

Gender Feminism in the Thought of Christina Hoff Sommers. A Critique

El feminismo de género en el pensamiento de Christina Hoff Sommers. Una crítica

Katarzyna GUCZALSKA

University of Economics in Krakow, Poland

guccci5@gmail.com

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Abstract

The goal of the article is to look critically at the thought of Christina Hoff Sommers, who, in her resounding book from 1995 *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, negatively evaluates the gender variant of feminism. According to Sommers, the left wing feminism betrayed the true matters of women and intensified hostility between women and men. Unfortunately, the libertarian feminism advocate's disquisition is no deep and profound critique of the background of left-wing feministic movement but only a partial description of the environment of American radical feminists. Although authentic feminism should make use of theoretical findings of liberal traditions – Hoff Sommers doesn't present any comprehensive analysis of the potential of libertarian thought in that matter.

Keywords: Christina Hoff Sommers, feminism, libertarian feminism, gender feminism.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es proyectar una mirada crítica sobre el pensamiento de Christina Hoff Sommers, quien en su renombrado libro de 1995 *¿Quién robó el feminismo? Cómo las mujeres han traicionado a las mujeres* evalúa negativamente la variante de género del feminismo. Según Sommers, la rama izquierda del feminismo traicionó los verdaderos problemas de las mujeres e intensificó las hostilidades entre mujeres y hombres. Desafortunadamente, la reflexión de esta defensora del feminismo libertario no constituye una crítica exhaustiva ni profunda del origen del

movimiento feminista de izquierdas, sino sólo una descripción parcial del ambiente de las feministas radicales americanas. Aun cuando el auténtico feminismo debería hacer uso de los hallazgos teóricos de las tradiciones liberales, Hoff Sommers no presenta un análisis suficiente del potencial del pensamiento libertario en lo relativo a esta cuestión.

Palabras clave: Cristina Hoff Sommers, feminismo, feminismo libertario, feminismo de género.

1. Introduction

The distinctive quality of *equity feminism* is the fact that it is deeply rooted in liberal tradition. This article aims at critically analyzing the “theory” proposed by Christina Hoff Sommers – one of the most significant representatives of this fraction of feminist thought.¹ The inverted commas emphasizing the word *theory* are intended to highlight the distance towards the concept, as well as the fact that Sommers’s work *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (1995) certainly does not abound in theoretical sophistication. The book in question is not an objective and insightful analysis of philosophical discourse. Rather, it is an ideological attack, whose target is the growing movement of *gender feminists* that has been conquering the American academic community.² Unfortunately, Sommers’s argumentation is not a thorough critique of theoretical basis for this radical left-wing feminist movement. Sommers’s identification with liberal tradition and reason is too deep to even imagine any discussion with feminists who claim that the crucial characteristic of contemporary highly developed societies is their patriarchal nature and oppression towards women.

What is characteristic of Sommers’s reflections is their dogmatic assumption that basic postulates of leftist feminists are an example of (it is more than proper to use the expression introduced by Sokal and Bricmont) *fashionable nonsense* and as such, they are not worthy of professional and thorough analysis. Sommers’s work is, for the most part, a description of activities undertaken by representatives of the radical

¹ The stance presented by Christina Marie Hoff Sommers is also referred to as individual or libertarian feminism.

² “Scholars like Daphne Patai and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have joined with Sommers to attack women’s studies and the supposed liberal bias of academia in general. Both Sommers and Fox-Genovese have been embraced by IWF [Independent Women’s Forum] and have served on its national advisory board”. R. Schreiber, *Righting Feminism. Conservative Women And American Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 24-25. “In her 1994 book, *Who Stole Feminism?*, Christina Hoff Sommers critiques feminists for claiming, without systematic empirical evidence, that incidences of domestic violence increase dramatically on Super Bowl Sunday. Hence IWF’s reference above to that “fiction.” Over the years, IWF has continued to publicize Sommers’s argument, and in 2000 used this information in a legal contest over VAWA [Violence Against Women Act of 1994]”. *Ibidem*, p. 68.

fraction of the feminist movement and their norms of behavior. However, this presentation is not an example of unbiased and unprejudiced sociological illustration of one of the most influential groups in American society. It is due to the fact that the majority of Sommers's reports do not have anything in common with accepted canon of academic objectivity. Apart from the doubts on the matter of fulfilment of basic requirements of academic work, the main factor that makes Sommers's book not acceptable as sociological analysis of the phenomenon in question (*gender feminism*) is the anecdotic nature of her reflections and arguments. The work abounds in anecdotes that are supposed to illustrate certain disturbing tendencies in the American feminist movement.

