

Feminism if Not the Story of Their Lives

by Christina Hoff Sommers

When Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asked an adult high school equivalency class at Lehman College in New York what it thought of feminism, not one of the seventeen women called herself a feminist, and the three men “regarded the word with downright suspicion.” Fox-Genovese notes, “They . . . agree that if women do the same work as men, they should receive equal pay. They all regard sexual harassment, to say nothing of rape, as intolerable; they all believe that their daughters should have the same employment opportunities as their sons.” This makes her question all the more interesting: “So why do these women and men mistrust feminism?”

In *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life* (Doubleday, 1996), Fox-Genovese tackles the subject of contemporary women’s unhappiness with feminism. Her approach is empirical, featuring interviews with some forty women about the role of feminism in their lives. There are chapters on feminism’s hostility to the family and children, on its fixation with abortion rights, on its hostility to femininity and fashion, on its preoccupation with the problems of up-scale career women and its failure to help or to sympathize with poor women. The book paints a vivid and altogether convincing picture of American women alienated from a movement supposedly there to help them.

Seeking to account for women’s resistance to organized feminism, feminists talk of their “false consciousness” and how they have “internalized oppression.” Such explanations condescendingly regard most women as unwitting handmaidens or dupes to the patriarchy. One kind of explanation made popular by writers such as Susan Faludi postulates elaborate backlash conspiracies. But Fox-Genovese shows that modern feminism is responsible for the fix it is in.

For one thing, as she points out, women simply “do not see men as ‘The Enemy.’” And so they refuse to join the militant feminists in their war against men and male sexuality. Related to this is the suspicion shared by many women that feminism is opposed to femininity, disapproving of women who are preoccupied with beauty, fashion, or romance. Here, the feminists are seeking to hold back the tides. As Fox-Genovese says, “If you doubt that femininity matters to women, just pick up a women’s magazine and you will find one article after another devoted to clothes, cosmetics, fitness, or relationships.” *Cosmopolitan* magazine is many times more popular than *Ms.* magazine; sales of romance novels run about 200 million annually worldwide, not having suffered at all from fifteen years of scorn heaped on them by the gender feminists.

Of course, the feminist scholars are ready with theories of why women cooperate with the oppressive “gender system.” Feminist literary scholar Kay Mussell tells us that women who read romance novels are unhappy, seeking escape from their own “powerlessness, from meaninglessness and from lack of self-esteem and identity.” Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar explains why she and her sisters-in-arms have managed to escape the patriarchal brainwashing: “Certain historical circumstances allow specific groups of women to transcend at least partially the perceptions and theoretical constructs of male dominance.”

Fox-Genovese finds the matronizing attitudes of hard-line feminists fatal to feminism: “It takes a breathtaking elitism . . . to charge that the mass of American women have let themselves be brainwashed—a charge that in effect reduces most women to ‘bimbos.’”

Though feminism's demonization of men and its hostility to beauty and romance help to explain its current unpopularity, it is the movement's negative attitude to children that Fox-Genovese finds most alienating for many women. She tells that story of a young journalist assigned to cover a NOW convention who noted that of the more than one hundred special sessions, only one focused on children—a workshop on lesbian mothering. The reporter, who was seven months pregnant, was taken aback.

Fox-Genovese was haunted by her conversation with this young reporter: “Here was a young woman of about thirty who was successfully pursuing a career and loving it and about to have a child she expected to love. Where could she turn for a story that would offer insights about her life and help her to live it more easily?” Not to the movement that supposedly spoke for her.

Patricia Ireland and the other NOW activists have a lot of advice for women on how to free themselves from motherhood: abortion, sterilization, birth control. In the event that a child is born, feminist activists lobby for full-time day care. But that's about it. They have been notably uninterested in helping women find ways to spend more time with their children.

The story of most women's lives centers around their children. Yet, feminists refuse to give that story its importance. When Betty Friedan recently called for feminism to reconsider its hostility to family, she was accused of trying to “destroy feminism in order to save it, and beat the moral majority by joining it.” In Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, “the problem that had no name” was women's dissatisfaction with their constricted, suburban lives. Today, says Fox-Genovese, the problem that has no name is women trying to raise their children in a hostile world.

A major reason that contemporary feminism offers women no comfort can be found in its stubborn commitment to the idea that “motherhood” is “socially constructed”—that is, that society, not biology, shuttles women into this role. The fact that there has never been a society in which women did not take primary care of young children, and the fact that even today vastly more women than men want to stay home to take care of children only angers the doctrinaire feminists. Because they believe that the desire for traditional motherhood is artificially imposed, they also believe that it will have to be changed. But, as Fox-Genovese demonstrates over and over again in her book, this inflexible feminist theory, a theory which is at war with nature, rejects women's actual preferences and so harms women and the children they love.

