

The War against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men.

By Christina Hoff Sommers. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Robert Menzies

Dans le volume intitulé The War Against Boys (La guerre contre les garçons), Christina Hoff Sommers déplore le déclin et la chute des jeunes hommes dans le sillage du féminisme dit « de la deuxième vague ». D'après Sommers, une révolution dans le système d'éducation, menée par une armée d'idéologues féministes, d'associations universitaires et de lobbyistes à la parole facile, a élevé les filles à leur statut actuel d'élite privilégiée quant au genre. En revanche, les garçons ont été marginalisés dans la classe ; ils échouent dans une proportion sans précédent et sont punis simplement parce qu'ils sont du sexe masculin. Concoctant une mixture—trop bien connue, hélas !—de rhétorique de ressac, de philosophie néo-conservatrice et de discours sociobiologique, Sommers fait un lien entre la triste situation des garçons (et des hommes) et les courants plus importants de relativisme moral, de collectivisme en expansion, d'égalitarisme obligatoire et de rectitude politique qui, d'après ses allégations, imprègnent la société contemporaine. Dans le monde de Sommers, garçons et filles aussi bien qu'hommes et femmes ne peuvent trouver le salut que dans la morale, le retour aux valeurs familiales, un respect légitime de l'autorité, un engagement renouvelé envers la discipline, une reprise de l'éducation conventionnelle et une revalorisation des rapports de genre traditionnels. Le livre de Sommers se situe dans la vague des écrits anti-féministes et « des droits des hommes » qui a inondé le milieu universitaire et populaire ces dernières années. Les féministes se doivent de prendre ce livre au sérieux, car il représente une force réactionnaire qui vise à réduire à néant des acquis difficilement obtenus. Dans son essence, la guerre contre les garçons reflète une lutte entre deux visions très différentes des droits de la personne, de la justice sociale, de la gouvernance publique et de la vie privée.

In The War against Boys, Christina Hoff Sommers laments the decline and fall of young men in the wake of second-wave feminism. According to Sommers, a revolution in the education system, executed by an army of gender-feminist ideologues, ivory-tower organizations, and slick political lobbyists, has elevated girls into their present status as a privileged gender elite. Boys, conversely, have been marginalized in the classroom, are failing in unprecedented numbers, and are being punished for simply being male. Concocting an all-too-familiar farrago of backlash rhetoric, neo-conservative philosophy, and socio-biological discourse, Sommers links the plight of boys (and men) to wider currents of moral relativism, rampant collectivism, compulsory egalitarianism, and political correctness, which allegedly flow through contemporary society. In Sommers's world, boys and girls as well as men and women can find redemption only through moral guidance, a re-

embracing of family values, a righteous respect for authority, a renewed commitment to discipline, a revisiting of conventional education, and a revalorizing of traditional gender roles. Sommers's book should be read amid the small tsunami of anti-feminist and 'men's rights' writings that have inundated both academic and popular contexts in recent years. Feminists need to take this work very seriously, for it represents a powerful reactionary impetus aimed at reversing hard-won progressive gains. The war over boys is, at its core, a struggle over widely disparate visions of human rights, social justice, public governance, and private life.

Since its publication a few months ago, *The War against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*¹ has triggered a small avalanche of commentary and debate in both scholarly circles and the popular media. Its author, Christina Hoff Sommers, is arguably the most recognizable among a growing cohort of female 'men's rights' advocates who have vaulted into prominence over the course of the past decade. Along with such other notables as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Wendy McElroy, Daphne Patai, Katie Roiphe, and Cathy Young,² Sommers has positioned herself among the vanguard of the 'pro-male' backlash movement against feminism. Their crusade is centred in the United States, but it has also had a global impact. It purports to represent the interests of men and boys everywhere who for a generation have been ostensibly enduring the indignities, excesses, and abuses of misandrist policies, nurtured by powerful 'gender feminist' forces, which have systematically corrupted the academy, the family, the educational system, the law, the state, and the public culture.