I regret to state that Sommers's argumentation is not a remarkable, or even good, philosophical theory. *Who Stole Feminism?* is not even a solid sociological analysis. What is it then? It is an example of so-called engaged journalism. Sommers aims at defending a reasonable (liberal) core of feminism against gaining more and more publicity radical (gender) fraction of feminism, which is an honourable thing to do. From more practical perspective, such expressive journalism is always useful. It suffices to evoke emotions and make one feel the thread of understanding among like-minded people. However, the question arises: is that all that the rich liberal tradition has to offer when confronting leftist feminism? Is telling anecdotes all that one of the most recognizable representatives of libertarian feminism could contribute to the issue of women's emancipation?

2. On two types of feminism

The notion of *gender feminism* requires more explicit presentation and commentary since it may seem quite oblique. What is it then, and how is it different from the feminism whose defender Sommers purports to be? It is a significant issue, especially since the distinction between "right" and "wrong" feminism is the basis for her critique of profound and disturbing process of changes in the goals and politics of the feminist movement presented in her work *The War against Boys* (2000).

It was Christina Hoff Sommers who has spread the conviction that there are, fundamentally, two fractions in American feminism.³ The first one is *equity feminism* based on the belief that the United States Constitution is the document that has had a fundamental influence on the development and success of the feminist movement.⁴

³ For further commentary on Sommers critique, see: T. Moi, "I am Not a Feminist, but...: How Feminism Became the F-Word", *PMLA*, 121/5, 2006, pp. 1735-1741.

⁴ Sommers makes an assumption that in the process of creation of this document, liberal thought was of profound importance. However, the analysis of the works of the Founding Fathers indicates that it was the ancient political thought and political action that played the main part in discussions on the constitution. For more information on this subject, see: H. Ardent, *On Revolution*, London, Penguin Books, 1990.

According to Sommers, the feminist movement in North America has accepted lawfulness of the moral, political and legal principles expressed in the constitution at the very beginning of its existence. Its efforts were channeled towards claiming the same rights for women as, according to the document, men had.⁵ This type of feminism has clear-cut political aims: claiming full political rights for women⁶ and assuring equality of opportunity for them. Sommers approvingly cites Elizabeth Cady Stanton:

We ask no better laws than those you have made for yourselves. We need no other protection than that which your present laws secure to you.⁷

These words of one of the leaders of the nineteenth-century American women's rights movement very precisely express the thought that is the basis for Sommers's whole theory. Her analysis is based on the assumption that American – or in broader terms – liberal society formally (but not necessarily practically) grants equality for each and every individual. Of course, Sommers admits that women in America did not have the same rights as men had. However, the very legal construction of the Constitution does not contain any elements that would render ensuring equity for all socially excluded groups impossible. In other words, the Constitution is not tainted by any original sin. On the contrary, Sommers believes it obvious that there is no noteworthy theoretical contradiction between respecting basic liberal principles and feminism. To put it another way, she assumes that the fundamental feminist postulates are perfectly achievable within the society founded on liberal tradition and principles.

Any reader, who particularly enjoys theoretical analyses and has broad knowledge of different, sometimes competing, fractions of liberal thought, might be quite disappointed by the ideological poverty of equity feminism. Sommers does not reveal the type of liberalism she represents in any part of her resounding work. Interestingly, her presentation of equity feminism continues for only four – out of three hundred – pages.⁸ Hence, those interested in the theoretical foundation of her definite and harsh critique of gender feminism are left with their own speculations on the issue. What can be drawn from rather chaotic reflections of the author is that basically, fundamental postulates of feminism have been realized. In the present day

⁵ C. Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 22.

