



The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965

Sylvie Murray

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Fictional characters, such as June Cleaver, and criticism of suburban domestic passivity, notably Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, have profoundly shaped our popular and intellectual view of the immediate postwar decade. It is this image of apolitical domesticity and suburban conformity that Sylvie Murray challenges in "The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965." Set in the rapidly developing neighborhoods of northeastern Queens--home of none other than Friedan herself in the early 1950s--this study traces the political activities of a diverse group of middle-class suburbanites and brings into focus the central role played by full-time mothers and housewives as community activists. Like their famous neighbor, these Queens housewives were at the center of a vital network of civic organizations that used a variety of political strategies--from quiet lobbying to street protests--to build residential neighborhoods of quality. The battles they fought--to improve local schools and other public services, to stop the construction of public housing, and to control the cost and quality of rental housing, among others--cannot be easily pegged to the right or the left on the political spectrum. Rather, they reveal a profound conviction that both citizens and the state were responsible for the well-being of local communities. Part of an ongoing historical revision of the 1950s, "The Progressive Housewife" engages the current attempt to recognize and understand the political meaning of the middle class and suburbia, dispelling the myth of suburban domestic passivity by revealing the forms of political activity ordinary women were engaged in long before contemporary feminism had surfaced.

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Author : Sylvie Murray

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