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The Second Stage



Betty
Friedan

with a new introduction

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With a New Introduction

Betty Friedan

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The Second Stage

Acknowledgments

This book evolved slowly in my consciousness over the last ten years as I was involved in the exhilarating actions and the disturbing impasses of the women's movement, and as I was beginning to formulate, in my teaching, writing, and conversations with personal friends, the concepts of what I came to call the second stage. I started to systematize these ideas in the early and mid-seventies when, as visiting professor of sociology at Temple University, and then at Yale and Queens College, I decided not to teach "women's studies" but to call my courses "The Sex Role Revolution—Stage Two" and "Human Sex and Human Politics."

In 1979, when Abe Rosenthal invited me to lunch with the editors of *The New York Times* to discuss the deadlock on the Equal Rights Amendment, I shared some of my thinking on the larger implications and the future direction of feminism, which they urged me to publish. That same year I was asked by Sey Chassler, editor of *Redbook*, to formulate the new questions for the eighties for the young women and men now living in terms of the movement for equality which I had helped to start. I also shared my sense of the political urgency of these questions with other movement veterans on the board of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, who

asked me to convene a National Assembly on the Future of the Family in November, 1979.

While my original sense that we must move now into the second stage came from my personal questions and observations of the conflicts of the young and not-so-young women, and men, trying to live in terms of first-stage feminism, the emergence of full-scale backlash with and after the Reagan election in 1980, when I was halfway through this book, gave enormous political immediacy to my task.

I am deeply indebted to more people than I can name here for various kinds of help in formulating and substantiating my hunches; in helping me to arrange and taking part in the personal and group interviews on which this book is based; in deepening my research and leading me to other research converging on and illuminating my own; in sustaining me through my hesitations over articulating questions that would inevitably disturb some of my older feminist sisters even as they urgently needed to be articulated to help resolve the conflicts, doubts and fears of younger women and men; and for the work over and above the call of professional duty required to get this book out in time to meet the deadline now facing the women's movement in America.

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had to write this as a book; to Muriel Fox, Gene Boyer, Stephanie Clohesy, Phyllis Segal and Laurie Goldstein of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, who helped give these ideas a first tryout at the National Assembly on the Future of the Family and, as is the way with the women's movement, gave them far more substance and resonance than I could have done alone.

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In preparing this book for the paperback edition, I have made a few corrections in the final half of Part One, "End of the Beginning." In the last chapter of the book, I have taken into account the foreboding economic and political developments of 1982, which force us to enter the second stage in reality now, no matter what our ideology. We know that we cannot stop here. We will not go back from this new place. Our hope now is simply to move on.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
June 1982

*For my own children—
Emily, Jonathan, Daniel—
and for my extended family of choice.*

*Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
And try to love the questions themselves.
Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you
Because you would not be able to live them
And the point is to live everything
Live the questions now
Perhaps you will gradually without noticing it
Live along some distant day into the answers.*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

Introduction, 1998



As I write, they are declaring that the women's movement is over. From all corners of the news media, it is being said that we should declare our victory, fold our tents, and go away.

There is no doubt that the women's movement has transformed American society, opening life in many ways for women and men alike. There may be nostalgic yearnings for the feminine mystique, but women are no longer defined solely in terms of their relation—sexual, maternal, or domestic—to men. They are defining their lives themselves by their actions in society. But though the women's movement has begun to achieve equality for women on many economic and political measures, the victory remains incomplete. To take two of the simplest and most obvious indicators: women still earn no more than 72 cents for every dollar that men earn, and we are nowhere near equality in numbers at the very top of decision-making in business, government, or the professions.

In the simple goal of women's equal participation with men in the mainstream of society, we may be coming deceptively close to equality. But the remaining gap, especially the gap at the top, is never going to be closed by putting the problem in terms of women vs. men—the terms that defined our first stage of advance. I am both amused and frustrated by the chatter from some young feminist writers now about a “Third Stage” of feminism, when the fact is, we still haven't reached the second stage. We have won some general cultural consensus on women's equality with men (except

for the far reaches of the religious right). Still, in the workplace and in the home it is an equality that is lived with great difficulty, unnecessary guilt, a constant and sometimes desperate improvisation within outdated but unchanged structures: the male model of work and the female model of family. When starting out in their careers, women now earn roughly 90 percent of what men earn—still not equal, but close. It is having children that lowers women's earning power to a mere 70 percent of men's. More than ever, we now have to think about moving to the second stage I first described in this book: the way to live the equality that we fought for in a world of diverse new family combinations of women, men, and children.

