



“The Crises of Human Identity in the 1960s”

by David DeHaas

On the night of June 28th, 1966, a variety of powerful and frustrated women secretly met in the hotel room of Betty Friedan¹ to discuss the federal government's efforts to elevate the economic and social status of women.² The Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women was underway, and the women who gathered in Betty Friedan's hotel room were all attending this conference.³ Most of these women were employed by the federal government, thus representing a collective of prominent female figures that held influential positions normally held by males.⁴ They had faith that the government was the best medium for addressing these social and economic issues, but the secrecy behind this midnight rendezvous hints at the magnitude of the problems facing women in the 1960s. The meeting led to the decision to present a proposal on the floor of the convention the following morning.⁵ This proposal, however, was blocked from even being considered.⁶

This incident led to the founding of the National Organization for

Women, a means in which the interests and concerns pertaining with women could be addressed in the same sense that the NAACP represented the issues and concerns of African Americans.⁷ As important as these events would be for the betterment of the practical lives of both women and men, the essence of these events pertains to an issue far more critical.

The 1960s were a time of many social and political movements representing the diverse voices and concerns amongst the fragmented American populous. The particular causes of these movements consisted of clashes between standard cultural norms that characterized American society, and communities that resisted this standard. However, I will argue that the social and political unrest that occurred in the 1960s does not simply stem from the differing concerns and causes of these movements, but, further, that a substantial causal factor is a general crisis of human identity.

My argument will proceed by explaining the nature of the identity crises,

¹ Champion of the Women's Movement and author of *The Feminine Mystique*.

² National Women's Organization. "Founding." <http://now.org/about/history/founding-2/>.

³ *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, "Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women."

⁴ Betty Friedan. *Life so Far: A Memoir*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 173.

⁵ Betty Friedan. *Life so Far: A Memoir*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 173.

⁶ Betty Friedan. *Life so Far: A Memoir*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 174.

⁷ Betty Friedan. *Life so Far: A Memoir*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 174.

which begins with a critical examination on Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan provides sufficient justification to make the claim that femininity has developed unnaturally by virtue of the culture's values and expectations, and this unnatural development lays the foundation for the identity crises. After, I will show how this crisis affected the social and political unrest of the 1960s.

The Nature of the Human Identity Crises

In order to fully grasp this crisis of human identity and to establish a foundation for my argument, it is necessary to briefly discuss the nature of human life. My analysis begins by begging the question, how can human beings authentically achieve happiness and flourish? This question has been addressed by many different theories and interpretations, and many have even proposed that such an inquiry characterizes the goals and aims of human life. However, happiness, and the activities associated with it, have always been defined under a shroud of subjectivity. My examination begins with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, who expertly shows

us that American culture in the 1960s rested upon a clear cut contradiction consisting of a mystique surrounding femininity. This mystique dictates that women could only be happy and fulfilled by getting married and having children. Friedan uses a critical analysis of the media, advertising, and the psychological assumptions about females that permeated in American society.⁸ The immediate concern with the mystique is that women were not feeling fulfilled as simply mothers and wives, and Friedan was one of the few voices that exemplified this dissatisfaction. Her writings in *The Feminine Mystique* sparked an outcry of mothers and wives who felt as though their lives were unfulfilling.⁹

Friedan's claim that female flourishing and happiness was thwarted by American cultural standards is just as powerful as it is terrifying. Her postulation illustrates that American culture has assumingly elevated the existence of women to the peak of happiness and human flourishing, when clearly, it was far from the case. Friedan even comments on the difficulty of determining that there are any problems at all with

⁸ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 1-2, 10.

⁹ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 7.

"Display Ad 180 -- no Title." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Apr 30, 1963. The ad recurred multiple times throughout 1963: 07 June; 10 Apr; 02 May. This emphasizes the popularity of the book when it was first published.

American culture. She writes, “How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life? How can she believe that voice inside herself, when it denies the conventional, accepted truths by which she has been living?”¹⁰ The worries that beckoned amidst the depths of the female psyche had no proper outlet to be expressed because of the fear of going against cultural expectations.

The crises of human identity stems from the assumption that men and women are fundamentally different. One clear difference is biological, but are the biological distinctions sufficient justification for the psychological and cultural distinctions that characterize masculinity and femininity? Friedan discusses the writings of Helene Deutsch on this matter. Deutsch associates masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity.¹¹ According to this view, men are naturally active and women passively support the active endeavors of their husbands and male children. Friedan interprets this perspective by stating that femininity can only be achieved by renouncing one’s own active pursuits and attempts to express

oneself, resulting in the conformity of the role as mother and wife.¹² A female who actively pursues her own goals and intellectual desires is suffering from, what Deutsch terms, a masculinity complex.¹³ According to this perspective, human flourishing is essentially a male endeavor, but again, what sufficient justification is there to say that men and women are so fundamentally different? Despite any potential differences on the subject, what is essentially illuminated by the work of Friedan is a distinct disconnect between happiness and the reality of female existence. This disconnect can be fully expressed as the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity.

Despite other potential features of one’s identity, being a male or female is essential. The dysfunctional dichotomy of gender is critical for understanding the identity crises. The writings of Shulamith Firestone elaborate upon the consequences of gender’s unnatural development. Firestone’s book, entitled *The Dialectic of Sex*, associates the dichotomy of gender with a schism in human culture. She writes, “The sex role system divides human experience; men

¹⁰ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 21.

¹¹ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 132-133.

¹² Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 133.

