



Episode 625: Feminism vs. Free Speech and a Free Economy

Guest: Christina Hoff Sommers

WOODS: I've had so many requests for you. I'm so glad that we're able to have this conversation, and as I said, I'd like to just jump from topic to topic now that I've got you, because I've been interested in so much of what you've been working on for quite some time. I remember when I was in college, I was a Harvard undergrad from '90 to '94, and there was a women's studies department there. And at first I thought this meant that this was a department where they taught the history of women, maybe the economic position of women or whatever. And it was about a year, year and a half into this naiveté of mine that I realized that this department exists for the sole purpose of confirming the ideological prejudices of the people in that department. There's no way I'd be able to have a department like that in a university that would just confirm me in my existing views, but that's more or less what women's studies departments are. And in fact, when I had Milo Yiannopoulos on not too long ago, I said, what do you think the chances are that Christina Hoff Sommers would be able to get a position in a women's studies department in an American university. And of course it was a rhetorical question. What can you tell us about the very phenomenon of women's studies?

SOMMERS: Well, from the beginning women's studies has been highly politicized. Now, I will tell you there are serious scholars that teach under the rubric of women's studies, so you will find experts on women in classical Greece or women in the 19th century, 19th century women novelists. But overall the tone is set by the feminist theorists, and you are exactly right. They built a department around their own political dogmas. No one else would be allowed to do that, except maybe in ethnic studies; I think people do that. But in women's studies they've perfected it, and they don't allow critics.

And this is very bad; this is very bad for our society, because unfortunately these gender scholars in our universities, they kind of have a monopoly on the brain trust on information about women, so when politicians, journalists, anyone, they want to find out, oh, what's happening with women in the economy, what's happening with women in psychology, what's happening with women in education, they turn to these scholars who are actually ideologues and who aren't reliable. They're simply not reliable as a group. Some of them might be individually.

WOODS: I remember looking through the course catalog at one of the courses, and it was talking about all of the topics that would be covered in the course, and it used the term "anti-choice" to refer to the pro-life movement. Now, it's considered to be good form to refer to a movement by the name it chooses for itself, and the pro-life movement does not call itself the "anti-choice movement." So right there in the description of the course was an ideological stake in the ground. So I guess my question to you is what would be — and I realize we're generalizing here, but let's just take the typical, if there is such a thing, women's studies department. What's the picture of the condition of women in America and in the world that somebody would get if their only source of information were courses in that department.

SOMMERS: Well, I can tell you that, because I have over the years, I continued to gather the curriculum from women's studies courses and textbooks; I try to keep up on the readings.

WOODS: Oh, that's great. Good for you.

SOMMERS: If anything, it's worse than ever. They now have turned to something called intersectionality. That's all the rage. It's the idea that you don't really focus on gender; you have to focus on race, class, and gender, as well as other social pathologies that they see. Like, lookism, do you know what that is?

WOODS: If somebody's unattractive I might discriminate against them?

SOMMERS: Right, right.

WOODS: Okay.

SOMMERS: And even neuroatypicalism and heightism. There are a lot of -isms that have been brought into it.

WOODS: I've suffered from heightism my whole life. I'm 5'6".

SOMMERS: (laughing) I suffer from ageism, as a woman of a certain age.

WOODS: But we've overcome, haven't we?

SOMMERS: Who cares? Life's too short.

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah, life's too short, and so am I, unfortunately.

SOMMERS: (laughing) Right. And no, it grows. They have something that they call a matrix of oppression —

WOODS: Ugh.

SOMMERS: — or an axis of — oh, I forget. It's elaborate. But you're absolutely right, that the underlying them is just everything is bad for women and getting worse. You would think that the United States, that women are living in a state of siege, male predation; everywhere we're being battered; we're being raped; we're being denied healthy food by the patriarchy that insists on slender standards of female beauty. On and on and on. Is any of it true? No, it's not. They take problems. Women have problems; so do men. They take problems, and they exaggerate them, and then they produce advocacy research to make their findings look, you know, credible.

