvoir: Yes, I think that's true here in France.

Friedan: In the last two years in America, there has been a diffusion of energy in an internal ideological dispute. Women began to realize their political power with the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment right before the '72 elections and the Supreme Court's decision on abortion. At that point, forces on the far Right began a well-financed campaign to prevent ratification of ERA in the States and to overturn the abortion decision. From testimony at the Watergate hearings, we suspect that *agents provocateurs* were also at work within the Women's Movement, fomenting disruption and extremism, fanning the divisive note of sexual politics—"down with men, childbearing, and motherhood!" The attempt to make a political ideology out of sexual preference, out of lesbianism, has diverted energies from the political mainstream and hindered the political momentum of the Women's Movement.

de Beauvoir: Well, of that, I'm not so sure. Do you mean that promoting, "Down with childbirth, up with lesbianism" may be a maneuver to ruin the movement?

Friedan: It immobilizes the movement politically. To some extent there are genuine ideological differences. Some women in the movement genuinely feel—and I might disagree with them—that this is a class warfare against men, that childbearing, motherhood, and sex are the enemies. But it is my feeling that an overfocus on sexual issues, on sexual politics, as opposed to the condition of women in society in general, may have been accentuated by those who wished to immobilize the movement politically. According to the Gallup and Harris polls, the majority of American women, and even a majority of men, support the basic goals of equality for women in society. But when it is made to seem that women must renounce the love of men or children, you alienate the majority of women . . .

de Beauvoir: I understand.

Friedan: . . . as well as unnecessarily alienate the men. By the way, I am very glad to see that you now call yourself a feminist. I know you now think that a change in the economic system, such as communism, does not automatically bring about the liberation of women. How do you relate the women's struggle to the larger economic and political struggle?

de Beauvoir: I don't at all think that the Communist or Socialist systems as they are practiced answer this need. But I think there is a very strong relationship between the economic struggle and the feminist movement, at least as far as France is concerned. There was a strike at a Lip watch factory, in which 80 percent of the strikers were women. The strike was led by the women and lasted for six months, giving the women a sense of their own economic, and therefore political, power. However, though they were very active in the strike, when it was a question of taking the night watch, if their husbands didn't want them to, the women said, "All right, we're doing enough for the strike without upsetting our marriages." So, even in their activism they remained subordinate to their husbands and unconscious of their relationship to the condition of women in general. The great problem of the MLF (*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*) here is to tie up these economic struggles to the feminist struggle.

Friedan: Is the MLF moving in a more economic direction?

de Beauvoir: It is very much divided. There are feminists who are concerned only with what you were talking about—the revolt against men, lesbianism, and so on—but there are many others involved with the Socialist movements, who try to connect the sex struggle with the economic class struggle and try to work with the women workers.

Friedan: Well, in my country the breakthrough in consciousness has been big, but we are facing a situation of economic turmoil in which women are being fired. With the retrenchment of budgets in universities and corporations comes a backsliding of the gains women have made. It is being asked, "How can we enforce the rules to hire more women when there is unemployment and more serious worries?"

de Beauvoir: It is not quite the same here, for the time being. On the contrary, the government tries to give the impression that the women are being integrated. Women are received at the Polytechnique, women are named presidents of universities, but the best of them understand that these are just tokens given by the reactionary forces. One woman resigned from a high post because she didn't want to be a token.

Friedan: We feel that women should take all the jobs they can get as long as they keep fighting to open the door wider for women and have no illusion that the tokenism takes the place of a real breakthrough.

de Beauvoir: This attitude is very much questioned in France. Certain women think this, but very often they are ac-

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cused of being "career women," "elitist," "privileged." Those who refuse are better liked because they don't believe that they widen the gap, but rather that they become alibis.

Friedan: Would you agree that it is not just a question of breaking through the overt sex discrimination, but that it will be necessary to change the rules of the game, the very structure of work—the class separation of secretary-boss, nurse-doctor?

de Beauvoir: Yes, that's why many women think they should not play the game, not the game in its present structure.

Friedan: How are they to eat?

de Beauvoir: They don't have to have the leading jobs. They don't have to be presidents of universities; they can be simple schoolteachers.

Friedan: Do you agree with that?

de Beauvoir: I ask myself the question. I think there is some truth in it, because if you want to really change society, it's not by accepting "honorable" jobs or important posts that you'll do it.