A philosopher by profession and former faculty member at Clark University, Sommers is now a 'fellow' at the right-wing American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. Her first foray into the gender wars, the 1994 book *Who Stole Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women*,³ was a widely referenced bestseller. In *The War against Boys*, Sommers, a mother of two sons, now trains her sights on the 'boy crisis' that has ostensibly erupted in the primary schools of 'America' (and, presumably, Canada and innumerable other countries of the developed world). Her main thesis, encapsulated in the subtitle, is that radical feminist ideology and 'junk science' have been responsible for inculcating dangerous myths to the effect that structured gender biases against girls permeate

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1. Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
2. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life" (New York: Anchor Books, 1996); Wendy McElroy, *Sexual Correctness: The Gender-Feminist Attack on Women* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1996); Daphne Patai, *Heterophobia: Sexual Harassment and the Future of Feminism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); and Cathy Young, *Ceasefire! Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
3. Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

the educational system. This pantheon of deceptions, distortions, and untruths, Sommers argues, has kindled a feminist revolution throughout the nation's schools, elevating girls into their present status as a privileged elite who garner a hugely disproportionate share of the available institutional resources and rewards. Boys, for their part, have been consigned to the educational scrap heap. According to Sommers, boys are being marginalized in the classroom; they are failing in unprecedented numbers; they are manifesting alarming rates of social problems, including suicide and violence; they are being exposed to a myriad of degrading programs of feminization, which are aimed at short-circuiting their male identity. In short, they are being punished simply for being male. As the book's opening sentence solemnly intones, "[i]t's a bad time to be a boy in America."⁴

The War against Boys is essentially a manifesto in three parts. The first three chapters establish Sommers's main premise concerning the alleged tyranny of gender equity, in which she arrays a litany of sources in support of her assertion that boys are the victims of a feminist-controlled state educational machinery. According to Sommers, a politically correct cabal of authoritarian do-gooders—epitomized by such organizations as the American Association of University Women, the Wellesley Center for Research on Women, and the Women's Educational Equity Act Equity Resource Center—has laid siege to masculinity in the schools, as it has elsewhere. Assorted atrocity tales are selectively wheeled in to chronicle how equity-obsessed and gender-intoxicated academics, researchers, and policymakers have conspired to demonize young men as culturally deficient and inherently abusive beings, and how they have made boys the targets of invidious brainwashing practices that are destined to emasculate an entire generation of males into a condition of androgynous impotence.

Who comprises the ideological brain trust behind these feminist encroachments into the male realm? Who has been supplying the intellectual capital and propagating the deficient and deceptive research data that have combined to empower this organized campaign against boys? In Chapters 4 and 5 of the book (archly entitled, respectively, "Carol Gilligan and the Incredible Shrinking Girl" and "Gilligan's Island"), Sommers singles out Carol Gilligan, professor of gender studies at Harvard University and author of the ubiquitous book, *In a Different Voice*,⁵ as one of the principal purveyors of anti-male discourse and policy. In a protracted (and vitriolic) excoriation of her theoretical writings and empirical research, Sommers depicts Gilligan as a prototypical 'ivory tower' feminist whose work has wantonly privileged women's culture to the detriment of fact and truth. Gilligan, according to Sommers, exemplifies feminist ideologues everywhere in reproducing "the tiresome misandry that infects so many gender theorists who never stop blaming the 'male culture' for all social and psychological ills."⁶ For those individuals who are even remotely acquainted with the longstanding feminist debate over Gilligan's work—in particular, with the

4. Sommers, *supra* note 1.

5. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

6. Sommers, *supra* note 1 at 134.

controversies that her more essentialist writings have evoked—Sommers's efforts to brandish Gilligan as a feminist archetype will appear, at the very least, surreal. At another level, some may detect no small irony in the extent to which Sommers's posturings occupy the very same essentialist terrain (albeit of a biological rather than a cultural bent) upon which she casts, and so caustically castigates, her 'radical' feminist adversary.