WOODS: If you have all this raw material, though — you've got textbooks; you've got syllabi, all these things from these departments, then it seems to me you've got the guts of a great book right there. Just there, just a book about the insane people in these departments, because the last thing in the world they really want is for mainstream America to know everything that goes on in these classes, because of course we're not quite enlightened enough to be able to appreciate it. To me that would be a tremendous service, and it's easy for me as the host of the show to ask other people to perform tremendous services, but it seems somebody ought to do this.

SOMMERS: Well, here's the sad thing. I wrote this book many years ago. I wrote it in 1994. *The Atlantic* sent me out to do an article on gender studies — it was called women's studies mostly then. And I went to conferences; I read all the textbooks. I think I figured it all out. I think I was right, and I wrote *Who Stole Feminism?*

WOODS: Oh, that's what that was. Okay, all right.

SOMMERS: And then I wrote *The War Against Boys*, because that was a kind of a follow up on *Who Stole Feminism?*, because I found that the worst mistakes they were making, the feminist establishment, was in the area of education and not noticing that boys were the have-nots, not the girls. But it's just disheartening to have done that research, have basically any I think any fair-minded person, liberal or conservative, review *Who Stole Feminism?*, look at the arguments, would say that I was right. But it didn't matter, because I may have won the argument — it wasn't just me; there were several of us that were sort of dissident feminist scholars at the time. We won the argument, but the other side won the assistant professorships.

WOODS: Yeah.

SOMMERS: And so they've been there all along, and now what's really too bad and why I should probably rewrite *Who Stole Feminism?*, just update it, because I don't have to change the themes of the arguments, just more evidence.

WOODS: Yeah, just make them 40% crazier.

SOMMERS: (laughing) Right, exactly. But the problem is that everything that people think they know about gender is just wrong. It's sort of like, you know, those credit default swaps that were everywhere, you know, they corrupted everything, the economy. Well, this information I think has corrupted the spirit of the country,

because women are bitter; they're going around thinking they're being cheated out of almost a quarter of their salary.

WOODS: Yeah, give us a few examples. I've talked about the gender pay gap, so called, and I've had Mark Perry on, but what are some things that women are being led to believe about themselves that have no basis in fact?

SOMMERS: Oh, well, that one in five girls on campus is going to be sexually assaulted.

WOODS: Yeah, they were saying that even when I was in school X number of years ago. They were already saying that.

SOMMERS: Oh yeah, well, when I wrote *Who Stole Feminism?* in '94, it was one in four.

WOODS: That's what I remember on campus. So what, are you telling me they've gotten slightly more reasonable?

SOMMERS: No, they just have different studies. But all the studies make the same mistake, and if you look to reliable statistical gathering agencies, like the Bureau of Justice Statistics, they find that sexual assault on campus is relatively rare and that women are far more at risk, to the extent that anyone's at risk, they're at risk in poor neighborhoods and high crime areas. But overall, crime has gone down, and that includes rape, which is a very good thing. But on the campus, it's the rarest of all. But how did we persuade ourselves or persuade how many otherwise sensible people, including so many journalists and young women, believe that a school like Swarthmore, Wesleyan, Yale, that these are rape cultures? And it was done because this point of view, this very grim world view, a grim view about men, viewing American society as a frightening and oppressive place for women. They started out with that view long ago. The feminist establishment started out with that view, and they've just been trying to prove it ever since, and they've gotten very good at it, except for the fact that it doesn't exist, this oppressive, nightmarish, patriarchal male hegemony. It does not exist, not in the United States. Maybe other countries.

WOODS: Yeah, right, exactly. And so in other words, if you start off with that presumption, that that's the nature of American society, then it's easier to persuade yourself of wildly implausible statistics about rapes on campus. But is it also that — are they just defining rape in a way that's different from how normal people define it?

SOMMERS: Yes, they're doing a few things. They have enlarged the meaning of rape to include — or sexual assault to include things that most of us would not call rape. So you know, even an unwanted kiss in some surveys counts as sexual violence, as well as rape while you're inebriated. I think we would all agree that if you were so drunk you were passing out and someone took advantage of you, we might call that rape, and in many cases we certainly would, but what if you're just drunk and you're using bad judgment and you hook up with someone? Well, the male will be called a rapist. I find this whole thing sexist, because why is he the rapist? If I'm drunk and he's drunk, we're

both drunk, we have sex, and we both agree to it under the conditions of inebriation, why does he get called the rapist?