Friedan: On the other hand, if women are to be in a position to change society, they have to have the confidence and the skills to move in an advanced technological society. How are they to get those if they do not break through the barriers against them and actually move in the society? Your argument can easily be used to rationalize a position of continued inferiority—to reject education as well because it is tainted by the system.

No Gods, No Goddesses

by Betty Friedan

I suppose that what really made me go to see Simone de Beauvoir was a feeling that *someone* must know the right answer, someone must know for sure that all the women who have thrown away those old misleading maps are heading in the right direction, someone must see more clearly than I where the new road ends.

I, who had helped start women on that new road, had no such sure answers and distrusted those who did. I needed to share—with someone wiser, older, who had traveled longer that unmapped road—my own groping fears of the movement's coming to a possible dead end or maybe just to a mystifying fork in the road, an unforeseen new corner to turn. I, whom other women looked to for reassurance, suddenly needed someone to reassure me in my uncertainty, because I was too far down the road to turn back and now not so sure as others think I am of what lies ahead.

"The Women's Movement has no ideology," the intellectual critics, the political scientists, and the philosophers had been saying. Without a clear ideological blueprint, a complete map of the new system that is to replace the old, without a clear, precise, abstract ideology like the ideologies of revolutions past, detailing strategies for the overthrow of the enemy and the whole system, the actions women have been taking, personally, politically, were—the critics said—doomed to failure.

I did not agree. The real truth of this new Women's Movement, the only part of it I really trusted, were the *actions*, not the rhetoric of ideology borrowed from or modeled after other revolutions. I trusted only those actions stemming from the concrete reality of women's personal lives—actions aimed at breaking through, or transforming, the concrete social institutions that oppressed our lives or blocked our life-affirming energies.

Actions were taken in *life*, not in the static abstract, and you could tell from what happened in life where you were going wrong—if you looked at what was really happening. My problem lately had been that the Women's Movement was turning inward on itself, borrowing its ideological argument from those of other revolutions. And what was really happening as a result seemed to me a paralysis of action—or an acting out of rhetoric that did not open up new possibilities in life. I wanted to help keep the Women's Movement on its own existential course—feeling, somehow, that we must continue to find the truth from the questions and actions stemming from the reality of our own existence. But it is very difficult for people to trust themselves like that, especially on a new road, especially women who have had so little experience in traveling on the main roads of society, women who have so little confidence in themselves and in their own authority.

So I was going to see Simone de Beauvoir, still seeking that authority in someone else, seeking her authority to trust my own existential truth, like a child who still needs an authoritative God, who is not tough enough to face the uncertainty of existential truth.

I had never met Simone de Beauvoir, but I had learned my own existentialism from her. It was *The Second Sex* that introduced me to an existential approach to reality and political responsibility—that, in effect, freed me from the rubrics of authoritative ideology and led me to whatever original analysis of women's existence I have been able to contribute to the Women's Movement and to its unique politics. I looked to Simone de Beauvoir, therefore, for a philosophical and intellectual authority for my own existentialism.

To be more precise, when I first read *The Second Sex*, in the early Fifties, I was writing "housewife" on the census blanks, still in the unanalyzed embrace of the feminine mystique. And the book's effect on me personally as a woman was so depressing that I felt like going back to bed—after I had made the children's breakfast in the suburban morning—and pulling the covers up over my head. Only after a dozen years of living that kind of life did I personally, concretely, analyze what had brought me and other American women to that depressing state. And then I saw it as something that could be changed—the existence of women in a society that has made us what we are. The act of confronting my personal reality in *The Feminine Mystique* led me to the action of organizing social change—the Women's Movement—as personal consciousness-raising has led so many other women to the movement since.

It is only recently that Simone de Beauvoir has embraced the Women's Movement, professing publicly to find in radical feminism an ideological blueprint superior to Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist communism. Maybe, I thought,

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de Beauvoir: Education is a different matter. One can have an education in order to have the instrument, but refuse to use it in order to be amongst the "elite" of a society we reject. Many of us think, and I do, too, that if society is to be changed, it must be done not from the top, but from the bottom.

Friedan: We are writers; so we can achieve some higher post in society by writing critically about the society. Your position gives you the voice and the ability to influence millions. Would we be serving the cause of women if we did not use this power in ourselves?

de Beauvoir: Because of the way I was brought up, and because of the situation in my time—there was no feminism—the idea was for women to be the equal of men! But there are so many women now who are so profoundly feminist they refuse to be the equal of men. They don't think that the aim is to acquire a name or a place in this society, but to fight and destroy it. For example, there is a general refusal of what is called the "star system." These feminists don't sign their articles in the feminist newspapers; it's a collective system and no one signs. They refuse the idea of competition, masculine glory, ambition, and fame.