⁶ As we know, this aim has been achieved in 1920 with the establishment of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states: *The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.* Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 22-26.

society, women have equal rights. The feminist movement has proven successful in reorganizing formal, institutionalized differences, consequently creating circumstances under which women are able to fulfil their full potential. Women are no longer condescendingly expected to be the guardians of the household. Their role is no longer only taking care of the household and raising children. Owing to doubtless successes achieved by advocates of women's rights, females can compete with men in every area of life and field of study. It is only a matter of their own capability if they are better physicists, politics, etc. Today, each area of human activity has regulations that should be respected and there are no objective obstructions that would prevent women from achieving success in any field. *Equity feminism* does not call for any radical reorganization of the society (as is the case with some fractions of libertarianism) but, rather, aims at maintaining the *status quo*. This element should be noted explicitly since the very conservative nature of Sommers's thought plays a significant role in her critique of *gender feminism*.

Although the distinction between two types of feminism is essential to Sommers's reflections, it is easy to detect a certain theoretical inconsistency.⁹ On the one hand, she claims there are two types of feminism, but on the other hand, she clearly tends to support the concept that *gender feminism* is not an actual feminism, but rather its total transformation and corruption.

The title of the book itself suggests that there is some treacherous enemy who has been gaining more and more publicity in America. This traitor has assumed the right to represent the interests of women and has been trying to acclaim the legacy of the actual feminism. Who is this thief?

Sommers claims that the main fault in *gender feminism* is politicization of gender issues which results in perceiving society as a structure based on the dominance of men and subjugation of women. This type of feminism condemns the patriarchal nature of society and emphasizes that the fundamental and inalienable trait of modern society is the enslavement of women. Sommers clearly highlights that feminism understood in these terms does not have many female supporters.¹⁰ She believes that modern feminism movement has simply been dominated by loud and aggressive minority which is incorrectly considered an authentic and lawful representative of women's issues.

The alleged patriarchal character of democratic societies is one of the most popular feminist theses. This is why one might expect Sommers to present at least several arguments that would prove this assumption wrong. However, the author of *Who Stole Feminism?* is too content with references to the reason and common sense and

⁹ A-M. Kinahan, "Women who Run from the Wolves: Feminist Critique as Post-Feminism", A. Prince, S. Silva-Wayne and Ch. Vernon (eds.) *Feminisms and Womanisms: A Women's Studies Reader*, Toronto, Women's Press, 2004.

¹⁰ However, since she does not provide any statistics, Sommers's opinion is difficult to verify.

too strongly attached to some vague liberal thought canon to take this thesis into consideration even for the rhetorical purpose of the paper. Although Sommers claims that dogmatism is one of the main faults of *gender feminism*, her own refutation of the patriarchal character of democratic societies thesis belongs to the realm of dogmatism and prejudice. How to explain her stance on this issue? Most of all, she believes the argument of patriarchal nature of modern society to be so absurd that it does not deserve to be taken seriously. In her opinion, wide acceptance of this thesis is the result of disturbing and destructive fascination with French post-structuralism. American feminist movement has betrayed liberal ideals and turned to vague, grandiose concepts that are hostile to the Enlightenment and were created by Parisian intellectual elite. This is where one can find another weak spot in Sommers's reflections. If post-structuralism plays such an important part in *gender feminism*, one might think that she will present at least a draft of critique of the most important effects that representatives of this thought produced on society. Unfortunately, Sommers once again constrains her argumentation to several, disorderly formulated observations. She devotes only four paragraphs to the thought of Michel Foucault.¹¹ Her critique of the thought of the author of *Discipline and Punish* is only instructive in a sense that it perfectly illustrates argumentation strategy that Sommers adopts throughout her book. After providing an extremely brief presentation of the concept of disciplinary society, she wonders if Foucault's theory could be taken seriously. She does not even care if the theory is true (since, as it seems, it is *a priori* impossible), but whether it deserves the attention of a serious American reader. Next, we are informed that Michael Walzer considered Foucault's theory a "childish leftism" and it does not have many supporters among major American political philosophers. Therefore, her argumentation strategy seems to consist of the following steps: first, one presents a certain theory in an extremely brief manner, then, asks a person that he respects whether they consider it worth of respect. Since the asked person criticizes the theory, it is safe to assume it is not true. It is a very peculiar argumentation strategy, which unfortunately, can be noticed throughout Sommers's book. It seems that this line of reasoning and argumentation proves only one thesis: that Sommers values Walzer's opinion more than that of Foucault. But in no way does it solve the authenticity issue of the author of *Words and Things*. It appears that to Sommers, the only opinions which prove decisive are those presented by people with whom she agrees. However, it is important to note that to be an authority in a given field for Sommers, one is not required to have any particular competency (as we remember, the essence of philosophy is wisdom). She refers to opinions of scientists as willingly as she does to opinions of random students that did not enjoy classes on *women's studies*.