I don't understand that, but that's part of the logic of this – there's a new thing going on on campus now. I call it fainting couch feminism, and I don't know exactly where it came from, but it's all these girls that have trigger warnings and safe spaces and they're constantly being put upon by men and everything – it's the opposite of women's liberation. But it was all fostered by this sort of paranoid theory.

Oh, and I should have told you one thing in the beginning. When they came up with these dogmatic theories, they have a kind of strange epistemology where it was very hard to get real knowledge of what was going on. It was hidden. So women had to get together in safe spaces and talk to each other, and then you would get the truth. So they were already protected from criticism in the '90s, because if you came along and said, well, I don't see this, I don't see American women living in a state of siege, I don't see what you're saying is true, the fact that you don't see it is proof of how insidious it is.

WOODS: Yeah.

SOMMERS: Or proof that you're part of the problem they're trying to overcome.

WOODS: So it's not falsifiable. There is no way –

SOMMERS: It is not falsifiable. It is – in my opinion, this is a little strong, and I don't like to use language this way, but I've come to the point where I think I'm right. I think on campus, not for all students but for a fair number of students, today feminism is a cult.

WOODS: I can understand how that type of language would be used because of the non-falsifiability of some of the claims and because, well –

SOMMERS: A conspiracy theory?

WOODS: Yes.

SOMMERS: You know, it's a conspiracy theory about the patriarchy, and only you understand the evidence; it's secret evidence only available to those who've already been enlightened to the truth.

WOODS: Yeah, and it's not even available apparently to all women, because they wouldn't allow you in their safe space.

SOMMERS: (laughing) Oh no. When I spoke at Oberlin and at Georgetown last spring, they organized safe rooms where they could flee in case I said something that invalidated their experience.

WOODS: That is so —

SOMMERS: That's the worst thing you can do, is to invalidate their experience. I thought that was one of the many purposes of a college education, to have your assumptions challenged.

WOODS: Yeah, no, it's just not.

SOMMERS: (laughing)

WOODS: (laughing) You know, maybe at some point, but it — boy, that is the last thing in the world these totalitarians want. And I think about these delicate flowers with their safe rooms, and I think back to my college experience, when if we got one slightly right of center speaker every three semesters, it was a miracle. To the contrary, they got, again, all their prejudices confirmed by every speaker who came through. We barely had one, and they would be screaming and making a production. And I thought, if these people ever got into power, what would they be like when their attitude is that we can't even listen to one slight deviation from orthodoxy? I mean, if I had to flee to a safe space every time I heard a crazy view that invalidated my experience, I would have been in a cocoon my entire college career. Have you had any other oddball experiences when you've been a speaker on college campuses?

SOMMERS: Oh yes, I only have oddball experiences.

WOODS: I guess that was a rhetorical question.

SOMMERS: (laughing) I went recently to the University of Minnesota, and I was there with Milo Yiannopoulos. We spoke together.

WOODS: (laughing) Oh my gosh, you'd need a safe space with steel beams or something like that.

SOMMERS: I know, well, they were definitely triggered, and members of the audience — people came to protest. They set off these little sirens while we were talking.

WOODS: (laughing)

SOMMERS: Every time I'm with Milo — we went to a panel in Florida; there was a bomb scare. We had a gamer meet up in Washington; there was threats and they had to bring in dogs because of, oh, again a bomb scare.

WOODS: (laughing)

SOMMERS: So bomb threats, bomb scares, threats of mass murder. Milo got an email saying someone was going to come in, shoot up the place. So those are the extreme examples.

WOODS: Let's jump back, by the way, to something you said about Milo getting an email about somebody who was threatening to shoot up the place. I mean, imagine if, you could think of any feminist speaker, if there had been an email like that, the whole country would know about it and we'd never hear the end of it. But I didn't know —

SOMMERS: Exactly, that's what shocked me, is just a few weeks before we got that email, Anita Sarkeesian got a threat of that sort at a university, and yes, we have heard about it over and over again. We never stop hearing about it. But somehow if people — well, some victims of threats count more than others.

WOODS: Yeah.

SOMMERS: Some are more [inaudible] than others.