Friedan: Are you no longer going to write books under your own by-line?

de Beauvoir: No, of course not, because I was formed differently. I began under a different system, and what I have achieved I am going to use. But I understand and sympathize with those who don't sign their names.

(*Continued on next page.*)

Simone de Beauvoir could give us the authority we need.

It didn't quite work out that way.

I made the trip to Paris, meeting her with two interpreters—one French, one English—in her salon.

It was furnished in well-worn, self-conscious Bohemian elegance—Oriental tapestries, porcelain cats, shawls, statues, pillows, pictures—memorabilia of her travels, with Sartre, all over the world. She looked more proper, correct, Establishment, than I had imagined, somehow more prim. My mind's image of her must still be that of the young girl, leaping over the Parisian rooftops with Sartre—as she portrays herself in the early autobiographical chapters of *Prime of Life*, which I had relished. And still I felt the thrill of meeting a cultural hero in person—an intellectual heroine of our history. And after the gracious beginning, she offered, almost cursorily, the authority I thought I had come to find. But the authority with which she spoke about women seemed sterile, cold, an abstraction that had too little relationship to the real lives of all the women struggling now in France and in America for new directions. I felt almost like a fool, struggling with those mundane questions that real women have to confront in their personal lives and in movement strategy. Those questions did not seem to interest her at all. Somehow she did not seem to identify with ordinary women, trying to make something new of their own lives or to feel at all involved with their everyday problems, as they leave behind the old guideposts. And yet, she uttered the fashionable radical phrases, repudiating "elitism," elevating the anonymous "working-class" woman in the abstract.

She proclaimed it quite irrelevant for women to break through sex discrimination to get better jobs or advance in professions or achieve posts of leadership. One must simply destroy the system. But how then, I ask, are women to eat—how are they to get the technological skills, the expertise even to have a voice in changing the system? They do not have to have *good* jobs in order to eat, she says of other women. But she herself has lived a life of exceptionally good jobs and has risen to eminence in a respected profession. Other women should not seek fame or even by-lines on their own articles, she says, though she herself will continue to write, of course, under her own famous name and enjoy the royalties and the influence it has earned. The comforts of the family, the decoration of one's own home, fashion, marriage, motherhood—all these are women's enemy, she says. It is not even a question of giving women a choice—anything that encourages them to want to be mothers or gives them that choice is wrong. The family must be abolished, she says with absolute authority. How then will we perpetuate the human race? There are too many people already, she says. Am I supposed to take this seriously?

It doesn't seem to have much to do with the lives of real women, somehow. Or even the reality of herself, Simone de Beauvoir, in this salon that is decorated with personal style, full of cherished objects. She is absent-minded, perfunctory, as if her mind were somewhere else, far from these problems of women. I have been told that Sartre is ill and that she will give me only an hour because she must go to the hospital to be with him. Well, I can respect the reality of such a bond. But when one has lived a whole life in such dependence upon a man as she has—and, by flaunting the absence of legal sanction, made a stronger bond than others do in ordinary marriage—how can she then advocate for other women the renunciation of the very need to love and be loved by a man, the security and beauty of a home, or the possibility of wanting to give birth to a child? Or does she still fight her own unexpressed dependence by urging other women to be more independent than men?

AND THEN I RECOGNIZED the authoritarian overtones of that supposedly Maoist party line I've heard before from sophomoric, self-styled radical feminists in America. I have been told that Sartre has been embracing the Maoist approach in French politics, with de Beauvoir following him, as she did once, to existentialism . . . Possibly the existential authority I was seeking from Simone de Beauvoir, my tutor in existentialism, she no longer seeks in the reality of her own experience, much less that of other women.

