

From the Women's Desk:

The "Stolen Feminism" Hoax: Anti-Feminist Attack Based on Error-Filled Anecdotes

By Laura Flanders

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In her book, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, Christina Hoff Sommers sounds the alarm. "American feminism is currently dominated by a group of women who seek to persuade the public that American women are not the free creatures we think we are," she writes. Such feminists have "alienated and silenced women and men alike." Where once there were Reds under the bed, now there is the Fem Menace by every blackboard: "These consciousness-raisers are driving out the scholars on many campuses."

Unlike the "well adjusted" women of the 19th Century "first wave" of feminism, "gender feminists" (as Sommers calls the modern ones she doesn't like) are manipulating facts, squelching debate and running off with money and influence.

"The gender feminists have proved very adroit in getting financial support from governmental and private sources. They hold the keys to many bureaucratic fiefdoms," Sommers reports, without citing statistics. "It is now virtually impossible to be appointed to high administrative office in any university system without having passed muster with the gender feminists," she asserts.

Even as Sommers berates feminists for embracing "victimhood," she complains that classicists like herself are under personal attack: "To criticize feminist ideology is now hazardous in the extreme."

Sommers, an associate professor at Clark University, is entitled to her opinions. The problem is that her book, published this year by Simon & Schuster, claims to be about facts. The *National Review* (6/21/94) excerpted a portion under the headline "Why Feminism's Vital Statistics Are Always Wrong". Her book is filled with the same kind errors, unsubstantiated charges and citations of "advocacy research" that she claims to find in the work of the feminists she takes to task.

Anti-Feminist Folktales

Reviewing the book in the *Wall Street Journal* (7/1/94), Melanie Kirkpatrick enthused: "One of the strengths of *Who Stole Feminism* is its lack of a political agenda.... Ms. Sommers simply lines up her facts and shoots one bulls-eye after another."

In fact, like anti-"p.c." writers before her, Sommers relies heavily on a handful of oft-repeated anti-feminist anecdotes--or folktales. In *Who Stole Feminism*, readers find again the tale told by Katie Roiphe (*The Morning After*) and Sarah Crichton of *Newsweek* (10/25/93) of the rape-on-campus study that included the question, "Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because a man gave you alcohol or drugs?" Like Roiphe and Crichton, Sommers exaggerates the importance of the question--she claims that "once you remove the positive responses to question eight, the finding that one in four college women is a victim of rape or attempted rape drops to one in nine."

Mary Koss, the study's author, explicitly writes in *Current Controversies in Family Violence* (a book Sommers makes reference to) that when answers to that question are removed, the victims of rape or attempted rape fall from one in four to one in five. The one in nine figure related to completed rapes alone, as reported in a newspaper story Sommers apparently misread.

Sommers also retells the story of the English professor at Pennsylvania State University who "took offense" at Goya's *The Naked Maja*, a reproduction of which was hanging in her classroom. According to Sommers, who sources only the *Pottsville Republican*, the professor "filed formal harassment charges" and got the painting removed. The professor, Nancy Stumhofer, says she never objected to the painting but to male students' comments about it while she tried to teach. "I never claimed I had been sexually harassed by the painting," Stumhofer pointed out in *Democratic Culture* (Spring/94). Nor were formal charges ever filed.

In arguing against feminist claims that wife-beating was tolerated in English common law, Sommers quotes the 18th Century legal historian William Blackstone: "The husband was prohibited from using any violence to his wife...." The ellipsis conceals a Latin phrase that Sommers either didn't bother to translate or decided to ignore. In English it reads: "other than that which lawfully and reasonably belongs to the husband for the due government and correction of his wife." (Linda Hirshman, *L.A. Times* op-ed, 7/31/94) In other words, the complete text says the exact opposite of Sommers' partial quotation.

Even when Sommers spots an authentic feminist foul-up, she makes errors of her own. Naomi Wolf, in her book *The Beauty Myth*, claims that there are 150,000 deaths from anorexia a year. Sommers points out that this is actually an estimate of the number of cases of anorexia per year. Then she states that the actual number of deaths from anorexia is "less than 100 [deaths] per year." This number is highly dubious, since it is based on a count of death certificates, which rarely list anorexia as a cause of death; anorexia-related deaths are usually listed as heart failure or suicide. Studies of anorexia suggest that the long-term fatality rate may be 15 percent or higher (*The Course of Eating Disorders*, Herzog et al, eds.).

As Sommers writes: "Where were the fact checkers, the editors, the skeptical journalists?" Naomi Wolf has long since admitted her error, as has Gloria Steinem who repeated it. Sommers herself seems to have a harder time facing facts and correcting her errors.