In the final four chapters of the book, Sommers unleashes the core elements of her neo-conservative philosophy of gender politics, and she outlines her agenda for neutralizing feminist policies and practices both within and beyond the educational system. For Sommers, not surprisingly, the antidote to the alleged moral relativism, rampant collectivism, compulsory egalitarianism, political correctness, and overall social decline of recent times resides in a restoration of traditional value systems. It demands a recognition of the material and moral absolutes upon which gender relations, and social institutions more generally, were originally established.

The assault on boys and men, according to Sommers, has been fuelled by a misconceived culturalist repudiation of the inherent socio-biological roots of all human conduct and cognition. The gender-specific behaviours of boys, she insists, must be accepted (and celebrated) as "normal manifestations of biological structures that determine the different ways in which boys and girls function."⁷ Given that "[m]other nature is not a feminist,"⁸ totalitarian intrusions into the male world, in the reputed interests of making them better (for women), are doomed to fail. However assiduous the efforts at transforming them, Sommers reminds us, in the final analysis masculinity is not open to negotiation: "[O]ne of the most agreeable facts of life is that boys will be boys."⁹

Superimposed on this all-too-familiar rendering of the biology-as-destiny model is a lament for the lost moral world of past generations. For the philosopher Sommers, Aristotle trumps Rousseau. If twenty-first-century boys (and girls) are indeed in trouble, their confusion, rage, and pain are attributable not to poverty, racism, (hetero)sexism, and a multitude of other progressivist obsessions but rather to children's "moral drift, their cognitive and scholastic defects."¹⁰ According to Sommers, "[w]e are just emerging from a thirty-year experiment with moral deregulation."¹¹ The liberal legal culture of child rights¹² and the "morally permissive, laissez-faire environment that most schools today provide"¹³ have together operated to cast boys (and girls) adrift in a value-depleted purgatory forged from the ideologies and policies of feminism and related 'radical' movements. Only through moral guidance, a structured environment, a re-embracing of family values, a righteous respect for authority, a renewed

7. *Ibid.* at 152.

8. *Ibid.* at 88.

9. *Ibid.* at 213.

10. *Ibid.* at 157.

11. *Ibid.* at 192.

12. *Ibid.* at 188.

13. *Ibid.* at 200.

commitment to discipline, a willingness to punish transgression, a revisiting of conventional forms of education, and a revalorizing of traditional gender roles can the 'war over boys' be won.

Sommers's message is scarcely new. The populist stylings and seductive discourse aside, the essential content of *The War against Boys* could easily have been harvested from a Republican party white paper (in every sense of the term) on educational policy, or perhaps from a position platform drafted by R.E.A.L. Women. Sommers's philosophical rationalism, moral absolutism, biological determinism, possessive individualism, privileging of liberty over equality, and enmity towards all things progressive pervade every page of this vituperative little tome. Sommers's arch-conservative politics of nostalgia, her hierarchical vision of gender relations, her caricature of 'gender feminism' as anti-male, and her identification with the 'men's rights' movement are all the more accentuated by her professed allegiance to 'real' feminist values. Her denunciation of ('radical' and 'authoritarian' versions of) feminism in the name of women, and on behalf of men, represents one more wearisome rendering of this chronically recurring theme in the anti-feminist literature. In the end, apart from its focusing of attention on boys rather than on men, and its inventive censuring of liberal education as an anti-male establishment, *The War against Boys* is best seen as just another in a profuse torrent of backlash books that have been inundating the academic and popular marketplace over the past ten years.¹⁴

However, if Sommers is simply retelling old ground, then why should feminists, and socio-legal scholars more generally, pay heed to *The War against Boys* and other publications of its ilk? Why provide a forum in the pages of the *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* and other progressive academic contexts, for this politically antediluvian, academically dubious, and decidedly androcentric tract?

