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Creating Rosie the Riveter
Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II

Maureen Honey

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*To the women who made history
during World War II*

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Introduction

Many researchers have been drawn to the World War II period because demands of the wartime economy necessitated a dramatic reassessment of women's role in American life. Specifically, women were hired to fill positions normally occupied by men, jobs that not only paid higher wages than those in female fields but were thought to require "masculine" abilities and attitudes. The fact that a woman could step into a man's shoes and wear them rather comfortably posed an implicit challenge to traditional notions about femininity and female limitations. The question that has absorbed those of us focusing on the ideological dimension of this period is why the media's legitimation of female entry into male work failed to supplant the traditional image of women as homemakers, unsuited by nature for wielding power outside the domestic province, for competently manipulating the machinery at the heart of our industrial society, and for holding jobs normally allocated to male "breadwinners." Indeed, the great puzzle of the 1940s has been the paradoxical spawning of a reactionary postwar feminine mystique by a crisis that necessitated radical revision of traditional views.

In this study I am seeking to clarify those elements which defeated the potential of war work to legitimize women's entry into nontraditional occupations, to identify the ideological currents that invited women into men's sphere and yet flowed into the restrictive channels of traditional views about womanhood at the war's end. Where was the interface between praising women for their ability to perform public work competently and relegating them to the home because that is where their "natural" limitations and strengths placed them? How did the strong figure of Rosie the Riveter become transformed into the

naive, dependent, childlike, self-abnegating model of femininity in the late forties and 1950s? Why did the public image of patriotic war workers eager to return home fail so completely to reflect the reality of women wanting to keep their jobs, given that the media must in part reflect the feelings and beliefs of consumers in order to be credible? Finally, what were the models available to working-class women during the war for forming nontraditional conceptions of women's work? Since they were, after all, the major source of labor power and the people most dramatically affected by female employment patterns, it is instructive to look at media designed especially for a working-class audience to see if our analyses of the media as a whole apply to them as well. These are the questions that informed this case study of wartime fiction, advertising, and propaganda.

Scholars disagree over the long-term impact of World War II on women's role in American life and over whether the war period should be characterized as a time of continuity or of dramatic change in definitions of woman's place. ¹ William Chafe is at one end of the spectrum, concluding that the war accelerated the movement of women, especially married women, into the labor force, while Leila Rupp feels that the war had no permanent impact on their participation rate.² Karen Anderson agrees with Chafe that the war was an important turning point in that it began to make acceptable the notion that women could combine home roles and paid employment. She concludes, however, that women's secondary status within the labor force did not improve significantly and that the war's progressive impact was disappointingly weak.³ Susan Hartmann believes that the war not only paved the way for homemakers to take on outside jobs but laid down important bases for emergence of the second wave of feminism. At the same time, she notes that other forces generated by the emergency undermined its potential to alter gender roles.⁴

While there is considerable disagreement over the war's liberating effect on women in the postwar world, it is generally conceded that various forces worked against the retention of most progressive changes adopted to encourage women's entry into nontraditional fields. These range from the exclusion of women from powerful policy-making bodies in government through war contractors' resistance to viewing women workers

as permanent hires to the refusal of unions adequately to defend women's rights during reconversion. 5

In searching for an explanation as to why the war failed more significantly to improve women's status, analysts have attempted to understand the complex and seemingly contradictory images of women that characterize the early 1940s. Specifically, they have sought to unravel the mystery of how those images could expand and contract public conceptions of woman's place within such a short period of time without confusing or alienating the population and without more seriously challenging the conservative ideology behind the sexual division of labor. Again, there is a range of opinion on this issue.

The first attempt to explain the postwar reaction was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963.⁶ Friedan's study was the first to recognize that a radical change had occurred in women's magazines in the postwar era. She pointed out that prior to World War II heroines from magazine fiction were self-actualizing achievers committed to following a dream, whereas the postwar heroine was devoid of goals for personal growth: "The image of woman that emerges ... is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home."⁷ Advertising, articles, and fiction all abandoned the exciting world of adventure so characteristic of early magazines in favor of a mundane domestic playground which Friedan had come to view as a prison.

Friedan's explanation for this shift focuses on the social changes that occurred in the immediate postwar period when, she asserts, the insecurities and deprivations of the previous fifteen years made it tempting for people to retreat from the world into a domestic haven: "The American spirit fell into a strange sleep; men as well as women, scared liberals, disillusioned radicals, conservatives bewildered and frustrated by change the whole nation stopped growing up. All of us went back into the warm brightness of home, the way it was when we were children and slept peacefully upstairs while our parents read, or played bridge in the living room, or rocked on the front porch in the summer evening in our home towns."⁸ The traumas of the Depression and the war years had combined to produce in most citizens a desire for stability.