No matter. I wish her well. She started me out on a road I'll keep moving on, even though it's rough going when no one has a sure map to follow. I suppose now that all of us must simply keep moving on it, trusting ourselves, our own experience, our own questions. There are no gods, no goddesses, no outside authorities, however radical their credentials, or even authorities we create ourselves from childish need, that we can follow blindly, on this road. We need no other authority; we can trust no other authority than our own personal truth. The only test of our movement is whether it opens real life to real women—to ourselves. □

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(*Continued from page 17.*)

Friedan: I think that it would eliminate the "star system" if there were a thousand Simone de Beauvoirs and a thousand Betty Friedans. If *we*, who are known, tell the others to stay nameless, that doesn't eliminate the star system.

de Beauvoir: I'd be sorry if there were a thousand Simone de Beauvoirs. What I mean is that the basic work women should be doing is not each one trying on her own to make a name for herself.

Friedan: In the Women's Movement, in the student movement, and, I think, even in the black movement, the argument of elitism has been used to get rid of democratic structure and effective leadership, to manipulate and prevent effective action. This doesn't remove power; it just makes manipulating power easier when there is no structure of clear, responsible leadership. That was the way that the student movement was ruined.

de Beauvoir: I think that in France the Women's Movement is much more spontaneous and very real, very fundamental, on the part of all the young women who try to live their state of being women differently. Naturally, there are inconveniences in having no structure or hierarchy; it can lead to dispersion and hinder unity of action. But to refuse bureaucracy and hierarchy has the advantage of trying to make each human being a *whole* human and breaks down the masculine idea of the little bosses.

Friedan: I don't want women manipulated by male power machines or co-opted by female imitators, either. A guerrilla army is harder to take over. You need the maximum amount of autonomy for local groups with just enough national structure to be able to take massive actions that have an effect on the whole country.

de Beauvoir: That is what we did with abortion. We managed to mobilize Paris, the provinces—all over. But that is an issue which interests all classes of society. All women—peasants, workers, as well as the *bourgeoises*—are concerned about the abortion issue. But there are issues around which it is much harder to unite everyone. For example, the question of housework, which I consider very important for feminists. Housework takes up so much time, is non-salaried, and is exploitation by men of women. Well, on that subject, you will get an echo from the *petites bourgeoises*, certainly from the intellectuals, and perhaps from working women. But from the non-employed wives of workers, there will be no support; it is their reason for being. That is going to create a great division among women.

Friedan: I have been putting together an Economic Think Tank for Women, and one of the questions is how to put a minimum wage value on housework. This could be recognized for social security, for pensions, and in the division of property if there is a divorce. Surely the poor and middle-class housewife would identify with that.

de Beauvoir: There I don't agree at all. It makes for segregation; it puts the woman in the house even more. I and my friends in the MLF don't agree with that at all. It's keeping to the idea of women at home, and I'm very much against it.

Friedan: But don't you think that as long as women are going to do work in the home, especially when there are little children, the work should be valued at something?

de Beauvoir: Why women? That's the question! Should one consider that the women are doomed to stay at home?

Friedan: I don't think they should have to. The children should be the equal responsibility of both parents—and of society—but today a great many women have worked only in the home when their children were growing up, and this work has *not been valued* at even the minimum wage for purposes of social security, pensions, and division of property. There could be a voucher system which a woman who chooses to continue her profession or her education and have little children could use to pay for child care. But if she chooses to take care of her own children full time, she would earn the money herself.

de Beauvoir: No, we don't believe that any woman should have this choice. No woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one. It is a way of forcing women in a certain direction.

Friedan: I follow the argument, but politically at the moment I don't agree with it. The fact is, we have hardly any child-care centers in the United States. We're fighting for them, but there is such a tradition of individual freedom in America that I would never say that every woman must put her child in a child-care center.

de Beauvoir: But that's not how we see

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de Beauvoir: ". . . as long as the family and the myth of the family and the myth of maternity and the maternal instinct have not been destroyed, women will still be oppressed."

it. We see it as part of a global reform of society which would not accept that old segregation between man and woman, the home and the outside world. We think that every individual, woman as well as man, should work outside and have the possibility, either by communal living, collectives, or another way of organizing the family, of solving the problem of child care. Not keep the same system of crèches, but change the system so that the choices that are available are different. Something along these lines is being tried in China. For example, on a certain day everyone in the community—men, women, and children, as far as they are capable—come together to do all the washing or darning of socks. It wouldn't be your husband's socks; it would be all the socks, and the husbands would darn them, too. Encouraging women to stay at home will not change society.