WOODS: How about that? Yeah, if only that were a rare thing, but it seems to be the norm. All right, I want to shift gears, because I want to ask you something that I've been curious about. The whole controversy regarding women in science is something that you've written about, that the fact that women are not represented anywhere near their proportion in the population in the sciences can be understood and interpreted in different ways, but of course in the modern feminist point of view this is obviously because of either social expectations or discrimination or oppression or patriarchy or outright exclusion or whatever. What do you think the real truth of the matter is?

SOMMERS: Oh, I think the truth of the matter is that women on average prefer other subjects. So if you have a young woman with the skills to be a physicist or a computer scientist, she's more likely than a similarly skilled young man, she's more likely to just choose something else. She might choose cognitive psychology; she might choose art history. Women major in far more subjects than men, and they dominate in the humanities and the social sciences. And we know that a little girl who is a — let's say she's a math prodigy. Well, girls who are math prodigies are often also verbally at the very high end of ability. They score at the very high end. So they have more options in what they can do, and they — so you just don't get as many women choosing that field. And again, this selective inattention. All the activists want to say, well, what are we going to do about this crisis of so few women in physics. Well, what about so few men in psychology?

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, that seems like a pretty good point to me, and it also seems kind of odd to be constantly badgering women with these women in science programs. Like women aren't going to be aware of the existence of chemistry unless we launch an awareness campaign directed at them. It seems a little bit patronizing.

SOMMERS: It is patronizing. It's also unnecessary, because there are girls that are brilliant and are flourishing in the sciences. There just aren't as many, because it's almost as if these activists believe that until there is statistical parity in the areas that they want — they don't want statistical parity with window washers. You know, that's

fine that that's all men. Or roofers or, you know, coal miners, sewage workers. But if it's something that they think is desirable and it's not 50/50, they're not happy. And by the way, if it becomes imbalanced in favor of women — so our colleges are approaching, what is it lately? It's getting close to 60% female at many schools and only 40% male. They don't mind that. That doesn't create an equity issue. It's only when they don't have statistical parity in something that they value.

WOODS: Right, right. Now, you obviously know an awful lot about all the different strains of feminism, because I remember even just being in college, there were so-called difference feminists, who would admit that men and women were different, and then there were feminists who more or less thought that men and women were the same and that the differences were just environmental.

SOMMERS: Right.

WOODS: But there must be many other flavors. I mean, what would you say is the dominant strain, if there is one, today in feminism?

SOMMERS: Well, first of all, I just want to tell you the difference feminists thought that men and women were different and that women were better.

WOODS: Oh, I forgot that.

SOMMERS: (laughing) I've always called them superiority feminism.

WOODS: That's better.

SOMMERS: I believe the sexes are different and equal, and that's fine, and I don't require statistical parity, but what I would ask is to prove that there's equality of opportunity. If a young woman or a young man has the opportunity if they so desire to study psychology or to study physics or whatever, then that's all I ask. But they ask much more. Now, what's happening today is a shift than when you were in school, and it's this, what I mentioned before, intersectionality. Now, this theory developed from actually a group of African American women in the '70s, scholars, activists, who initially had a reasonable complaint. They felt that the women's movement, the organized women's movement, as well as the scholarship money, they felt that it excluded black women and that sort of middle class, fairly well fixed white women were defining "woman" as all inclusive but leaving them out. And so they demanded attention, which was fine. It makes sense that they would do that.

But they wrote a lot of — just their movement gained momentum, and now in many gender studies departments, it's not all. They would take what's called a sort of intersectional approach, and that means that you can't simply look at race and class and gender; you have to look at how they are mutually reinforcing. So you can't understand — and they say they give various kinds of benefits and burdens. So a black male would be burdened by race but benefited by his gender. A lesbian woman would

be burdened by her having an atypical orientation and she's be burdened by being a woman, but she'd be benefitted by her class.

And so these theorists, Patricia Collins and Bell Hooks and several others, they did think that because African American women were the least advantaged, this gave them a privileged standpoint, a privileged source of knowledge and wisdom. And so the idea of intersectionality is that everyone should identify their privileges and their burdens, and they should listen to those who are more oppressed than them. So white males should listen to white females; white females should listen to black females; black females who are heteronormative should listen to lesbian black females. You know, so there's a hierarchy really of wisdom, of prestige, and to me it looks like the opposite of liberalism –

WOODS: Yeah.