Though feminists disapprove, many women would happily join “the mommy track.” In 1989, Felice Schwartz, the founder and president of Catalyst, a non-profit group that seeks to find ways to help women in business, published an article in *Harvard Business Review* suggesting that companies set up a special career path for a growing number of women who want off the fast track. Schwartz found that large numbers of women were looking for a way to achieve a better balance between family life and workplace. According to Fox-Genovese. “The polls show that married women and especially working mothers remain as eager as ever for part-time work and flexible work schedules . . . Schwartz has a good sense of what millions of women want . . . Most women would ask nothing better than to be able to follow a “mommy track.”

But as Fox-Genovese reminds us, the idea of the “mommy track” was anathema to feminist establishment: “NOW and the National Women's Political Caucus, joined by the ACLU, “delivered a blistering attack on Schwartz . . . The radicals have called her a ‘traitor to the women's movement’ . . .

But Schwartz focuses on what many women want, not on what radicals presume they should want.”

The feminist fight against the facts of life is unceasing. Last year, Hasbro Toys tested a doll house they were considering marketing to both boys and girls. (The idea was not simply the result of feminist pressures; it is a matter of economics that successful unisex toys generate twice the profits of same-sex toys). The Hasbro researchers found that little girls and boys did not interact with the doll house in the same way. The girls dressed the dolls, and played house: the boys catapulted the baby carriage from the roof. Sharon Hartley, a Hasbro general manager explained what in prior times would have been considered obvious: “Boys and girls have different play patterns.” Mundane wisdom like this is what feminists cannot accept. They keep looking to the day when boys will learn how to play with the doll house. As Gloria Steinem has said: “We badly need to raise our boys more like girls.”

It’s going to take many years of unsuccessful social engineering projects before feminists finally come to realize that this is hopeless. (As a mother of two boys, I know it’s hopeless.) The prospects of men entering the nursery on a par with women are just as dim. And in any case as Fox-Genovese makes abundantly clear, women themselves are not out for precisely mathematical parity in child rearing. Women do need and want help with child care, but they are learning not to expect practical solutions from the feminist movement, which is less concerned with helping them than with punishing their husbands and lovers. Genovese sees feminists as irrelevant to the problem at hand: “[F]or the foreseeable future, the care of young children will remain more of a woman’s responsibility than a man’s. And I fail to understand how we will improve the prospects of most women and children by deferring desperately needed supports until that fabled day of glory when equality will somehow prevail. Beyond that, I remain unconvinced that most women really wish to relinquish their special bonds with children.”

The style of doctrinaire feminism to which Fox-Genovese is reacting and whose fatuity she is exposing in this book goes back to Simone de Beauvoir. Discussing the woman “who chooses to take care of her children full time,” Simone de Beauvoir said: “[W]e don’t believe that any woman should have this choice. No woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one.” It is interesting to contrast Beauvoir’s contemptuous authoritarian attitude toward women with the democratic respect shown them by conservative feminist Clare Boothe Luce. Luce talks unabashedly about “women’s nature,” but she is careful in conditions of freedom and opportunity:

It is time to leave the question of the role of women in society up to Mother Nature—a difficult lady to fool. You have only to give women the same opportunities as men, and you will soon find out what is or is not in their nature. What is in women’s nature to do they will do, and you won’t be able to stop them. But you will also find, and so will they, that what is not in their nature, even if they are given every opportunity, they will not do, and you won’t be able to make them do it.

De Beauvoir believed that a draconian policy was required to prevent women from leading blighted “inauthentic” conventional lives. Though she does not spell it out, she must have been aware that her “totally different” society would require a legion of gender wardens endowed by the State with the power to prohibit any woman who wants to marry and stay home with children from carrying out her plans. She betrays the matronizing attitude typical of many gender feminists toward the duped

constituency they claim to represent.

Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life is an elegantly written account of what women want under conditions of relative freedom and equal opportunity. It is full of suggestions on how we could improve the lives of women and children, not by raising their consciousness, “overhauling their desires,” or “decolonizing their imaginations”—but by helping them to get what they want—and not what feminist ideologues believe they ought to want. It is one of the first works in contemporary feminist scholarship that convincingly describes women as they are with all the “unfeminist” preferences and aspirations the Big Sister would dearly like to exorcize from their very souls.

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