Friedan: I would tend to think more in terms of a pluralistic situation of real options. I think that the sense of individual family and the values of motherhood are so strong in people that I don't see any viable or even valuable political attempt to wipe them out. If people should choose a communal life-style such as you spoke of, that possibility should be open to them. But I would like to see the creation of new institutions in society so that men and women who choose a nuclear-family life-style can be liberated from the rigid sex roles we have been locked into in the matters of housework, child care, and so on. And those who wish to continue in the conventional roles should have that option. The problem has been no other options.

de Beauvoir: In my opinion, as long as the family and the myth of the family and the myth of maternity and the maternal instinct are not destroyed, women will still be oppressed.

Friedan: Now, here I think we do disagree. I think that maternity is more than a myth, although there has been a kind of false sanctity attached to it.

de Beauvoir: As soon as a girl is born, she is given the vocation of motherhood because society really wants her washing dishes, which is not really a vocation. In order to get her to wash the dishes, she is given the vocation of maternity. The maternal instinct is built up in a little girl by the way she is made to play and so on. As long as this is not destroyed, she will have won nothing. In my opinion, the abortion campaigns as such are nothing except that they are useful in destroying the idea of woman as a reproduction machine.

Friedan: You do believe, then, that women should not be mothers?

de Beauvoir: No, I'm not saying that, but since you're talking about choice, a girl should not be conditioned from her childhood to want to be a mother. I don't say either that men should not be fathers, but I do think it should be a choice and not a result of conditioning.

Friedan: I believe with you that it should be a choice and that women should have the choice when to have children if they decide to do so. We are trying to change society so that women, who do happen to be the people who give birth, can be full people in society. A whole new approach to child-rearing needs to be created—not just mother, but mother, father, society as a whole, the communal situation, if you wish, and the child-care center and so on. Then, I think many women may more joyously and responsibly wish to have children. I think that motherhood is a good value in life. I found it so; I think many women have . . .

de Beauvoir: Why tie up maternity with housework? In this way, housework is encouraged by a sort of token—motherhood. No, we do not agree, because you express the idea of remunerating housework, while I think that women should be freed from housework. At what age do you give a girl the choice? If she is conditioned from birth to think that she *should* have children, when she is 20 she no longer has a choice.

Friedan: She should have other choices, but don't eliminate that as a possible choice. When you got your Ph.D., you were a very exceptional woman; you were the only woman in an intellectual circle. Now society is a little different. Is it possible that in your generation, motherhood was seen so strongly as something that would prevent a woman from really using her abilities in society that it seemed necessary to make a choice between one thing or the other?

de Beauvoir: I thought I couldn't have children because I wanted to write. But we are getting away from the subject. I think that if housework is paid, it is a way of accepting segregation and the structure which, through maternity, condemns women to housework. I am totally against this.

Friedan: You would not put any value on the work women have been doing?

de Beauvoir: I think that the value is such that it should be shared by the men—by everyone—and that women should not be forced to do it.

Friedan: There I agree . . .

de Beauvoir: Then it must not be specially paid. Society should be organized in such a way that this work is done as a community thing—as a public service, perhaps. A Chinese man said, "I clean my own teeth; I don't ask my wife to do it." Mending socks should be the same thing; there should not be a special sector for housework—that is what I consider scandalous. There could be laundry centers that would do the washing for a whole building. We are moving more and more toward that sort of specialized division of labor.

Friedan: Are we talking about society today or about some remote future? In some of the Communist countries, instead of restructuring jobs to take maternity into account, it has been decided to pay the women to stay at home and pay the men more to keep the women at home. I think this is a reactionary move. But that's not the same as women in America, now, who have been at home for 10 and 20 years, having the right to Social Security and retirement pensions, for example. Some value should be put on the work they have been doing.

(Continued on page 56.)