"Sea of Credulity"

In her account of a campaign sparked by FAIR to get NBC to play a 30-second public service announcement about domestic violence before its broadcast of the 1993 Super Bowl game, Sommers repeats uncritically one reporter's version of the incident, and adds fresh errors of her own.

Sommers writes that there wasn't "any basis for saying that there was a significant rise in domestic violence on Super Bowl Sunday." Her book suggests that she never read FAIR's Jan. 18, 1993 news release, which spelled out the grounds for addressing domestic violence on Super Bowl Sunday. That release stated: "The Super Bowl is one of the most widely viewed television events every year. Unfortunately, women's shelters report that Super Bowl Sunday is also one of the worst days of the year for violence against women in the home." The release cited press reports (*New York Times*, 1/5/92, 1/22/92; *Chicago Tribune*, 1/27/91) based on the accounts of those who work with battered women.

In contrast to a "roiling sea of media credulity"--including at least one journalist who had been writing about the Super Bowl-related violence for years before FAIR's campaign--Sommers praises "a lone island of professional integrity": Ken Ringle, a *Washington Post* staff writer. Ringle is hardly to be held up as an ethical model: *The American Journalism Review* (5/93) found that, in his Super Bowl article, he appeared "to have twisted and used quotes selectively to support his thesis," and noted that the *Post*'s ombudsman had acknowledged "inaccuracies and flaws" in his reporting. Sommers cites the *AJR* article in a footnote, but declines to quote it.

Sommers claims to be a skeptic who believes in going to the original source, but neither she nor Ringle ever called the national FAIR office in New York to check their stories or get copies of the materials that FAIR distributed. Nor did Sommers consult a calendar: Her "chronology" put the Super Bowl on Jan. 30, which was actually a Saturday.

Sommers also claims that around the Super Bowl, "a very large mailing was sent by Dobisky

Associates, FAIR's publicists, warning at risk women: Don't remain at home with him during the game." Had Sommers (or Ringle) called FAIR, s/he would have discovered that FAIR has never worked with Dobisky Associates--and had never heard of the firm before Ringle's piece.

In her account, Sommers uses quotes from a psychotherapist named Michael Lindsey that appeared in Ringle's piece. One of his comments she quotes twice, for emphasis. She doesn't mention that the Post's ombudsman had acknowledged that Lindsey's remarks had been taken out of context by Ringle.

Nor does Sommers mention that the views attributed to Lindsey by Ringle--critical of FAIR's Super Bowl efforts and of a link between football and domestic violence--were directly contradicted by accurate quotes from Lindsey in the same day's New York Times (1/31/93): "That PSA will save lives," said Lindsey. "It will give people the permission to call for help. The same way so much violence in football gives people permission to batter."

Right-Wing Feminism?

Sommers claims that she's a feminist, and journalists have largely taken her at her word. She has been identified as such on television, and many of the reviews of Who Stole Feminism? ran under headlines such as "Rebel in the Sisterhood" (Boston Globe, 6/16/94) or "A Feminist on the Outs" (Time, 8/1/94).

Yet Sommers was quoted in Esquire earlier this year (2/94), "There are a lot of homely women in women's studies. Preaching these anti-male, anti-sex sermons is a way for them to compensate for various heartaches--they're just mad at the beautiful girls." By that standard, Rush Limbaugh ("Feminism was established so as to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream of society"--Limbaugh Letter, (3/94) is a feminist.

Actually, Limbaugh--a proven font of disinformation--and Sommers--who portrays herself as a stickler for accuracy--have developed a mutual admiration society. Limbaugh repeatedly plugs her "brave and courageous book" (radio show, 6/14/94). "I'm proud that you like the book," Sommers wrote to Limbaugh in a letter he quoted on the air (7/26/94). "I'm asking you not to stop telling the public about it."

Sommers claims that "in the outside world I'm a liberal," (Boston Globe, 11/14/94) although Who Stole Feminism has mostly been lauded by the right. Crossfire's Pat Buchanan (7/4/94) declared that "Ms. Sommers is right on the mark"; former Reagan speech writer Mona Charen called Sommers "a brave woman" (Rocky Mountain News, 6/2/94); U.S. News columnist John Leocommended her in a piece arguing that men are battered just as often as women (7/11/94). Professional feminist-baiter Camille Paglia praised Sommers' book to the Boston Globe (6/26/94): "It's so rich.... If someone tries to go against this now, they're really spitting in the wind."

It's no surprise that conservatives are enjoying the most recent attack on feminism, since right-wing foundations helped bring it to the public eye. Complaining that "it is not so easy to receive grants for a study that criticizes the feminist establishment for its errors and excesses," she cites the right-wing Olin, Bradley and Carthage foundations as supporters without whose "gracious and generous support...I could not have written this book." In fact, according to foundation records, these three right-wing groups gave her at least \$164,000 between 1991 and 1993 to write her book--on top of a reported "six-figure" advance from Simon & Schuster (Boston Globe, 5/17/92).

