

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

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ELAINE TYLER MAY'S *HOMEWARD BOUND:
AMERICAN FAMILIES IN THE COLD WAR ERA*¹

May attempts to blend peculiar political ideology (Cold War) and prevalent social practice (domesticity) into a cultural history of what she calls “domestic containment.” While the two may parallel, but not even as to strict chronology as she admits, they do not directly influence each other necessarily. To her discredit, she often misreads sources and fabricates phrases that have no basis in legitimate historical discourse, as she promotes her thesis that “the story of domestic containment . . . viable alternatives to the prevailing family norm were virtually unavailable. Because of the political, ideological, and institutional developments that converged at the time, young adults were indeed homeward bound. But they were also bound to the home” (xxvi). Such thinking is quite creative but not really historical. Few who lived in the 1950s would understand what she is talking about. *Homeward Bound* typifies the post-Vietnam reconstruction of an earlier mythologized period, yet written in contradistinction to its mores and especially in regards to women’s liberation from what is caricatured as the domestic sphere.

At best, the Kelly Longitudinal Study (and even the Alfred Kinsey report) represents marginal and regional (particularly the KLS) cross sections of the American populace. She omits important political resources (i.e., for a Cold War history), recontextualizes popular cultural data (i.e., the Bill Haley lyrics), and appeals to quirky authorities (i.e., Joseph Darst). By redefining

¹New York, NY: Basic Books, 1990.

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social phenomena in political terms, she infuses the squabbles over domesticity with a broader cultural identity.

Obviously, the use of historical data from the 1950s can be gleaned for legitimate foundations and preconditions of a later decade or decades. This is a natural function of chronology and the meaning of history through or over time. But the data thus extracted must be coherent with and plausible to observations and understandings of that time in order to be historically valid.

The fragmented and ill-defined American bourgeoisie presents a difficult obstacle to May's argument. It is a given that American domestic perceptions (i.e., of the black minority) were not as monolithic as she assumes.

The myth of the "middle class" has and will plague American historiography, until historians guard against generalizations (*a la* sociological interpretations) and limit the scope of their work to the strictures of empirical evidence. However, this tends to trivialize history and render historical interpretation impotent. Regardless, some measure of security and stability did emerge from the United States victory in World War II. After all, America and the Allies won the war. But a society as large as the United States, even in the 1950s, revealed mixed feelings along with multiple reactions to the "newness" of the United States in both internal and international concerns. Generally, though, the growth of the middle class through the 1950s inveighs against insecurity as an impetus for domestic tranquillity. The question for May's study

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may very well be the proverbial “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” Did family ideology influence foreign ideology, as seems to be the case, or visa versa, as May suggests?

In May’s caricature, Marilyn and Hugh do not fit into the evolving cultural mold of domestic containment. They only can be viewed as anachronisms (but a sweet one in Marilyn’s case) from a bygone era, or as precursors (“forerunners” perhaps, or maybe “prophet” and “prophetess”) of a forthcoming sexually-liberated aeon. At any rate, Hugh survived to see his heyday, but Marilyn, “uncontained” (except by John F. Kennedy, presumably), perished prematurely.