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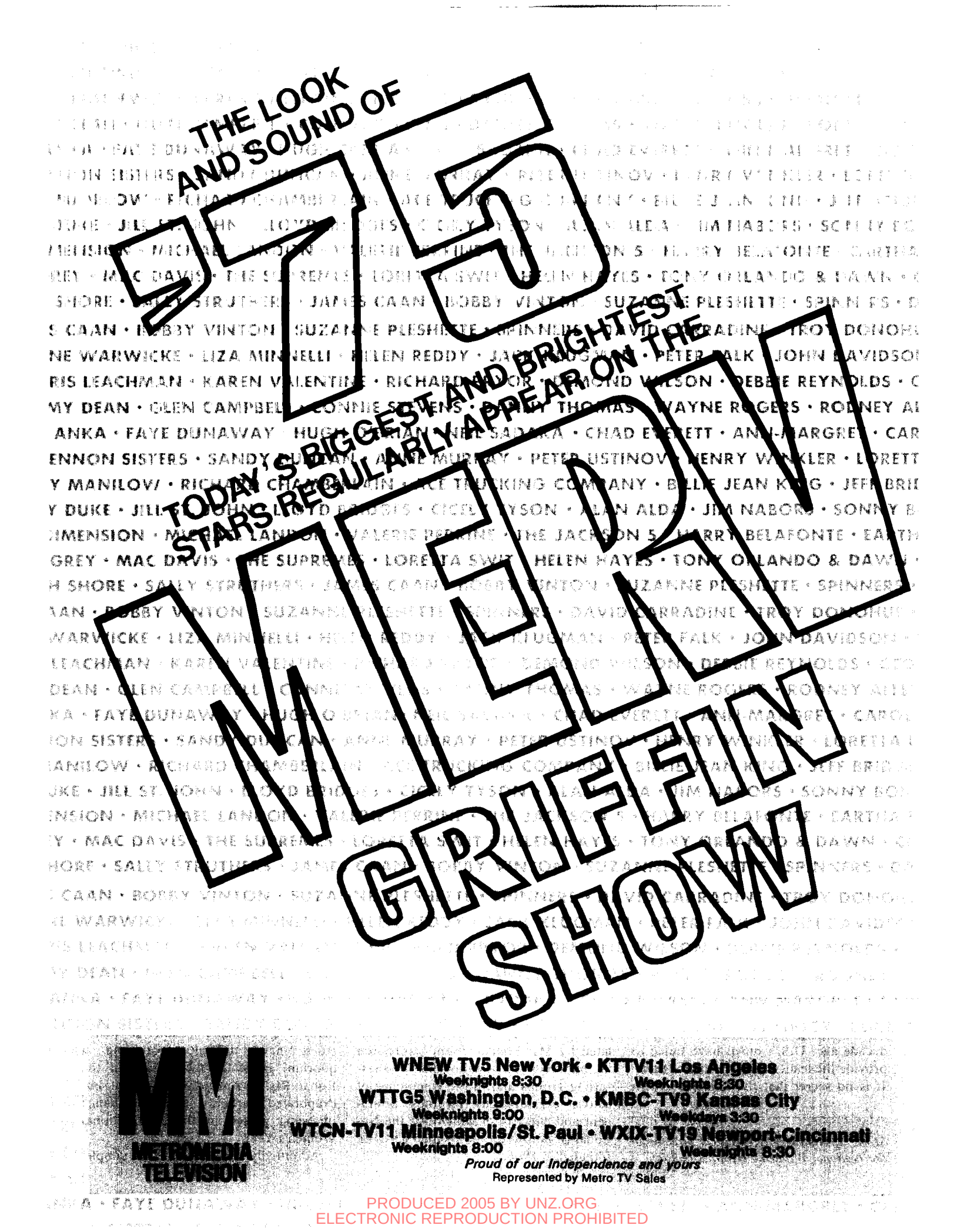