SOMMERS: – because it's tribalism, and there's also a kind of collective guilt, because all men bear the guilt – because according to intersectionality, it's not just that you're privileged, but that you got your privilege by oppressing other people. You have what's called unearned advantage, and you've got to confront that, you've got to just be quiet and listen and learn, but basically shut up. Now, this doesn't create a very happy environment on the campus. This is strong right now. I've just done a new episode in my – I have this series called *The Factual Feminist*. I try to correct a feminist myth every week or two.

WOODS: We're going to link to that, by the way. That's going to be linked at TomWoods.com/625. People have got to tune in to that.

SOMMERS: Yeah, I forget; I think I have about 45 videos. And when I first started correcting feminist myths, my mother said, wait a minute, you're going to run out.

WOODS: Yeah.

SOMMERS: (laughing) No, because they've been doing this since the 1980s, even the '70s. There's a lot to correct. But anyway, sometimes I don't just correct facts; I expose the fallacies of theories. So lately I've been looking at intersectionality, and it's full of fallacies, and it's also – it doesn't really improve social relations. It doesn't do much to alleviate oppression. But it's a permission to be a bully.

WOODS: Now that raises a question. Given that this is a libertarian show, there may be some people in my audience who say, I'll grant you this is a lot of crazy belief and crazy behavior, but as long as it doesn't spill over into government policy, then it doesn't really affect me any. But does it in fact influence government policy?

SOMMERS: Well, you know, it really didn't until a few years ago. I mean, there were always crazy feminists on campus who were over the top, and then I consider myself a feminist in the reasonable sense of wanting basic fairness and equal liberty for women and so forth. But in 2011, because these groups pressured – they do pressure

politicians, these feminist groups. And they pressured the Department of Education to change the rules on campus, so that if the young women were able to get the rules changed so that a young man or anybody that offended them would be violating Title IX. Let's say you told a dirty joke in their presence or did something they found offensive or hurtful around gender, because of these new regulations the school has to come down hard on the kids, the transgressor.

So they've changed the rules on college campus. So almost everything you hear about the crazy that's going on on campus was because the government got involved and the government took the side of basically the intersectional feminists, and the schools were afraid they'd lose their funding if they didn't punish speech that offended or triggered someone. So the schools are rushing to not run afoul of Title IX as it was interpreted in 2011 by the Department of Education.

WOODS: I bet there's one other area where they could have an impact on government policy. We're hearing both Hillary and Bernie talking about the gender pay gap, and as I said, we've covered that on the show, and there's no reason to believe it in the way that they're describing it. And they're both pledging to correct it. What would that look like – ?

SOMMERS: Oh, you can't imagine how much this influences government. They're going to correct the pay gap.

WOODS: Yeah, how?

SOMMERS: In absurd ways. They're going to punish employers or threaten employers for something that is not the responsibility of the employer, because the employers didn't create the pay gap. The pay gap is, again, it has to do with what women mostly – not entirely, but mostly – what women study in college, where they go to work, what sector they work in, what job they work – that'll make – and men and women do not take the same jobs. They don't even work on average the same number of hours. Men work more hours. Men are also far more willing to take dangerous jobs in faraway places. They're more willing to take jobs with crazy schedules where you have to work five days a week away from home, and all these things. Now, you can say that's because of gender role socialization. Okay, maybe, but that's not the fault of employers.

WOODS: Right, so why should it be on their shoulders?

SOMMERS: It shouldn't, but this is the power of the feminist establishment to take something that's not true, insist that it's true, and then pressure politicians to come up for a solution for this false claim of an injustice.

WOODS: Your colleague Martin Perry went and did the numbers, because you're right, if we just look at full time workers, that's not accurate. You've got to disaggregate that, because full time is 35 hours plus. Well, there are a lot of women between 35 and 40, but there are a lot of men at 40 and over –

SOMMERS: Exactly.

WOODS: – so when you correct for that, this gets the so-called pay gap down to about 12%, and as Mark Perry found, that's exactly the gender pay gap that exists in the Obama White House. And so when they were confronted by this, their response was, well, you know, men and women have different jobs in the Obama White House. Yeah, no kidding. That's what every private employer has been trying to tell you (laughing).