As I see it, when all is said and done, the substantive content of *The War against Boys*, the rigour of Sommers's research, and the quality of her scholarship are really of secondary import and are perhaps even entirely irrelevant to this book's unquestionable standing as a contemporary feminist concern. The real impact, and the attendant danger, of Sommers's writing lurk instead in its instrumental and symbolic value as an ideological medium of the new Right male agenda. In this capacity, Sommers's work both graphically represents and

14. See all of the titles listed in note 2. See also Philip W. Cooke, *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997); Peter C. Emberley, *Zero Tolerance: Hot Button Politics in Canada's Universities* (Toronto: Penguin, 1996); Warren Farrell, *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); John Fekete, *Moral Panic: Biopolitics Rising* (Montreal and Toronto: Robert Davies Publishing, 1994); Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, and Martin W. Lewis, eds., *The Flight from Science and Reason* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997); David Horowitz and Peter Collier, eds., *The Heterodoxy Handbook: How to Survive the PC Campus* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1994); Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Alan Millard, *Equality: A Man's Claim* (Salt Lake City, UT: Northwest Publishing, 1995); Robert L. Nadeau, *S/He Brain: Science, Sexual Politics, and the Myths of Feminism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Rick Zubaty, *Surviving the Feminization of America: How to Keep Women from Ruining Your Life* (Palatine, IL: Panther Press, 1994).

profoundly reinforces the potent neo-conservative discourses that circulate through advanced capitalist society. The reconstituted and repackaged orthodoxies dispensed by Sommers and other individuals like her are ascendant not only in educational contexts but also across an array of civil and state institutions, from the family to commercialized culture to the law. These discourses, in turn, infuse and sustain a wide aggregation of retrograde and radically conservative social movements—including the vast network of anti-feminist (read: misogynist) men's and fathers' rights organizations and agencies.

For advocates of 'male power,' *The War against Boys* has become a veritable *cause célèbre*. The websites, newsletters, and publications of the anti-feminist movement are festooned with testimonials to Sommers's outpourings, not to mention the works of Fox-Genovese, McElroy, Patai, Roiphe, Young, and the burgeoning cohort of male propagandists for the men's rights 'cause.'¹⁵ Together these writings comprise the cultural cutting edge of a political impetus with deep roots and far-reaching implications. Appropriating the discourses of feminism and other progressive movements, these backlash forces have derived their energy and legitimacy from (re)constructed ideas that women have managed to eclipse men in the historical struggle for gender supremacy. Literally hundreds of such organizations, agencies, and lobby groups¹⁶ are currently active across Canada, the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and beyond. They have established a presence in academic settings, legal arenas, policy forums, and governments, and they are actively promoting their neo-conservative agenda across a galaxy of issues, including equity and affirmative action; (sexual) harassment; child custody, access, and support; health, education, and welfare expenditure; gay and lesbian rights; taxation policies; and legal and constitutional reform.

Feminists need to take this movement very seriously, for the 'war over boys' is, at its core, about the preservation and advancement of human rights. It is a political and institutional struggle over widely disparate visions of public governance and private life. In these respects, the rallying cries of anti-feminists and men's and fathers' rights groups are discursive representations of a far deeper conflict over who gets access to the power structures of contemporary society. These struggles play themselves out, to a large degree, within the cultural realm. The writings of Sommers and other 'manpower' advocates reproduce the wider hegemonic practices of which they are a part, at the same time as they harbour direct implications for feminist scholars and activists everywhere. Through a perversion of all that feminism stands for—by mutating its inclusive, democratizing, and emancipatory theories and practices into warped public images

15. See all the titles in notes 2 and 14.

16. Just a few of the more prominent American and Canadian examples include: Academic Sexual Correctness, the American Fathers' Coalition, the American Congress for Fathers and Children, the Anti-Feminist Backfire Society, Backlash, Freedom for Kids, the Foundation for the Advancement of Sexual Equity, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education Inc., Friends of Choice for Men, MANifesto, the Men's Defence Association, the Men's Educational Support Association, Men-Law, Men's Rights Inc., the National Centre for Men, the National Coalition of Free Men, the Shared Parenting Forum, and Witchhunt.

of totalitarianism and intolerance—books such as *The War against Boys* become ideological weapons in the war against social justice. It is at this point that the political potency of such writings—their capacity to nourish the backlash and help reverse hard-won feminist gains—must be acknowledged and resisted.