The second stage is where we must move, women and men together. We need a new and politically active consciousness-raising to get us beyond the polarized and destructive male model of work and decision-making and the undervalued women's model of life—the model that takes it as inevitable that having children is a woman's free individual choice to short-circuit permanently her earning power and her professional future. Women have far more political power than they may realize. To take one strikingly important example, women elected the President of the United States in 1996 by a seventeen-point gender gap. The issues by which President Clinton was reelected were those that matter most to women: health care, social security, social welfare, protection of the environment, and education. The power that women indubitably have, voting as they do in increasingly higher proportions than men, and becoming an ever-larger proportion of the labor force, must be used to restructure the terms and conditions at work and the already changing roles of women and men at home.

It's seventeen years now since I originally proclaimed the need for a "second stage" if women, men, and children were to be able to live the equality that we fought for. I believed then, and believe with even more conviction now, that the organization of the family—or rather the whole diversity of families that now exists—is the new feminist frontier. We must still transform institutions, physically and culturally, from the office to the home, and change the patterns of career advancement beyond the

current models that tacitly assume that a worker always has a wife at home to handle life for him. In the seventeen years since I made that call in *The Second Stage* to restructure home and work, the real lives of women and men, living on new terms of equality, have changed in marvelous, messy, diverse, and still not yet completely charted ways. Feminist theory, still preoccupied with sexual politics and mired in a stance of victimhood, has not caught up to this reality. It is time that we contemplate—and act on—the true dimensions of women's own empowerment as a new majority. With us as allies are all those men who now carry babies in backpacks, and who have been supported by and strengthened by (or have at least gotten used to) women carrying half the earning burden, as they now do in over 50 percent of American families. The greatest political need for women and men now is to make the restructuring of the work-home relationship a part of the American political and economic agenda.

Just as women must not allow themselves to be sucked into the classic male power games in the workplace, we must not allow ourselves to be diverted by the emotion-ridden issues of sexual politics. The abortion hysteria is the desperate last gasp of those who are threatened by women's autonomy, but do not dare attack it head on; they try to keep us concentrating on the issue of abortion—fighting that battle over and over again. I fear that feminists fall into a trap when they allow abortion to be seen as *the* feminist issue. Every social survey that is done indicates that though there is ambivalence and disagreement about some questions—for instance, abortion for minors—a national consensus exists on the right of women to choose. We must of course defend a woman's right to choose when and whether to have a child, because that is basic to the personhood of women. Abortion is now a necessary recourse to exercise that right when birth control fails, but abortion itself I hope and believe will soon be obsolete. Abortion is not a value in itself and neither it nor other aspects of sexual life are the most significant issues for women's empowerment. What *is* most important is participating on equal terms in economic and political decision-making.

Just as it is now of urgent importance to move to the second stage, transforming life as it can be lived with men on a basis of

equality both at home and at work, it is time to grow up and move beyond our obsession with having babies or preserving the beauty of our youth, to recognize the new challenges of the eighty-year life span that is women's lot today. We may be amused or shocked (or both) by reports of a sixty-three-year-old woman's having a baby. Although I can sympathize with the attraction of using new technology to obtain one's heart's desire, such belated parenthood strikes me as somehow a symptom of our inability to grasp the totality of the life now open to women and to men. This is not just women's blindness, of course: obviously men who choose to start families at fifty or sixty or seventy with younger women—a much more common phenomenon than pregnancy in a sixty-year-old—are clutching an illusion of youth. Although millions of dollars are made selling women cosmetics and face lifts, women on the whole are moving to the pragmatic challenges of their longer life span and of each phase within it.

We are now doing our best to live the second stage. Although too few institutional adjustments have been made, in PTA conference schedules or office hours, whole industries of changes have arisen to recognize the new needs. Take the undramatic but important example of take-out food and the wonderful proliferation of affordable ethnic restaurants, offering something beyond the mass-produced franchise fare, which can free mothers from the burden of cooking dinner at the end of their own long work days. A family that eats together, but eats out together, is part of a new flexibility that families are acquiring.