Friedan acknowledges, however, that other countries, even more traumatized by these events, failed to develop the mystique of feminine fulfillment through homemaking. She postulates that the American experience grew out of the ability of business to exploit such feelings in women in order to sell consumer products. While careful to point out that there was no high-level conspiracy to create the mystique, Friedan credits the plethora of domestic images to postwar sales strategies and the domination of women's magazines by male editors: "Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives." 9

More recently, studies have sought to locate the origins of the feminine mystique in an earlier period. The most important of these is Leila Rupp's analysis of German and American propaganda from 1939 to 1945.¹⁰ Rupp examines wartime images of women in government propaganda directives and women's magazines to see how the war affected traditional ideas about woman's place. She identifies several ways portrayals of war workers simultaneously urged the acceptance of women in male jobs and preserved their feminine identities. These ranged from comparing factory work to housework to using war workers as sex objects.¹¹ Rupp sharply contradicts Friedan's belief that the war's end precipitated an abrupt change in women's images. She concludes that, although the media's attention to working women was unprecedented in scope during World War II, fundamental changes in attitudes toward women did not occur as a result of the emergency: "Rosie the Riveter, like the flapper, was exotic in appearance, even perhaps in lifestyle. But the new image did not mean that the ideal American woman had changed beyond recognition. Beneath her begrimed exterior, she remained very much a traditional woman."¹²

Using a Marxist perspective, Ruth Milkman and J. E. Trey agree that wartime ideology continued to be based on prewar conservative values while noting that it reflects the intention and practice of capitalists to maintain gender divisions within the labor force even while they were hiring women to fill men's jobs. Though Trey states, as Milkman does not, that women were manipulated by the media into false consciousness of their roles as workers, both contend that tying war work to tra-

ditional female images was a logical direction for capitalist ideology to take because it reinforced women's inferior position in the work force at a time when material conditions challenged sexist work divisions. 13

Rupp concurs that public images during World War II adapted to the temporary employment of women in male fields so as to leave traditional gender norms untouched. However, she roots the survival of traditional images in what she believes to be the inherently conservative nature of social attitudes, which change very slowly: "The economic role and the popular image of women may change drastically in the course of a modern war, but basic ideas about women's proper sphere, characterized by cultural lag even in the case of long-term economic developments, change little."¹⁴

Karen Anderson and Susan Hartmann advance yet a fourth perspective. They posit that the postwar yearning for stability identified by Friedan was an outgrowth of needs generated during the war period itself, needs that strengthened traditional gender roles. As Anderson says: "The postwar stress on traditional family roles and values for women did not constitute a dramatic break with wartime themes."¹⁵ Both persuasively argue that disruptions to family life caused it to become highly valued and that women were expected to subordinate personal ambition in order to bolster the family unit."¹⁶ These tendencies were accelerated, not initiated, by the demobilization period when social readjustment was occurring on a massive scale.

With the exception of Friedan, who does not discuss the war years, these analysts have demonstrated that there is a high degree of continuity in images of the early and late 1940s and that postwar conservative views of women were rooted in economic, social, and ideological structures that transcended the brief campaign to alter gender roles. My intention is not to dispute this consensus, although my data suggest that the prewar and war periods were significantly more egalitarian than the years that followed. Rather, I wish to focus attention on the complex dimensions of home-front propaganda and its significance for images of women. It is my contention that the picture we find of women during World War II cannot be fully understood without reference to the larger campaign that tried to solidify and mobilize the home front into an efficient production

unit. The campaign to attract women into war production was part of a drive to weld the home front into an economic army, well disciplined, highly motivated by patriotism, and willing to make sacrifices for the good of American soldiers. This overriding propaganda goal subsumed the campaign to recruit women and largely shaped its direction; this was a goal, moreover, for which traditional ideas about women were well suited.

For a variety of reasons, war workers served as a symbol of the ideal home-front spirit, standing for national unity, dedication to the cause, and stoic pursuit of victory. This image both idealized woman as a strong, capable fighter infused with a holy spirit and undercut the notion that women deserved and wanted a larger role in public life. Because she was used to inspire energetic support of government programs, the war worker was shown as a paragon of virtue, capable of shouldering any burden and meeting any challenge. This aspect of her portrayal was a progressive movement toward the acceptance of women as equal partners in the struggle to preserve American institutions, to share in the hardships and rewards of public work at all levels.