¹³ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 133.

and women live in these different halves of reality; and culture reflects this.”¹⁴ Firestone’s main argument is that the single human psyche is split between masculinity and femininity, and she considers this schism with our culture. She associates femininity with intuition and the aesthetic, and masculinity with rationality and a technological way of thinking.¹⁵ Firestone argues that both femininity and masculinity and the human powers associated with them constitute a single human psyche, but the gender dichotomy has split the individual psyche, resulting in schizoid cultural standards and expectations. This rift in the culture is the source of the human identity crises, and from this division of the human psyche, men and women are conditioned to be a certain way without ever realizing the fullest potential of human life.

The Human Identity Crises and its effect on the 1960s

The 1960s was a time when people from all strata of American society were becoming more aware of injustice in the world, but what of the psychological injustice occurring within themselves? On account of the human identity crises,

the state of humanity suffered from a conflict between the status quo and freedom from the status quo. All the social and political unrest could be viewed as humanity attempting to break free from cultural norms and expectations, with the ultimate aim of reaching true human potential. This aim unified the many different causes and movements of the 1960s, effectively inspiring a grand attempt to optimize society’s potential; yet even today we find much resistance against cultural standards. The struggle to realize human potential is just as prevalent today as it was in the 1960s, and a critical examination of American values and the state of the economy in the 1960s will not only illuminate upon the schizoid state of American culture, it will also show why this struggle between the standard cultural values and freedom from these standards continues to dominate life in America.

Many of the counter-culture movements resisted the emphasis American culture placed on materialism and consumerism. However, through their efforts of resisting these cultural ideals, the communities could not escape the necessity of purchasing goods in order to survive. Another problem was that

¹⁴ Shulamith Firestone. *The Dialectic of Sex*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 148.

¹⁵ Shulamith Firestone. *The Dialectic of Sex*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 156-157.

the ideals propounded by these counter-culture movements spread through the American populous by virtue of consumer goods and commercialism. Anthony Ashbolt writes, "The crucial role of the market in this suggests not only possible limitations to the hippie critique of Establishment culture but also the very real seriousness with which community set about building a potential alternative society."¹⁶ The principles of the free market constituted the American economy and were in themselves American ideals. Although these movements attempted to resist American ideals they could not resist the economic environment. The ideals of love, peace, and communal living became products for purchase.¹⁷ Ashbolt suggests that by the end of the 1960s, "...the fight against organizations of the Establishment has suddenly turned into an Established Organization".¹⁸ The counter-culture movements could not escape the economic environment they were resisting, but this inability to completely resist American culture simultaneously

points to the change these movements desperately wanted.

Through the same means materialism and consumerism gained its economic and cultural power, the ideals of the counter-culture movements could have had an even greater impact on society. The counter-culture aimed to replace the American cultural standards, which included consumerism and commercialism, with standards and values they believed to be more just. But the only way to influence culture with the ideals represented by the counter-culture would be through the same methods the American cultural standards achieved dominance. Leslie M. Dawson fully illuminates upon this relationship. Dawson writes, "The marketing discipline today constitutes a great paradox. The nation stands deeply troubled. It seeks solutions to grave problems both within and without its own society. Marketing and marketers are in integral part of this picture, either as a dimension of the problems or as a source of their solutions."¹⁹

¹⁶ Anthony Ashbolt, "Go Ask Alice: Remembering the Summer of Love Forty Years On," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (December 2007): 42.

¹⁷ "Display Ad 76 -- no Title." 1969. *The Hartford Courant* (1923-1990), Sep 04, 44. This is an advertisement of a mug expressing the idea of the Age of Aquarius. It is one example of hippie ideals becoming commercialized and available for purchase.

¹⁸ Anthony Ashbolt, "Go Ask Alice: Remembering the Summer of Love Forty Years On," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (December 2007): 43.

¹⁹ Leslie M. Dawson, "Marketing Science in the Age of Aquarius," *Journal of Marketing* 35, no. 3 (July 1971): 68.

According to Dawson, marketing is not only a tool for business and advertising, but the same techniques and methods used by marketers are the same methods and techniques used for spreading new ideas amongst a populous.

Analyzing the marketing paradox in relation with the 1960s provides an interesting insight on the nature of the human identity crises. The marketing paradox evidently shows that marketing itself is not good or bad, it is merely a study of the methods and techniques for spreading goods, services, and ideas through a populous. Despite American culture's reliance on marketing, the American culture does not consist of marketing. Commercialism is an emphasis on purchasing products for consumption, and this American ideal simply uses marketing to sell these products. By recognizing that the techniques associated with marketing are essential for spreading any idea, the movements that had occurred in the 1960s might have met greater success.

Conclusion

The inherent sexism that rests as the foundation of American culture has not only segregated people, but has also split the human psyche: effectively corrupting the way individuals think. The sense of inequality and injustice that

permeated the populous was very strong and called many different groups of people to action. However, there was not a full understanding of the nature of these issues. Emotional and intellectual capacities were not united in the individual, but fragmented due to various cultural expectations and biases. One's race, gender, economic standing, sexuality, etc. played its role in fragmenting human potential. However, the 1960s should be viewed as a period that elevated human consciousness unto a greater awareness of reality. Recognizing problems with culture and the world's political affairs might have sparked a flame in human beings, i.e. a call to action. But the failures that resulted from this initial spark should not be simply viewed as the failures of a decade filled with angst and passion, but they should be viewed as the beginnings of an elevated way of both thinking and living a human life. The problems in the world are not going to be solved overnight, but any real solution must first begin with each individual recognizing the injustice occurring within themselves.

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