The great majority of women who are now working in jobs outside the home are doing this with varying degrees of comfort, pressure, guilt, desperation, and pleasure, but all are required to accept the old male model of work. Women, who make up half the workforce today and are getting 40 percent of the professional degrees, do not have wives at home to do the grocery shopping—but now neither do the men. Slowly, slowly, individual families are finding ways to share the responsibilities of home and child-care, with varying degrees of difficulty and probably a lot of unnecessary guilt. The need to restructure the institutions themselves has not yet been faced adequately in terms of public policy.

What women and men today need is not the right to have babies at sixty-three, but real choices about having children in their twenties, thirties, or even in their forties, without paying an inordinate price or facing impossible dilemmas in their careers. We need to restructure hours and conditions of work. The technology of work today (not to mention the traffic jams of our cities) urge us to flextime, with staggered hours of starting and leaving work, and variable schedules during the work week.

But it also seems to me that living equality is not just a matter of sharing the care of babies or rearranging the hours of work. Men and women alike will also need to come to terms with the new long life span, in which all of us will have, in effect, two or three staggered careers. Men as well as women will inevitably become much more comfortable with varying, complex patterns of life, putting together work, study, family concerns, childcare, and personal adventures, both intellectual and geographical, in a new mosaic over that eighty-year life span. As long as men's identity is defined in terms of simple dominance, either by winning the rat race or, if all else fails, by dominance over women, then women's move to autonomy and power will indeed be threatening. Clearly, men need to break through that machismo model, for their own good as well as women's, and they do seem to be doing so today. A few years ago I was delighted to read on the front page of the *New York Times* a headline announcing that American men are not sharing 50 percent of the housework. I thought it was wonderful that the *New York Times* thought it was possible that American men would share 50 percent of the housework, and that the fact that they weren't would be front-page news. To me it was quite marvelous that these sons of the feminine mystique whose mothers picked their pajamas up off the floor were sharing even 30 percent of the housework. (Of course men don't do the ironing—but then women don't either.) We can hope that the men who carry babies in their backpacks, share hands-on childcare, and are interested in more in life than winning at all costs, will not die eight years younger than their wives.

The second stage is something that the women's movement itself has been slow to embrace, to the ultimate detriment of women. Why does the United States, the richest of all nations,

not have a superb national program of childcare combining public and private funds with a sliding-fee scale? Women have the power, if they would choose to use it, to demand a national system of childcare as a political priority. We now finally have unpaid parental leave: why don't we have paid parental leave or the option of taking unpaid leave for a year or more without losing our jobs? Why are women becoming desperate workaholics trying to fit themselves into that male model of work, while still taking most of the responsibility for the home and family? The attempt to do what is nearly impossible only contributes to a backlash against working mothers juggling family and work, as the majority do today.

The media backlash blames the parents, really meaning the mother, for greed in choosing a dual-earner life, rather than cutting back on expenses so that one parent (guess who?) could stay home full time with the children. The fact is that at least a third of all working parents today are making choices in favor of more family time, splitting parenting more and more evenly, leading to a 7 percent annual growth in home-based self-employment and new movements focusing on "voluntary simplicity" and on fatherhood. In polls a majority of men and women indicate that they would prefer more time for family and personal concerns to a wage increase. But these cannot remain merely small-scale individual adaptations to a fundamentally rigid system. If we are to live a second stage we must move women and men onto issues such as a shorter work week and shorter working hours and a real national priority for childcare.

Even more than when I first dreamed of this twenty years ago, it seems to me now that when we begin to live that kind of equality, insisting on those priorities from politicians and business bosses, there will be a transformation of our current obsession with sexuality, which so brutalizes sex. What we are experiencing today is both a new, more down-to-earth understanding of sexuality as part of our total human experience, and an ever-greater acceptance of diverse ways of loving, in families that may look nothing like Ozzie and Harriet's but are families all the same. The second stage is finding a way of living it all—men, women, and children in whatever combination, changing over time.

So we must now find ways to live personal lives to the fullest and accept the new political challenges as they occur. We can all feel joy over the wonderful way the women's movement has transformed the very possibilities of life for women and men, and has opened our society to the new frontiers of a second stage. I only hope I live long enough to see how we get there.