and

Guest: Walter Block

WOODS: Well, this is going to be the best week ever, Walter Block Week on *The Tom Woods Show*. I don't know, it's like the best idea anyone could ever have. And I want to kick it off with an episode about you, Walter Block, and then we're going to dive right in in the next couple of episodes into your books *Defending the Undefendable* and *Defending the Undefendable II*. So we'll get to those in the middle of the week. But here's our first episode now, and I want to — because there's a story you tell in your life later on about going to a talk, I guess that Ayn Rand gave, and then you hung around and talked to them and all that. I want to get a little bit more detail on that story a little bit later. But first, I want your background. I know you went to high school apparently with Bernie Sanders, but tell me about — because I don't know anything about your upbringing. I know you were by default a lefty as you got older, but what can you tell us about the making of Walter Block?

BLOCK: Well, I was born to Abraham and Ruth Block. My father was a CPA accountant. My mother was a legal stenographer, legal secretary. I have a sister, Eleanor, who is four years younger than me and who is a professor of sociology, retired now. I was born in Brooklyn, and my first house was near the Hasidic area, Eastern Parkway, and then we moved to Flatbush when I was about seven or eight. And I went to elementary school there, and I went to James Madison High School there and then Brooklyn College.

And in high school, I was a buddy of Bernie Sanders. We were both on the track team together. We both ran the same distances. We both lived similarly away from Madison High School, so we'd go to school and walk to and from school together sometime. We never really discussed politics much. It was more girls and sports at that time, although he was into it. I didn't realize until later he was really into the politics. But I was sort of a lefty through osmosis, because I don't know, my family's Jewish, and my family, sort of like Murray Rothbard, half the people, not half but maybe one third of them were card-carrying commies, and the others were fellow travelers of communism. I mean, Jewish and non-communist is almost like a contradiction. So I wasn't really into it that much, but I sort of became a vague lefty all through high school.

And in my first year, maybe my first two years of Brooklyn College, I majored in philosophy, but not political philosophy. I was more interested in, oh, I don't know, other minds and God and things, more basic philosophy things, not political philosophy. And then Ayn Rand came to Brooklyn College to speak, and I think I was a junior or a senior at Brooklyn College and still sort of a lefty, and I can —

WOODS: And what were you studying at that point?

BLOCK: I was a philosophy major. John Hospers was one of my teachers, but he didn't really promote libertarianism. He was doing more basic philosophy, I don't know, Gilbert Ryle and Wittgenstein and Kant and stuff like that. So he didn't really promote liberty, and I didn't even know he was a libertarian. I didn't know what libertarianism even was. All I knew was that Ayn Rand favored free enterprise, and free enterprise was evil because free enterprise meant starving babies and poverty and rich capitalist pigs and all the rest. And it was a big, big group, maybe 2,000 kids in the audience, and I booed and hissed her because she favored free enterprise, and everyone knows free enterprise is evil.

And then at the end of the thing, they said the Ayn Rand study group or whatever it was that had invited her was having a lunch in her honor, and anyone could come even if you disagreed. Well, I didn't get enough booing and hissing in there, so I went and I came to the lunch. And Ayn Rand was sitting at the head of the table, and Branden was on one side, and Peikoff on the other, and Alan Greenspan, the senior collective, was sitting near her. It was a long table, maybe 50 people on a side, and I was relegated to the foot of the table. That was the only place where there was room.

And I turned to my neighbor, and I said capitalism is evil, socialism is the way to go. He said, well, I don't really know all that much about it, but the people who do are at the other end of the table. And I was a chutzpahnik in those days, still am, or vestiges of it anyway. And I went, and I stuck my head in between Ayn's and Nathan's. And I was maybe, I don't know, 20 years old, and Branden, maybe 35 and Rand 50. And I said there's somebody here who wants to debate them on socialism and capitalism, and they said, "Who?" and I said, "Me." And Branden was very, very nice and gentle with me, a really nice guy.