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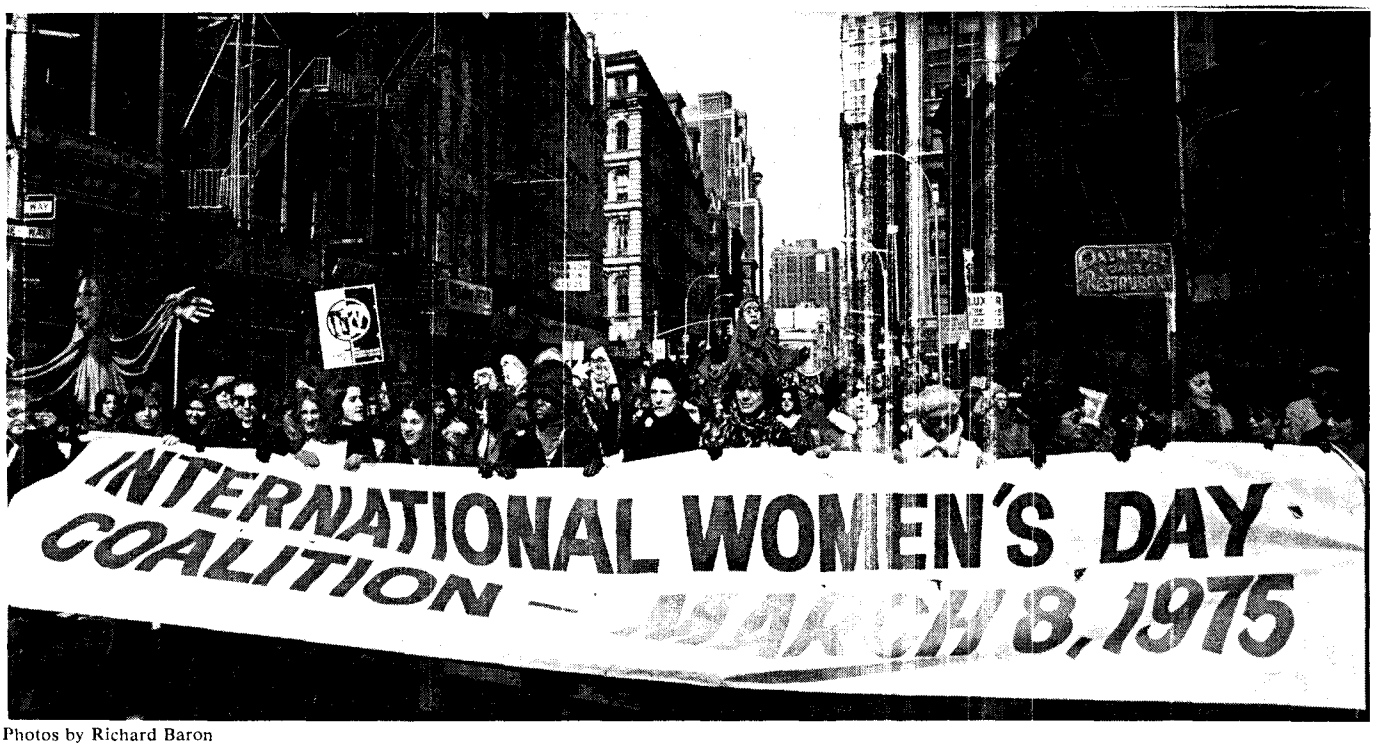

Photos by Richard Baron

Women's Day in New York—"How did a revolution that mobilized thousands of women on August 26, 1970, the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage, dwindle to the point where many NOW chapters have difficulty gathering a quorum?"

International Women's Year: Fact and Fantasy

Can the faltering feminist movement regain its old momentum and magic? An upcoming U.N. conference may give some answers to that tricky question.

by Merle S. Goldberg

A surprise may be waiting for the thousands of unofficial delegates who attend this month's U.N.-sponsored International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City.

The conference will ostensibly deal with the cause of feminism and with the triple theme of peace, equality, and economic development. However, these themes may well prove to be merely the tip of a gigantic iceberg whose steady expansion is affecting, even paralyzing, the nations and organizations represented at the coming conference.

For American women, in particular, this meeting may be traumatic. Credited with initiating the feminist movement a decade ago, U.S. women have failed to provide the leadership expected of them. It is no secret that the U.S. movement has been leaderless and has begun to decline since the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling liberalizing abortion. Like the women's suffrage victory of 1920, the abortion ruling, ironically, dissipated a major unifying force among women.

IN ORDER FOR US to understand the present ineffectiveness of the movement, a candid reappraisal of recent history may be helpful. It was less than two decades ago that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provided the shock of recognition for a small, isolated generation of college women. That same shock was re-created for many middle-class women of the United States a decade later by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Almost immediately, the smoldering rage so effectively articulated by Ms. Friedan found expression in hundreds of small consciousness-raising groups and in the emergence of activist organizations, the most prominent and effective of which was the National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966.

Later came the rallying cry, "I am Woman; I am invincible." It became an instant anthem. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, one couldn't help wondering whether perhaps "the lady doth protest too much . . ." The media looked upon many attention-getting activities as a kind of malevolent entertainment. The legitimate message of street theater was most often overshadowed by hyperbole and unmitigated hostility. Thousands of responsible feminists, working quietly to improve the status of women, divorced themselves from the sloganeers and headline-seekers.

How did a revolution that mobilized thousands of women on August 26, 1970, the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage, dwindle to the point where many NOW chapters, some in major cities, have difficulty gathering a quorum? Hope for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment has all but evaporated; certainly it has no chance of being passed in this International Women's Year.

Admittedly, the issues are not simple.

Merle S. Goldberg is executive director of the National Women's Health Coalition.

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