Unfortunately, Sommers's critique of theoretical basis of *gender feminism* leaves much to be desired as she claims that the post-structuralist thought cannot be treat-

¹¹ C. Hoff Sommers, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231.

ed seriously. According to her, feminism that developed from the post-structuralist thought is a threatening ideology that not only results in destruction of social unity, but also leads to negative changes in American education. Sommers believes that politicization of the gender issues threatens the unity of society, because it is based on the assumption that social relations can be explained by means of conflict between sexes. Since women assured in their theory of patriarchal nature of modern societies perceive women as the sex oppressed by men, *gender feminism* also contributes to the escalation in hostility between the sexes.

Sommers makes an attempt to present some sort of *gender feminism* lineage.¹² She emphasizes that it is founded on morally right and honorable disgust at various examples of mistreatment of women. This kind of disgust often results in taking ethical actions but, according to Sommers, modern feminists' intentions have some kind of dark, even suspicious moral character. She writes:

But most of those who publicly bemoan the plight of women in America are moved by more dubious passions and interests. Theirs is a feminism of resentment that rationalizes and fosters a wholesale rancor in women that has little to do with moral indignation. Resentment may begin in and include indignation, but it is by far the more abiding passion. Resentment is “harboured” or “nurtured”; it “takes root” in a subject (the victim) and remains directed at another (the culprit). It can be vicarious— you need not have harmed me personally, but if I identify with someone you *have* harmed, I may resent you.¹³

As a result, we witness the emergence of a community of victims bound by the feeling of solidarity and a group of culprits that could grow in perpetuity. Sommers continues to point out that the factor which cements the group might not necessarily be a similar situation or the same experience. The nature of this community is imaginative and it easily attributes offences caused by particular males to all representatives of the gender. According to Sommers, the underlying mechanism of the emergence of such a community is the following: it is true that a certain number of women are raped. There are two ways of reacting to this fact. One is admitting that it is a real social problem and trying to prevent it. The other reaction is more complex. It can be assumed that the rape on the woman “X” is simultaneously a rape on all women and conclude that all men are potential rapists. Obviously, there is only one man guilty, however, according to Sommers, *gender feminists* claim that the guilt should be attributed to all men collectively. Rape is only an example here – any negative experience, even the most individual one, can be universalized this way. This is exactly how *gender feminism* leads to the creation of oversimplified perception of

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 41-50.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 41-42.

social reality: on the one side of the barricade there is an oppressed group of women, who, after an adequate “theoretical training,” view the world through “resentment lenses” and on the other side, there are ferocious and aggressive men who exploit their hegemonic position at all times.

According to Sommers, feminism widespread on the university campuses is a destructive ideology that threatens basic European values. In her book, the notion of “ideology” once again is not a thoroughly analyzed theoretical category (as is so often the case with the manner in which she elaborates on her arguments). However, “ideology” is a slogan that is important on this discussion as *gender feminists* often claim that every form of education contains ideological elements. Western education is based on the rationality canon developed by men and, according to *gender feminists*, it legitimizes the power of men. As an answer to this argument, Sommers, as a defender of the European culture legacy, needs to prove that distinguishing an ideology that is threatening and has been conquering all aspects of human life from one which is simply a normal and natural education is not that difficult. In order to achieve this, she refers to a conservative philosopher, Roger Scruton, who believes that indoctrination is characterized by three qualities. Contrary to a normal form of education that aims at teaching methods enabling individuals to assess value of particular data and argumentations, indoctrination is based on presenting assumption that certain theses are *a priori* true. This set of theses is a network of beliefs, an image of the world that needs to be absorbed by a student. Indoctrination presents a certain closed system of assumptions which is immunized against any possible critique. This system has one disturbing characteristic: it interprets any information in a way that, seemingly, each fact proves its correctness. In other words, it is absolutely nonfalsifiable:

In the case of gender feminism, the closed system interprets *all* data as confirming the theory of patriarchal oppression [...]. If, for example, some women point out that *they are* not oppressed, they only confirm the existence of a system of oppression, for they “show” how the system dupes women by socializing them to *believe* they are free, thereby keeping them docile and cooperative [...]. Gender feminism is a closed system. It chews up and digests all counterevidence, transmuting it into confirming evidence.¹⁴

Sommers considers this type of feminism a threatening successor of totalitarian ideologies that destroys the foundations of European civilization as it aims at blurring the border between truth and false, rationality and irrationality. Bearing all this in mind, it is worth to note that there is one issue on which Sommers agrees with leftist feminists. She joins them in claiming that it is true that the role of women

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 96-97.

was ignored in many fields of science. It is not improper that e.g. many courses at universities include review of the legacy of female authors who, for various reasons, did not receive the proper acclaim during their lifetime. Sommers is willing to admit that this lack of acclaim derived from the secondary role that women were seen to play in contemporary culture. However, she definitively disapproves of more radical demands of feminists that, in her opinion, wish to redefine the cultural canons. It is acceptable to state that works of one lesser known nineteenth-century American writer could be an object of serious academic study, but claiming that her books are more valuable than *Moby-Dick* is, according to Sommers, an utter nonsense.

It would not be fair not to admit that some of the anecdotes presenting the *gender feminism* movement reveal that, at least part of, its representatives do not accept any kind of critique. They aim at creating intellectual ghettos – areas of safety where only certain individuals are allowed to stay, sometimes only women that have absorbed certain ideology. Stories presented by Sommers paint a picture of angry women who have created a cult and managed to win great influence on academia and wish to conquer it – to destroy the bastions of education. Nevertheless, it is difficult to judge whether these stories present the whole feminist movement adequately and fairly or rather only individuals who are radical in manifestation of their ideology.

For Sommers, *gender feminism* is the story of unsuccessful emancipation.¹⁵ She claims that liberalism, which is an innate characteristic of American political system, enables women to become whatever they want (this liberalism is equal to feminism itself). Achieving goals of the original and traditional American feminism provided women with an opportunity to fulfill their full potential. Gender feminism has got out of the step and seeks to emphasize the female perspective – absolutely illegitimately – by trying to prove that in the culture dominated by male values, women are still being discriminated. In order to maintain the uniqueness of their worldview, women have to attack the very foundations of culture, which in itself proves all native stereotypes about women to be true. Sommers attempts to prove that gender feminism contributes to the creation of perception that women are excluded from the rational social discourse, they rely on the intuition and instincts etc. In other words, Sommers believes that by subduing to the *gender feminist* propaganda, women deprive themselves of a chance to participate in a truly universal space of social life, where the gender distinction is not particularly important to anyone.

Sommers's work is undoubtedly suggestive and thought-provoking, however, it would have been much more persuasive had she elaborated on the argumentation which is supposed to prove that fully consistent realization of liberal principles would, in fact, automatically lead to achieving all of the feminist goals. I personally

¹⁵ Rhonda Hammer argues against Ch. Hoff Sommers, Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf calling them “antifeminist pseudofeminists”. R. Hammer, *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.

do not consider liberalism and feminism to be hostile to one another, but I do believe that it is much more complex than one would think on the basis of Sommers's analysis.¹⁶ The tension between liberalism and feminism has been elaborated on in a highly interesting and thorough manner by Carole Pateman. She put much effort into arguing that most of the fundamental liberal categories are patriarchal in nature.¹⁷ It is truly a shame that Sommers does not refer to a philosopher of this quality, and instead enjoys chaotically presenting various anecdotes – some more interesting than others.

¹⁶ Indeed, the discussion about emancipation in the context of liberal thought is a complex one and can lead to heated debates. For further information, see: L. H. Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism Feminism as Political Critique*, Pennsylvania, Penn State University Press, 2006, pp. 15-75 and A. M. Cole, "There Are No Victims in This Class: On Female Suffering and Anti-"Victim Feminism", *NWSA Journal*, 11/1, 1999, pp. 72-96.

¹⁷ C. Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988.