And he said, "Look, there's no room for you at this end of the table, but I'll come to the other end of the table, and I'll talk to you under two conditions. One, you promise not to let the compensation lapse after one session, but we continue this until we settle it, and two, you read two books that I'll recommend." Well, the two books *Atlas Shrugged* and *Economics in One Lesson* by Henry Hazlitt. And we had our discussion, and I came to his house and Ayn's house in the Empire State Building three or four times. I read those books, and by gum and by golly, I was not a libertarian, nor was I an objectivist, because the only part of the Randian objectivist movement that I liked was economics. The rest of it, you know, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, and all sorts of other stuff, it didn't really grab me.

And they invited me to come to their NBI sessions, which were held in the basement of the Empire State Building. And I came, and I sort of was a little schizophrenic. I had an approach avoidance reaction to that. On the one hand, I really liked the economics of it, and these were the only people I knew that were free market, so I really loved it. On the other hand, it was very cultish. If you asked Ayn Rand a question like, "On page 42 of *Atlas Shrugged*, you said this. Could you elaborate on it or tell us where you got the idea?" or something, that would be a good question, and she'd answer it. But if you said, "On page 42, you said this, but on page 923, you said that, and I see a contradiction," you know what she would do? She would say, "Get out." And she was serious. She wasn't joking. She kicked you out, and she'd kick you off of her mailing list and say you're a hooligan or something like that.

So I would leave in disgust, and then I'd come back in six months, because I didn't know anyone else who favored free enterprise, and they were the only people. So I'd come back and then I'd be disgusted. And meanwhile, I had enough of Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson* in me that I wasn't sure I knew that I wanted to promote liberty, and I wasn't sure whether the best vehicle for that was philosophy or economics, so I —

WOODS: All right, well, let's stop right here. I want to back up a little bit.

BLOCK: Okay.

WOODS: Did these conversations actually begin the day of that lunch? Did they start talking to you over the lunch?

BLOCK: Not they, just Branden. Branden came to the other end of the table. Ayn Rand and Peikoff and Greenspan stayed where they were.

WOODS: Okay.

BLOCK: So it was just me and Branden.

WOODS: And how long did that go on, roughly?

BLOCK: Well, the whole hour, the whole lunch hour.

WOODS: Okay. And so did you walk away from that lunch thinking they'll never convince me, or did you walk away thinking, well, I mean, it's tougher to argue with them than I thought it would be?

BLOCK: Oh, no, I was pretty pushy. *They'll never convince me. This is all BS. Free enterprise is horrible, and we have to go socialism, and socialism is more gentle and more egalitarian.* You know, the usual. He didn't convert me that first time.

WOODS: Now, had you come to those kind of conventional views just through osmosis? I mean, not because you were subscribing to the *Socialist Worker* or whatever.

BLOCK: Correct, just osmosis. Everyone was a socialist, and I never really thought about it that much. As I said, I was interested in girls and sports. And I don't know, I was interested in chess also, but just peripherally. My main interest then was not politics, but everyone was sort of a socialist. I mean, if you weren't a socialist — the issue never came up, because I never heard of non-socialists except for Ayn Rand.

WOODS: Was it the books more or the conversations that changed your mind?
BLOCK: Both. *Atlas Shrugged*, I mean, *Atlas Shrugged*, what is it, 1,200 pages? I read that thing in one weekend. I couldn't put it down. It was magnificent. I've read it every ten years since then, and I got more out of it every ten years afterward. I love that book. And so if you ask me which was it more, the book or the conversation — and Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*, my God that is magnificent. So I would probably say maybe two-thirds the book and one-third my conversations with Branden and Rand and Peikoff and Alan Greenspan and other people like that.

WOODS: This is a long time ago, right? What year is this?

BLOCK: This is 1964? 1964, maybe 1963.

WOODS: So I can forgive you if your recollection of the precise details is a little fuzzy at this point.

BLOCK: Right.

WOODS: But are there any moments that you recall of Ayn Rand speaking to you in particular? I mean, was she patient or impatient? Was she condescending? Was she friendly? Like what is your impression?