Her apotheosis as a soldier-oriented, self-sacrificing martyr, however, reinforced notions about woman's traditional family role as supporter of the husband, without personal ambition or drive to make a lasting mark on the world. Such a view conflicted also with the feminist notion that women have a right to look after their own interests and promoted the idea of female self-subordination which feeds into the exploitation of women in and out of the home. Indeed, the notion that women had a right to be treated as individuals or to compete equally for positions of power ran counter to the major goal of war propaganda, which was to discourage individualistic, self-interested attitudes in order to produce a collective spirit of self-sacrifice on the home front. War work became a vehicle for women to shoulder their civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens rather than a way to become more independent and powerful.

Another dimension of the propaganda campaign to inspire civilian efforts which conflicted with the progressive notion that women could handle any man's job was the use of women as symbols of the besieged nation. To dramatize a conflict taking place on foreign soil, propagandists found in women the

personification of vulnerability they were looking for to concretize and make real the message that civilians must help soldiers protect American interests. Most often, this portrayal centered upon a wife, fearfully trying to protect her family amid the terrors of war. Though she was courageous and determined, it was clear that she was ill equipped to defend herself and needed to rely on masculine strength for her survival. The central role of the family in wartime propaganda, with the vulnerable homemaker as its figurehead, led easily into the idealization of the male breadwinner/female hearthkeeper at the end of the war.

Finally, women played the important role of preservers of peacetime virtues and family life, which came to be equated with security, stability, and prosperity. In addition to their courage and strength, they emerged as caretakers of national ideals and normalcy, a role that echoed women's traditional function as spiritual guides for the family. Having dramatized threats to their well-being in order to inspire service to their country, propagandists provided civilians with a vision of coming peace and reassured them that a violent, brutal world had not destroyed human decency. Women, then children, came to stand for those cherished qualities that had been snuffed out by carnage and danger: innocence, gentleness, idealism, continuity, and safety. They were charged with preserving this vision for soldiers caught up in the daily struggle to survive and with mending the social fabric when peace was won. The role allocated to women in wartime propaganda, then, was a complicated mixture of strength and dependence, competence and vulnerability, egalitarianism and conservatism.

These themes were all represented in both middle-class and working-class magazines, although to varying degrees. One of the more significant differences between the two groups is that working-class women's fiction presented a weaker egalitarian portrait of war workers than did middle-class stories. The former primarily featured characters in unskilled factory work or female fields while middle-class heroines took up welding, riveting, truck driving, and the like. Moreover, working-class war workers were in subordinate positions to men whereas their middle-class counterparts frequently wielded power over male workers, at times taking charge of whole businesses. In short, the feminist implications of war work were more likely

to be reflected in middle-class stories whereas in working-class literature heroines tended to identify proudly with the accomplishments of the working class as a whole rather than with their achievements as women.

There are a host of cultural factors that could have been responsible for this difference. In addition to these, story formulas with appeal for the two audiences and differing recruitment strategies led to an emphasis on different aspects of the government's campaign. This meant that in working-class periodicals there was a class rather than a gender emphasis in portrayals of war workers. Paradoxically, the wartime employment of women led to a more radical redefinition of female roles for an audience most likely to have remained in the home, but the real Rosie the Riveter found little affirmation of her ability to do a man's work in magazines aimed at her, nor did she see much indication that the war was a historic opportunity for escaping the female job ghetto. For us to view the war period, then, as a time when women were encouraged to believe they were capable of performing men's work is to ignore the fact that recruitment propaganda was significantly less egalitarian in working-class literature for women. We cannot therefore speak of a single wartime model of women workers in the media.

Although the major focus of this research is to clarify our understanding of a crucial moment in history when ideas about women underwent radical change, it also explores some important dimensions of popular culture what functions it serves, what characteristics it has, what relationship it enjoys to the social realities from which it springs. One of these is that the use of formula fiction and advertising as propaganda highlights the extraordinary complexity and flexibility of media designed to have mass appeal. Advertisers tried to sell an image of war workers compatible with government programs, corporate marketing strategies, and women's interests even though some of these goals conflicted. Formula fiction writers wove a wide range of propaganda goals into their stories without losing a sense of what their audience wanted to hear. Their treatment of war workers, in particular, furnishes a striking example of how popular artists skillfully meshed contradictory currents in American life, sometimes creating images destructive to their audience's interests yet providing fantasies that carried great

appeal. In addition, writers during World War II were able to incorporate didactic messages into sophisticated adult formulas without sacrificing their credibility or entertainment value.