SOMMERS: (laughing) Exactly right. So it's a game, but you know, it's also in education. We have a huge problem with male underachievement. And it's most acute with African American males, but it's working class – in general, boys don't do as well in school, but there's a large cohort of young men that are going to have trouble graduating high school; they're going to have trouble finding a place for themselves in the information economy. Now, similar things are happening in Britain and Australia, France, the young men are struggling, and they have all sorts of efforts to strengthen their literacy, and that's the key thing, is to get kids to read and read a lot. And we need programs like that, and our schools need to focus on education boys and realizing it's a bigger challenge to engage a male child in school than to engage a female child.

But we can't do it, because as soon as you try to do something for boys, you will have women's groups, the women's council at the ACLU will sue and call it gender apartheid, you know, if you try to separate the boys and give them a program. There's endless nonsense and shenanigans, and we can't do a thing. We cannot address the problem, which may be one of the most serious problems, a real problem around gender, which is male disengagement, and especially poor boys, and that includes many African American, Hispanic, and white boys who are by far the greatest risk. We can't do anything, because these groups stop it.

Things like that, it's just exhausting, because they have misinformation; they believe it. I don't say that they're lying; I think they're just self-deceived. They've bought in to their own ideology. They're members of their of cult.

WOODS: Christina, if somebody wanted to jump into your work, especially after hearing this conversation, what would you say would be the first book to read?

SOMMERS: Well, I did a new edition of *The War Against Boys* a couple of years ago, so they might want to look at that if they have a son. Anyone with a son or a little brother or a little boy they love should read my book, because they should know that schools can be a very hostile environment for little boys. Their way of playing, their way of being is not appreciated in many classrooms. It's been interpreted politically in the very feminist-dominated schools of education. So a little boy that likes – even the level of the stories he writes. In my book I tell stories about a little boy who might want to write about monsters devouring a city. Well, that's thought to be predictive of violence; you know, why are they destroying the city? And the kid will get in trouble. Of course everybody's heard about these little boys who get suspended from school for making his fingers into the shape of a gun or chewing a pop tart into the shape of a weapon. Little boys will do these things. Girls do them too, but boys do it more, and

they're the ones getting in trouble. So the schools are just — a friend of mine said, it was an educational psychologist, today in the United States schools for the most part are run by women for girls.

WOODS: Well, I'm going to link to a bunch of your stuff at TomWoods.com/625. Is there a website also that you direct people to?

SOMMERS: Well, yeah, they'd want to go to YouTube and just Google "Factual Feminist," and I've made these videos. Some of my videos have had over a million views. They're popular. There's one called "The War Against Boys"; there's one called "Feminism Versus Truth." But then the Factual Feminist series has everything.

WOODS: Well, that is great. And I'm sorry to keep giving you assignments, but that's a great book title. Just gather up your stuff, the raw material is done. I mean, maybe you feel like you've done all this, I mean, enough is enough. But this thing writes itself.

SOMMERS: You know what I need is a good coauthor. Maybe you (laughing).

WOODS: It can't be a man. Forget that (laughing).

SOMMERS: No, it could be. If I'm the author — or a ghostwriter. Maybe I need a ghostwriter.

WOODS: Yeah, maybe that.

SOMMERS: Psychologically I can't do it again. So I'm now in social media, and I'm on the lecture circuit, especially with Milo, because he is notorious and brings in huge crowds of admirers and detractors, and we just have a lot of fun.

WOODS: Yeah.

SOMMERS: So I'm just doing that, enjoying it. But I mean, I might write this book again.

WOODS: Yeah, I know, and I'm sorry, I mean, that's the second thing I've told you to do since we've been on here. You know, he was on my show once, and I was only just getting to know who he was at that time. I was so unprepared for him that I was just knocked off the interviewer's chair — like, whose show is this (laughing)? So I want to get him back just to show I do know how to run the show. Anyway, listen, I really appreciate your time, and like I said, people were demanding that we had this discussion, and I'm so glad we did.

SOMMERS: And they were demanding that I — they said, why don't you be on his show, and I said, I will, I will.

WOODS: It was on Twitter.

SOMMERS: We were ripped apart, but now we've been brought together.

WOODS: And I couldn't be happier. Thanks so much.

SOMMERS: Thank you, buh-bye.