BLOCK: Very, very friendly. Very friendly. Exceedingly friendly. They were all very friendly. There was no *You're an idiot for not being a capitalist*. Very, very friendly. But you know, they would say, *Well, your view on the minimum wage is we have to raise the wage, but what about this, or what about what Hazlitt said?* And by this time, reading those two books really got me maybe two-thirds, maybe three-quarters. But Branden and Rand were very, very kind and very courteous and very supportive, not like the Rand that you see on stage or on TV interviews where she was tough. It's sort of like with neophytes, they're very gentle, but if you then agree and then you become a turncoat or you disagree with them on anything,

anything, even taste in music — like they like Rachmaninoff and I like Mozart and Bach. And then the atheism, the story with Murray, why Murray and she broke because Ayn Rand — Ayn Rand was very gentle with Murray. She said, I'll give you one year to convert Joey into atheism, and then you have to divorce her. But she gave him a whole year [laughing]. But then again, Murray was on the inner circle, so she was tough with him. But with me, I was just a baby, and we babies, they babied me.

WOODS: Okay, fair enough. So did there come a time when, at least on the economics — I get the rest of the objectivist baggage wasn't interesting to you, but on the economics, was there a time when you said to them, *All right, listen, you've converted me*? Was it that explicit that you actually said, *You win*?

BLOCK: Oh, yes, yes, I thanked them for converting me, and then he invited me to come to them NBI, the Nathaniel Branden Institute lectures. Oh, I was never in the inner circle, but I was in the outer circle, but I was part of the gang. And I thanked them for converting me, and I was very grateful to them. They had opened my eyes, and I was then a limited-government libertarian, not an anarchist. That came a little later with Murray.

WOODS: Yeah, Okay, yeah, but before we get to that, was there then a time when you — yeah, so you weren't in the inner circle, but they knew you, and they probably were interested in how your academic career was going. Did anything happen where you had a falling out with them?

BLOCK: Well, it wasn't a falling out. I never said, "Never darken my door again." It's just that I didn't go back. See, I would have this approach avoidance. Every six months, I'd go back for a month, and then I'd leave, and then I'd come back. And then when I met Murray, I never went back there.

WOODS: Ah, okay, okay. So now let's talk about that. What are the circumstances under which you met Murray Rothbard, and what were the arguments he made that made you abandon the limited-government libertarianism for the more radical variety?

BLOCK: Right, well, I was taking master's in philosophy and in economics, because I wasn't sure which way to go. And then finally I decided it was economics, and then I was taking philosophy at Brooklyn College and economics at City College. And then I decided economics is the way to go, and I enrolled at Columbia. And I met this guy Larry Moss, who was an intimate of Murray. And Larry Moss said, "You must meet Murray Rothbard. Your views and his are very similar, and Murray's an anarchist." And I said, "What, an anarchist? I don't want to meet an anarchist. Anarchism is crazy." And Larry and his roommate Jerry Wallows ganged up on me. I remember we were standing on a sidewalk one day, and they somehow ganged up on me and said, "You must meet Murray." And finally I agreed, I'd meet Murray.

And I met Murray, and he converted me to anarchism in about five minutes. Well, maybe ten minutes. I mean to meet Ayn Rand was — you know, in the *Reader's Digest* they once said, "Who is your most unforgettable character?" Well, Branden and Rand were really unforgettable characters, but Murray is unforgettable squared or cubed or whatever. Murray was magnificent. What he did — you know, in karate what you do is you punch the other guy. And what's the other one? Judo, what you do is use the other guy's momentum against them. Namely, he charges you, you throw him over your shoulder, but use his momentum. That's what Murray did to me. He didn't use karate. He used Judo on me, intellectual Judo.

Namely, he used Henry Hazlitt's arguments on armies, courts, roads, police, things like that. He said, well, look ,you see why we shouldn't have a post office, a government post office, because if a post office does a good job, it'll increase its market share. If it does a bad job,

it'll lose money. It'll have to leave. Other people will become post offices. Why wouldn't that work for police? Why wouldn't that work for roads? Why wouldn't that work for courts? And I couldn't answer it, because he was using Hazlitt against me. Boy, Murray was nasty. I'm kidding, of course. So Murray converted me using Hazlitt's arguments on armies, courts, police, and roads and other things that a minarchist wouldn't agree with.

