

WHO STOLE FEMINISM:  
How Women Have Betrayed Women  
by Christina Hoff Sommers  
Simon & Schuster, New York NY 1994  
320 pp index, \$US 16.00 sc  
Reviewed by Peg Tittle

Sommers' main claim is that 'gender feminists' (those who "believe that all our institutions . . . perpetuate male dominance" [16] such as Wolf, Faludi, MacKinnon, French, and Steinem) have 'stolen' feminism from 'equity feminists' (those who want "fair treatment, without discrimination" [22] such as Wollstonecraft, Stanton, Anthony, Friedan, and Greer).

I find Sommers' labels a little confusing: equity feminists, *like* gender feminists, look at the world through a sex/gender lens--it is precisely that view, because it reveals inequities based on sex and gender, that motivate them to become feminists. I myself prefer the term 'anti-sexist' to 'feminist' (the equity kind of feminist)--though 'humanist feminist' has also been suggested. And 'gynocentric feminism' would be, I think, a more accurate label for Sommers' 'gender feminism'--they are seeking the centrality (not 'just' the equality) of the female.

Opening with a challenge to death by anorexia statistics and birth defects by domestic violence statistics, Sommers goes on to address many 'facts' that make up the foundation of the feminist movement--and, I would point out, both 'equity' and 'gender' feminists 'depend' on them: bias against girls in school, violence against women, and wage differentials. Sommers is careful to say that it's not that there are no problems with any of these issues; rather, she is saying that the extent of the problem is not as great as we might think. However, it is one thing to say that the research was flawed. It is another to say that the research was misunderstood and/or misquoted. And it is still another to say that either of these is *because of* the gender feminists. I don't think Sommers sufficiently distinguishes these three claims.

I especially liked the chapter titled "The Self-Esteem Study". One alternative interpretation, put forth by Wendy Wood, intrigued me: "what may look like a self-esteem gender gap may be merely due to a gap in expressiveness . . . girls and women are more aware of their feelings and

more articulate in expressing them, and so they are more candid about their negative emotions in self-reports than males are" (144). Also, some interesting omissions were revealed: the statistics which indicate a gender gap are based on 'always true' responses (to the statement 'I'm happy the way I am'); when the responses to the next two possibilities ('sort of true' and 'sometimes true/false') are included (eliminating only the responses to the last two possibilities, 'sort of false' and 'always false'), the gap between boys and girls is not 17%, but 4%. Further, these are 'white only' statistics: 58% of African-American girls said 'always true' compared to 36% of white boys--so apparently only *white* girls have a self-esteem problem.

The chapter examining violence against women was equally full of surprises about how the statistics get figured and disfigured; ditto for the wage differential chapter (though I was sorry to see that Sommers ignored the relation between women and part-time jobs).

One of Sommers' implicit claims seems to be that we do not live in a patriarchy, that the playing field is now level--thanks to the efforts of Classical/Liberal/Old Feminism. This may be true *legally*; but I don't think it's true socially. (Usually legal change follows rather than leads social change, doesn't it?) In a hundred and one subtle ways, equity is being 'sabotaged': Why else, despite the fact that "twice as many girls as boys participate in student government, band and orchestra, and drama or service clubs" (160), are there nowhere near twice as many women as men in governments and orchestras and why are most of the service clubs (for example, the Shriners, the Rotary, the Lions) dominated by men? And why else, despite the fact that "more boys than girls cut classes, fail to do homework assignments, had disciplinary problems, had been suspended, and had been in trouble with the police" (161) do men own and control ninety-something percent of the earth's resources?

Though Sommers usually provides the university as the context for her claims and refers throughout to 'academic feminists', she never comes right out and says that her claims are applicable or observable only in that context. And I think that perhaps that is the case. People who live their lives in the university often forget that it is a world unto itself and it is only one of many worlds. My guess is that many (most?) feminists have never been to university; and of those who have, most

would not have taken a Women's Studies course (anyone who graduated before the early 80s, i.e., anyone over 35, simply would not even have had that option). And so though there may be blue safe lights all over the Princeton campus at night, we have seen no such thing in our neighbourhoods. And so there is legitimacy in saying, with reference to at least six of the twelve chapters (Women Under Siege; Indignation, Resentment, and Collective Guilt; Transforming the Academy; New Epistemologies; The Feminist Classroom; A Bureaucracy of One's Own), 'we don't know what you're talking about'. (And, unfortunately, it's a short step from that to 'you don't know what you're talking about'.) I have read several supposed 'backlash' books lately (Roiphe's *The Morning After*, Fekete's *Moral Panic*, Tafler's *Fair New World*) and all of them seem to share this narrow view--they see only the university.

Of course, if there is a clear relation between the university world and the rest of the worlds we live in, my observation may be trivial. Do the other worlds pattern themselves after the university? Are those books canary chirps we should listen to? Honestly--I don't know. Superficially, I'd say 'no'; but then I don't know how many and how effective advisors from academia are to the laws and attitudes in those other worlds.

To conclude, I think my 'going too far' line is a little further than Sommers'; nevertheless I have written 'yes' in the margin (yes, tossing out logic and rationality as phallogocentric is going too far) as often as I've written 'no' (no, eliminating the white male bias of the curriculum is not going too far)--it is a book well worth the read. And now that I have read it, I'd like to answer another critic's question, 'does Sommers like women at all?': I'm quite she does--just not *necessarily better* than men.