Once published, Who Stole Feminism? was featured on the cover of the National Review (6/21/94), another Olin grantee. Sommers is scheduled to appear on the McLaughlin Group in September, a series that has also received Olin's support. Newsweek's review (6/20/94) predicted that Sommers' Who Stole Feminism? was "likely to be the most talked about manifesto since Susan Faludi's Backlash." It's a pity reviewer Laura Shapiro did not investigate why.

The conservative foundations backing the book are hardly interested in promoting "a more representative and less doctrinaire feminism," which is how Sommers describes her mission. Olin, for example, was the foundation that backed Dinesh D'Souza's attack on progressive academics,

Illiberal Education, and David Brock's scurrilous *The Real Anita Hill*.

Had a comparable book been funded by an alliance of ardently left-wing foundations, one might have expected mainstream reporters to use that fact as an excuse to discredit the book--or, more likely, to ignore it. If, on the other hand, mainstream media gave regular attention to debates within feminism, much of *Who Stole Feminism?* would have sounded old. There have always been differences within feminism--between those who blame women's oppression on biology and those who target social power relations, for example. And for more than a century, feminists have debated the pros and cons of "protective" legislation as it relates to sex-work and pornography. It's a testament to the media's failure, or bias, that Sommers' shallow look at this discussion has received more attention than, say, *Pleasure and Danger*, a compilation on the topic edited by Carole Vance, published a decade ago.

If audiences were used to televised discussions between a variety of women's rights advocates, Sommers' suggestion that anti-pornography lawyer Catharine MacKinnon and journalist Susan Faludi belong to the same camp of "gender feminists" would have struck viewers as patently absurd.

From P.C. to Feminazis

As it is, most outlets gave *Who Stole Feminism?* the same cursory scrutiny they usually devote to feminist themes. Writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (6/26/94), Delia O'Hare gave thanks for a book that "remind(s) us that unflinching skepticism is still a vital tool of good citizenship." She stated that only "one factual error turned up as I checked the facts."

O'Hare must not have been trying. Sommers' book is filled with errors, from repeatedly calling the National Organization for Women the National Organization of Women, to quoting one source as saying cultural relativism was a "goon" when she actually said it was a "boon."

Political books deserve more alert critics. They also need to be placed in a larger context. *Boston Globe* writer Barbara Carton referred to Sommers' attack as part of an "internecine feminist conflict." In fact, Sommers' work is of broader relevance. In 1984, William Bennett, then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, charged that higher education had to be reclaimed from curriculum reformers (*To Reclaim a Legacy*). Ten years later, Sommers is updating the charge, this time targeting "gender feminists."

The anti-"p.c." forces of the 1980s talked about how '60s radicals marginalized and silenced traditionalists, even as the NEA debates proved who had power to silence whom. Sommers, who replaces "'60s radicals" with "feminists," is connected to the p.c.-bashing crowd through her involvement in the National Association of Scholars (NAS). "Only one organization," writes Sommers, "has been openly expressing concern at what the transformationists are doing" --the NAS. She suggests the group is poorly funded and understaffed: "In contrast to the transformationists," she says, "the NAS operates entirely on its own."

She fails to note the NAS's high-placed supporters. Launched in 1987 with help from the Olin Foundation (*In These Times*, 5/27/92), NAS is supported by conservative funders like Olin, Bradley and Coors. Three of its members, appointed by President George Bush, sit on the board of the National Council on the Humanities. The NCH, which governs the National Endowment for the Humanities, is the federal agency with probably the greatest impact on research and curricula in the liberal arts.

Meanwhile, Sommers raises the spectre of "gender feminists" in the halls of power. She states that Donna Shalala, "no bit player in the misandrist game," "heads a department whose outlays are almost double that of the Department of Defense"--not mentioning that more than 95 percent of the Health and Human Services budget are non-discretionary items like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Suggesting that Shalala's department wields more economic clout than the Pentagon is misleading to say the least.

If mainstream media took debate about feminism seriously, one might have seen Sommers subjected

to more investigative questioning. Instead, she appeared virtually unchallenged on CNBC's *Equal Time* (7/15/94) with journalist/host Susan King and co-host Linda Chavez, former Reagan civil rights commissioner--who seemed to agree that "feminazis" do indeed exist.

On CNN's *Crossfire* (7/4/94), Eleanor Smeal of the Fund for a Feminist Majority did have a brief opportunity to confront Sommers on her facts. "Smeal is only ever invited onto prime time to defend feminism against absurd attacks," said Fund press coordinator Colleen Demody. "She's never allowed to define the debate." The same can't be said, unfortunately, for Christina Hoff Sommers.

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