WOODS: Okay, so now you're converted along those lines. You wind up going into economics. You get your PhD from Columbia University. And then you've had a fairly interesting academic career. You have an academic career that's obviously very distinguished in the sense that you've published an almost unthinkable number of academic articles and you've collaborated with many other scholars, but you have moved from one institution to another, and I wonder about the kinds of troubles you've run into because of your ideas. I mean, how would you describe academia and how it's treated you and what you've seen over the years?

BLOCK: Well, I didn't get tenure until I was 60 years old, which is not good. Usually people get tenure — they get their PhD at age 30 or 28, and then six years later at age 34, 35, they get tenure. I went to many, many schools, but I was sort of mouthy. I would challenge my tenured colleagues through a debate, because they're a bunch of commies, pinkos, and Marxists and Keynesians. And you'll never imagine this, Tom, but they didn't really like me kicking their butt. And I didn't get tenure. I taught at State University of Stony Brook; I taught at Rutgers Newark; I taught at Baruch College.

And then I was at the Fraser Institute. I got fired there finally, because I could only write about stuff where Mike Walker and I agreed on, and we agreed on minimum wage and free trade and rent control but not much else. And finally, what he said is your next book is going to be on government, and it's going to be positive, the benefits of government. And I said, "Mike, it's going to be very short book." And he said, "No, I'm serious. You've got to write about how great government is." And I started looking for other jobs, and then he fired me for looking for the jobs.

Then I went off to Holy Cross six years, and I didn't get tenure there, but I had good debates and I kicked some butt there. And then I was at UCA, University of Central Arkansas, and I probably wasn't going to get tenure there either.

And then this job here at Loyola opened up, and I applied for it, and I got it, although they offered it to Don Boudreaux first. But he somehow didn't take it. He went to George Mason, and then they offered me this job. And I was then 61 years old or 60 years old. This was in 2001. And I came in with tenure. I tell you, if I didn't have tenure here, I'd have been fired one month later. They would have realized, my God, what did we allow in here, a guy who favors free enterprise? This is intolerable. Well, I'm exaggerating because Bill Barnett, my colleague and friend and many times coauthor helped me get that job, and he was pretty mouthy also. So I got that job here.

So I've had a rocky career. I mean, I have about 600 refereed journal articles and almost 30 books, and I don't know how many op-eds, maybe 10,000? I'm not sure; I don't count them. So in a sense, I've been very productive, but in terms of success, well, now I'm successful. I have an endowed chair, and I make almost 200,000 a year, and I have a very light teaching load. And this is for the last 20 years. And another part of my success is I must have maybe a dozen former students of mine who are now professors of economics and promoting liberty. So in some sense, it's a success, but in some sense, it's a dismal failure. I mean, to get tenure when you're 60 years old is not exactly a successful career.

WOODS: Well, to me, the output is what characterized the successful career, but I understand what you're saying. As you look back on it now, is there anything you feel like you could or should have done differently in your academic career? And then the second part of this

question is: is there any advice based on your own experience you would give to up-and-coming scholars?

BLOCK: Yes, I have a former student of mine who just got his PhD, and he's now at a very prestigious university, and he said I don't really want to talk to you because I don't agree with you fully. And I said, okay, fine, we won't talk for six years, you get tenure, and then I'll rope you back into the one true faith. What I should have done is keep my big mouth shut. I shouldn't have published anything that was controversial. I should have published some econometric thing about the elasticity of bananas or something, and shut up and got tenure. Then I would have had a much better career. But no, I was too mouthy. I was too pushy. I'm still pretty pushy. And my mistake, if I wanted to have a better career and get tenure when I was 34 instead of 60, would have been to be nice and amiable and not be divisive. So my advice to young people — you know, Murray used to say the best time to become an Austrian is right before you get your PhD, because if you get it too soon, then you start arguing with your professors, you don't get your PhD. I would just add one more and say the best time to get converted to Austrolibertarianism, or if you converted before to keep your big trap shut, is one week after you get tenure.

WOODS: Ah, okay. Yeah, I think that's probably pretty sound. Now, let me ask you to try to look at all the work you've done, and you've just described it, and tried to quantify it, and it's just overwhelming. But if you had to survey this vast avalanche of work you've done and narrow it down and say I think the two or three most important things I've done, most important contributions or insights, or even just popularizing an argument that wasn't well known, even if it's not original to you — what do you think they would be? What are you happiest with?

BLOCK: Well, it's interesting. When I got here, I had 200 articles. I now have 600, so I've done 400 in the last 20 years. And I look back at what I did before I got here, and virtually all of it was in law reviews and libertarian journals. Very little in economics. A little bit in economics. I mean, my PhD is in economics and I teach economics, but my heart is more with libertarian theory. So I don't think I've really made any contributions to economics. A little bit here, a little bit there, criticizing this guy, criticizing that guy. Maybe I did something with diminishing marginal productivity. Very little in economics. But in philosophy or libertarianism or law, there's where I think I've made more of a contribution.

I think my biggest contribution is voluntary slavery, abortion, and maybe privatization. I have made some contributions in economics, privatizing roads, privatizing rivers and lakes, and privatizing space, and also blackmail. I've done a whole book on blackmail. A lot of what I've done — like Murray Rothbard had one sentence in *Man, Economy, and State* on blackmail, and I wrote a whole book on blackmail. Murray, in a sense, my entire philosophical legal career is sort of conning on Murray's back and getting a piggyback off of Murray. I think the reason I've been successful is I picked Murray, and I got up on his shoulders, and he gave me a piggyback, and I stood on his shoulders. And to a great extent, I credit him for inspiring me, helping me, being my friend. Although I have one criticism of Murray. My big criticism of Murray is stomach cramps. You sit in Murray's living room, and all he does is keep you deliriously laughing for hour after hour, and I'd get stomach cramps. That's my big criticism of Murray Rothbard.

WOODS: Yeah, that's not a bad criticism to have. I only got to meet him a few times, but man, his personality just dominated whatever room he was in, and not in an obnoxious way. But it was just that, for example, I remember being at an event where somebody was talking about the evolution of the James Bond character. This was the early 1990s. And that he was, with the Cold War over, now he was going to morph into some kind of creature who was going to defend like the United Nations or something. And Rothbard shouted out, "No!" He was so

horrified at this. I mean, from the audience, he shouted this out. That was his sort of personality.

So what I want to do then for the rest of the week is look at some of this work that you've done, where you really have tried to fill in a lot of areas where there either wasn't much done or wasn't anything done to show that libertarianism can, in fact, solve whatever the problem is. I mean, it's not to say that you, therefore, get a "perfect society." There are always going to be problems, but it doesn't mean that you need to use organized violence to solve the problems or to address them.

So we're going to spend the next couple of days talking about *Defending the Undefendable*, volumes I and II. A lot of people don't know there's a volume two, so now they will. Then I want to talk about your running with *The New York Times*. And then on the last day of Walter Block Week, I'm just going to throw a bunch of these unusual sorts of topics at you and get your thoughts. So we're going to wrap up episode number one of Walter Block Week right here. Thanks, Walter. We'll talk to again tomorrow.

BLOCK: Tom, let me just add two more things I'm very proud of. One is my stuff on sociobiology, the *why is it that if we're right, why there are so few libertarians*. And the other is the economic freedom index that I started when I was at the Fraser Institute. Thanks again for having me.

WOODS: My pleasure. Yes, and I'm glad you added those two things. So I'll put some stuff up. I'm also going to put a link to Walter's website. Walter's website is WalterBlock.com, and if you go there, you can look at this gigantic collection of articles, some of which are available online, but you can get that bibliography, that CV available there. All right, Walter, we're going to pick this up again tomorrow.

BLOCK: Thanks again for having me, Tom.