The campaign to mobilize women through popular fiction and advertising provides a model of how artists can attempt subtly to shape cultural attitudes, to effect a kind of social engineering through using frameworks with proven appeal. Whether this attempt indeed produced the desired results is impossible to prove, although some researchers have concluded that the implicit, value-laden messages of popular culture are especially effective because they are not consciously analyzed. ¹⁷ What is important is that media people and government officials *believed* their efforts would produce behavior that would help the wartime economy run smoothly and demonstrated that the media can be effectively coordinated to perform a wide array of functions.

Any study of propaganda raises questions about the impact of media messages on their audience. This is an issue of such complexity that the field has been clouded by a fog of controversy concerning the relationship of popular culture to attitude formation and behavior. In the early stages of research into the significance and effect of mass communication, people tended to see a cause-and-effect relationship between mass media and the consumer: media shaped the audience's attitudes through presenting values in attractive packages. Wilbur Schramm has characterized this approach as the "Bullet Theory," wherein media messages were seen as a "magic bullet" transmitting ideas rather automatically from sender to receiver: "the audience was typically thought of as a sitting target; if a communicator could hit it, he [or she] would affect it. This became especially frightening because of the reach of the new mass media. The unsophisticated viewpoint was that if a person could be reached by the insidious forces of propaganda ... he [or she] could be changed and converted and controlled."¹⁸ Schramm goes on to say that researchers gradually adopted a more complex model that characterized the audience as an active selective one, "a full partner in the communication process." Seen from this perspective, the power of the mass media or propaganda to persuade is limited by the already existing attitudes, values, experiences, and needs of the consumer, who tends to

accept views from the media in agreement with his or her own: "the groups people [belong] to [lead] them to choose and react to messages in such a way as to defend the common norms of the groups they value." 19

Most analysts of wartime popular culture agree with this perspective and caution against the temptation to attribute more power to the media than was the case. Leila Rupp, for example, rejects the view that women were manipulated into and out of the labor force by propagandists, stating that the most important factor in women taking a job was financial incentive.²⁰ Similarly, Susan Hartmann notes that although postwar media were largely controlled by men women voluntarily consumed their products. She therefore concludes that a responsive chord had been struck, one that spoke to women's problems in adjusting to peacetime: "The female imagery in the popular culture surely spoke to women's own ambivalence about their changing situation, an ambivalence produced not just by the novelty of their experiences, but by the failure of social and economic institutions to change in ways that would ease women's accommodation to different roles."²¹

Popular culture must, to some extent, reflect the assumptions, fantasies, and values of consumers in order to be commercially successful. As John Cawelti says of popular story types: "I think we can assume that formulas become collective cultural products because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable to if not preferred by the cultural groups who enjoy them.... When a group's attitudes undergo some change, new formulas arise and existing formulas develop new themes and symbols, because formula stories are created and distributed almost entirely in terms of commercial exploitation. Therefore, allowing for a certain degree of inertia in the process, the production of formulas is largely dependent on audience response."²² Though we can attribute some of the traditional themes found in women's magazines to that portion of the audience which failed to enter the labor force, many of their consumers were wage earners, especially those of the confessions. We must assume, then, that some of the elements we find in wartime confession stories reflected the desires and feelings of many employed women, though they

mirrored only some aspects of their experience while ignoring others.

Cawelti also points out that the degree to which popular literature can be said to reflect the world views of its readers is limited by the fact that literary experience is qualitatively different from how one responds to real life: "our experience of literature is not like any other form of behavior since it concerns events and characters that are imagined. Reading about something is obviously not the same thing as doing it." 23 That the readers of confessions, for instance, fantasized about male rescuers and found little affirmation of their ability to do a man's work does not mean that working-class women in the labor force failed to believe they had a right to and would benefit from high-paying blue-collar jobs in manufacturing. We know, for example, that many women employed in defense plants wanted to keep their war jobs, including 50 percent of those who had previously been homemakers, and that they resisted being channeled back into service and trade work.²⁴ Clearly, economic imperatives and the fulfillment of doing skilled work exerted a greater influence on women who had advanced during the war than did propaganda or private fantasies.

To recognize that wartime propaganda was not a purely top-down phenomenon that manipulated a gullible audience into betraying its own interests, however, does not mean that it had no damaging effects on employed women. Though war workers were not convinced that their role was to come into defense plants only to support the country, the fact that the media conveyed this message almost certainly persuaded the public as a whole that this was the case since many would have had no personal experience that countered the prevailing image. Although it is impossible to measure the effects of propaganda that reinforced myths about working women, the lack of a more congenial ideological framework undoubtedly made it more difficult for workers to mount an effective defense of their rights.

Finally, we ought not to minimize the power of images to frame the parameters of what people consider appropriate goals and behavior for themselves. Susan Griffin touches on the significance cultural images have for our self-conceptions in her analysis of the pornographic mind: