



**Libertarianism Hijacked**  
**Guest: Christopher Cantwell**  
**May 14, 2014**

***Christopher Cantwell is an activist, writer, and satirist originally from New York, and operates the website ChristopherCantwell.com.***

**WOODS:** Chris, I hardly know where to start. I find myself saying this with a lot of guests, but with you in particular, you have been saying a lot of the things that I wish I could say, but for diplomatic reasons and for the fact that I am too busy to open up more civil wars—like I haven’t burned enough bridges with the rest of mankind already—and to read that you’ve done it and to see how many Facebook shares you’re getting, I say, well, the task has been accomplished. So you’re doing very important work. Even if you and have different styles: maybe you think my style is boring, and I think your style is too edgy sometimes, that’s secondary to conveying the message.

So let’s start off talking about what I think is probably the most important issue that you and I have in common, which is a frustration over a lack of precision, if I may put it extremely kindly, among some people calling themselves libertarians. Tell me what you think a libertarian is, and then what’s going on out there that’s muddying the waters?

**CANTWELL:** Well, firstly, I am really happy to provide that service of being the guy who says the things that other people don’t want to say. I am really glad that I can provide that service. I certainly don’t think that you’re not edgy enough, Tom. You provide an important service, too, where you kind of keep it calm, where I have trouble doing that. The question of what a libertarian is, I tend to think of that as the non-aggression principle: respect for property rights and pretty much allowing people to do as they see fit, and I am also frustrated with this effort to expand upon that, which really just excludes people from libertarianism.

**WOODS:** I don’t mind mentioning names, because I think there’s too much walking on eggshells, too much tiptoeing around. I don’t mind mentioning names about who’s causing some of these problems, but first, I want you to explain why in your view infighting in a movement like libertarianism is not the worst thing in the world. Notice that at this moment, I haven’t checked recently, but I think I am around 155 episodes of this program, and it’s not a coincidence that I am having you on at about 155 episodes—partly because I hadn’t thought of having you on until we talked about it and I said, wait, why don’t I have this guy on? What a blockhead I’ve been. But also so that I can say, “Look, don’t you for one second try to claim, ‘Hey, Woods, you need to do more to advance the movement and you’re spending all your time on infighting.’ Oh, yeah, well, check the other 154 episodes. Check my article archive. Look

at the books I have written. Look at the videos.” I have done a lot of that stuff, but part of advancing the movement is clarifying what we’re all about and correcting errors, and you can do so in a way that is engaging and interesting. So why is it not a problem to be worried about so-called infighting?

**CANTWELL:** Well, not only is it not a problem, I think there is a lot of benefits to it. I really think that it does a lot of great things for the movement, believe it or not. So for starters, let’s understand that if it hurt movements, there would be no Republicans or Democrats, right? Because all state politics is, is infighting. They literally exist for the purpose of arguing with each other who will go on to argue with the party. That’s all that political parties do, and they are some of the most popular things on the planet Earth. There’s 24/7 news channels that revolve around this, and every four years at least roughly half the population goes out to vote for these people. So if this was turning people off, we’d live in anarchy already. Because they wouldn’t be dealing with all the infighting of state politics.

There’s a number of real benefits to it, not the least of which is hashing out these very important differences. I think that when we’re talking about something, I think that we’re really hashing out very important issues here. When people are trying to change the definition of libertarianism, I think that that’s something that’s very important, because we’ve seen what happened to the word liberalism. To not have that discussion, I think, is really detrimental, because if people don’t respond to those efforts to change it, then those changes will happen, and if you see those changes as detrimental, then it’s really necessary to combat that, and that’s going to create an argument, and we know that before we do it.

Additionally, there’s search engine optimization things to that and social media to it as well. The way these mechanisms deem your relevancy is through whether or not people are talking about you. So even if I am arguing with another libertarian who I have a difference with on one issue or another, when we’re doing our back and forth, we’re driving both of each other up in the search engine results and the social media relevancy platforms, which gets both of us more attention in the process. If I am arguing with another libertarian, then the best thing that can happen is for the search engines to see that and push both of us up, because if they see an argument between two libertarians and they decide one of them is wrong, the conclusion they come to is the other libertarian is right, and I can’t see anything wrong with that.

**WOODS:** One of the ways that the borders of libertarianism are being muddied is through a retreat from the strict adherence to the non-aggression principle as the foundational and exclusive principle of libertarianism. So for instance, there’s a guy—I guess it’s a guy—named Max Borders, who says that we should substitute the idea of non-harm for non-aggression. But you notice that every single time they try to do something like this, it’s not to clarify, it’s to make things fuzzy. Non-harm is very fuzzy. If I call you name, I am harming you, so what does that mean? I can’t call you a name? Or if you read something that’s unflattering about the country you come from, let’s say, maybe you’re going to be harmed by that. That’s why aggression is such a perfect concept, because it makes clearly exactly what’s allowed and what’s not allowed. It’s precise. You know in advance whether you’ve done something that’s legally actionable or not.

But it’s not just Max Borders and these arcane questions about non-aggression or non-harm. I am not worried about that, because if you do a Google search for non-harm there are like five hits, and four of them are from this guy, so I am not worried about that. But there are people who are fiddling around

with what libertarianism is. Give me some examples of ways that they are concerned with issues that are not strictly libertarian issues at all, but they portray them that way.

**CANTWELL:** Well, I would say that some of these things are libertarian issues, and what they are doing is they are perverting them. There is an instance of where a gay couple was getting married and wanted to get a wedding cake, and we see certain people on the left wing of libertarianism saying that they're trying to really redefine coercion, that you're violating this person's liberty by not providing them with a service like baking them a wedding cake.

They stop short of outright advocating violence, so for my own strict definition of libertarianism, I still have to consider them libertarians, but if you're trying to redefine coercion, then I think that you are advocating violence, and I find that untrustworthy and dangerous, frankly. The issue that I see with it is that they perceive coercion versus voluntary interaction as a lot of gray area. So that one quote that I have is someone said, "What counts as aggression really depends on what rights you have." So if you think that you have a list of rights as outlined by government today, well, then violating any of those "rights" is an act of aggression against you. And there is all sorts of gray area as to what counts as a violation of your rights, and there's no solid agreement on that outside of the straight non-aggression principle. So the waters get very muddy, and you can't really nail any single one of them down on any particular answer, which we had sort of seen with liberalism in state politics already.

**WOODS:** Now what about this fashionable phrase in progressive circles that now on some of the fringes of libertarianism is getting some purchase—this idea of white privilege, or we might call it white male privilege. Before we get into that, I was talking to somebody the other day who said Thomas Sowell had an article some years ago, and we can't quite place it, where he said something like, "You know, I have a funny feeling that at the Korean Baptist Church in Los Angeles at their social hours they don't spend their time asking each other, 'I wonder what white people think about us.'" But we're told, anyway, this is an obsession with some people in some groups. But what are they talking about with white, male privilege, and is that something that you, Christopher Cantwell, have?

**CANTWELL:** I want to get some of it. I have been shopping around, and I just haven't been able to find it, unfortunately. I thought that because I was white and male and lived in America that I would sort of just have everything handed to me, but as it turns out I have to fight tooth and nail for everything, and as a matter of fact, I am actually discriminated against because I am a white male, so I don't know what it is that they think I am getting on the strength of my gender and skin color because I have yet to find it, unfortunately.

**WOODS:** And of course, this is a concept that feeds into all kinds of statist nonsense. If you look what they have done to their education system, they won't in some cases do heterogeneous grouping in the schools because that would have a racially disparate outcome, and so this must be unjust. Or if there is a test where the test scores are racially disparate, it must be unjust. So in some cases, like the fireman's exam, in some cities they have made the test so stupid that basically everybody gets 100 on it, so then there is no discrepancy. Then this feeds into problems that do lead into statism—and now, for some reason I am drawing a blank on it, I was going to say that New York official who was caught with a prostitute, but who would that be? Right? (laughs) But I can't—I think he was the Attorney General, and he was on MSNBC with his own show for a while.

**CANTWELL:** Elliot Spitzer.

**WOODS:** Elliot Spitzer, thank you. I am pretty sure I remember reading some years ago there was some department store chain in New York that if they think you are engaging in shoplifting, they ask you to leave. Well, apparently they had been spying on this particular chain, and it turned out they had been disproportionately asking black customers to leave. So this is *ipso facto* evidence of racism—*ipso facto*—without even having to investigate it. Apparently, shoplifting is equally distributed among the population. Why would that be an *a priori* judgment? How would we know that without just examining what people do, and what exactly happened, and what the numbers were in that case?

**CANTWELL:** It really displays the simplistic thought process of the left, I think. If you give them a pie chart where race is a factor in it, then any demographic disparity equals racism. We had one blogger talking about self-defense laws, Stand Your Ground being racist, and then Truth About Guns had come out and said actually it disproportionately helps people in poor, black neighborhoods as it turns out, and that doesn't cause anybody to change their position or retract their statements or anything like that. There's no effort to be honest with these people. They want an egalitarian society. They want things to be "equal" under the circumstances that they have perception are unequal, and they disproportionately are concerned about race, and I don't understand it because I don't really think about race. In my regular, daily life it's not something that really crosses my mind until these people start screaming their heads off about it. And I look at it, and I am like, well, there's a thousand other factors at work here. Why are you pinning this to race?

**WOODS:** Thomas Sowell has done such important work. He has a book, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* where he shows that in fact, among other things, the different racial groups happen to be distributed across the country in different patterns. They happen to be located in particular cities, particular states, that have particular costs of living. They will be older or younger than other groups, and of course, if an ethnic group is 25 years older on average than another, it's going to have more experience on the job, it's going to have more wealth. He says when you correct for all these differences, the income gap between these groups completely vanishes. When you correct for all the geographical differences, the age differences, the education differences—it disappears. So there is no privilege, so-called. This is an artifact of data that hasn't been adequately sifted.

All right, now I want to put you on the spot here. I don't know, maybe I am going to make enemies on this episode, who knows, but let's keep it fun. I want you to name me some names. I want you to tell me in your opinion who these days is most responsible for trying to push an egalitarian agenda onto the libertarian movement and muddy what the libertarian message is supposed to be all about. Give me some names.

**CANTWELL:** Well, right now I remember your epic Twitter battle with Antonio Buehler I think really set a lot of this off. The battle between the thick and thin libertarians of the left and right have been going on for a long time, but I think that a lot of this really got set off between me and Antonio Buehler on Facebook back in October, and it has built up this war, so there's Steve Horwitz. There's Jeffrey Tucker, has now jumped into it, surprisingly enough.

**WOODS:** Most unfortunate.

**CANTWELL:** And you've got Students for Liberty. You've got the Foundation for Economic Education, and these people are involved in lots of other different things, and a lot of people don't readily recognize it. So they get involved in other things and they shift to other people. I get scared because I

see people who I thought were philosophically sound libertarians repeating left-wing race and sex propaganda, or even going full-on economic whack job on me entirely too frequently, and when we see people like Tucker jump ship, that really gives a lot of credibility to these folks who are doing it. But Bleeding Heart Libertarians is one. Of course, the Alliance of the Libertarian Left doesn't make any secrets of what they're doing. The Center for a Stateless Society—any number of people over there would just—an anti-capitalist blog, and these things are given serious, unfortunately, given weight within the libertarian community, and it scares the life out of me to see these people getting speaking engagements. One relatively obscure blogger, who shall remain nameless for the purpose of this, was actually featured at Liberty Fest NYC just last weekend, which is an event that used to host speakers like you and me, and Adam Kokesh, and Stefan Molyneux, and now they are hosting left-wing lunatics, and it's really frightening, frankly.

**WOODS:** Well, let me just say in defense of the organizers of that event that I was invited to that. I was actually invited to be the mystery speaker, and I thought, wouldn't our friend love that if the mystery speaker at a women's liberty event turns out to be not only a man but me, whom she can't stand. But I couldn't do it. It wasn't enough notice. They did try to get Adam to do that as well, and I have been invited to that numerous times, but I understand completely what you're saying. Moreover, what I find bizarre is the same sort of perverse priorities that you see on a site like Politico or something, the priorities are that, yeah, it's okay for you to advocate war on the basis of B.S. propaganda that any idiot can see through. That's fine, and that leads to wholesale slaughter, but that's okay. That's a policy difference you and I have. But if somebody finds that you said something insensitive 20 years ago, you'll never be heard from again. If I belong to a despised minority group, I would so vastly prefer somebody who just says something insensitive about me 20 years ago to somebody who wants to bomb me. What am I missing here, Chris?

**CANTWELL:** Well, I think the first thing that we're missing is that this will not expel people from the world, right? What really jams people up with this is when they backpedal and apologize, which I think is the worst thing that you can do. When somebody calls you a racist, I think the best thing you can say is, "So what? Now get on with your argument." People call me a racist, and a sexist, and a misogynist, and a bigot, and I am like, okay, now make your point, because all you did was launch an ad hominem attack at me. You haven't even refuted anything I have said. You don't win the argument by doing this. I think if more people did that, then these attacks would really lose a lot of their steam. People have been trying to run me out of the liberty movement for years now, and I just—people laugh at me for bragging about Alexa ranks, but I just bypassed the Free State Project on toplibertarian.com. I am actually right below you right now, Mr. Woods.

**WOODS:** Ah, well, how about that? Well, lucky for you. I am too busy making Ron Paul homeschool videos to be at full octane, but good for you! (laughs)

**CANTWELL:** I know. I know. I know.

**WOODS:** Good for you, though!

**CANTWELL:** I know that if you were writing less important things than the obviously important work that you're doing right now that you'd be driving a great deal more traffic, but I get to feel really good about seeing my name right next to yours on toplibertarian.com right now.

**WOODS:** That really is an accomplishment, and what I like about it is that nobody, to return to the privilege issue, nobody handed you a thing. To the contrary, everybody tries to take things from you. Nobody said, “Hey, everybody. Here’s a platform where I am going to introduce you to this guy.” Now, I was lucky because I—Ron Paul has promoted me to one degree or another, and I have been with the Mises Institute for a number of years, and that’s been good for me. But at the same time, I am not part of the D.C. libertarian establishment. They pretend I don’t exist. I don’t get invited to any of their things, and yet I have what, 20 times the listenership that any of their alumni have put together? It goes to show that in this age you have no one to blame but yourself if you’re not getting the recognition you think you deserve.

**CANTWELL:** Exactly! I have fought tooth and nail for every bit of recognition I have gained, and you know what? I regularly thank all my detractors, because they are actually driving up my relevance. They are screaming about what a horrible person I am, and then people come to check it out for themselves, and they see that, hey, these people are out of their minds. They don’t know what this guy is talking about. And it helps. So I think that when people are throwing around these accusations and saying nasty things about you, the worst thing that you can do is give in to them, and that’s what most people do, and that’s why they get written off. Folks like you and me, we stand up to them, and sure, we might not be accepted into everything, but we can carve out our niche in this world, and we can succeed and excel, and combat our rivals and spread ideas better than they can.

**WOODS:** Partly because I am thinking in terms of other podcasts by other institutions I won’t name, but my podcast is lively and interesting. I don’t want to talk about some arcane aspect of Obamacare. What? I would rather jump off a building! I want to talk about really current, important, lively sorts of things. Now, on that racism issue, by the way, not long ago—very, very recently, as a matter of fact—several people I consider very dear friends were accused by someone of no distinction whatsoever of being so-called “racists,” and when evidence was requested for this claim, none was forthcoming and the person had to more or less apologize. Walter Block was named as somebody who is a racist. Well, I would like to know what possible statement you could be thinking of? So again, your point about if somebody calls you this name, you say, look, go ahead and make your argument. Yes, I know you’ve used a name that’s supposed to destroy my career without producing any evidence, but just go ahead and make your argument against me. When it comes to Walter, I actually saw somebody—this was an emotional hypochondriac, which most of these people are—say to me, “Walter is a racist because he once called blacks ‘weak economic actors.’” And this kid was so ignorant that she thought that meant that he was a eugenicist who thought, well, they are weak, so we must weed them out or something. What he means is that because they belong to a group that has not traditionally been loved by everybody they are the ones who get first fired when the minimum wage is raised. That’s what he means by “weak economic actors.” He means these are the people who are going to be hurt the most. So he’s saying something that is about as anti-racist as you can be, but these emotional hypochondriacs are so dying to find racism everywhere they look that it’s no wonder they find it.

**CANTWELL:** It just goes to show you how much racism is a non-issue really in this country at this point, except for when these people make it one that they have to look really hard for it. They really have to try very hard to associate everything with racism. The same blogger that you’re talking about said over at the Center for a Stateless Society that well, it’s difficult to survey for racism because nobody identifies themselves as a racist. We have to identify them as racist. So there’s nobody saying like, hey, I’m a

proud racist, and here's my racial policies that I want to discriminate people for, right? Nobody is doing that anywhere, but there—

**WOODS:** And if he did, he would disappear from public life forever.

**CANTWELL:** Exactly. And these people, what they are doing is I think they are just trying desperately to cling to relevance. By creating race hysteria, people pay attention to them. There are people who enjoy that. It's entertainment. It's a marketing gimmick. And there are people who respond to that, and they have to find racism on a daily basis basically to drive traffic to their websites and get retweets and stuff like that, and so they will find it wherever they can. The more shocking the allegation they can make, the more attention is drawn to them, and that's what they are looking for.

**WOODS:** And then, of course, they become the go-to person when the *New York Times* wants to prove what a bunch of terrible people we are. That person can both smear us and then at the same time, killing two birds with one stone say, now, I am not like those other people, no, no, no. I have all the officially approved opinions. I have never had a heretical thought in my life.

And it's interesting: they all have a very weird relationship with somebody like Walter Williams. On the one hand, Walter Williams is a libertarian, and he's black, and they love him, but on the other hand he has said things that if you or I said them, these very people would have dismissed us from the human race. Walter Williams has a book, I think it's called something like *Race and Economics*, and the subtitle is *How Much Can Discrimination Explain?* And his answer after looking at the data is: not a lot. Now if you or I said that, we'd be insensitive. It just goes to show how awful we are, and we're indifferent to human suffering, but he gets a free pass. Do you think it has to do with his race, Chris, that he gets that free pass?

**CANTWELL:** It's obviously black privilege, Tom.

**WOODS:** (laughs) That's what it is, Chris! That's right.

**CANTWELL:** And it's the same thing. Look, I am a satirist. So I have done a bunch of stand-up comedy and stuff like that, and in the comedy industry this runs rampant. If I get on a stage, I really have to either be prepared to take a lot of crap from people, or I have to really, really think about any time I am touching on race on the stage. Meanwhile, Chris Rock, Patrice O'Neill, any number of black comedians can get up there and say anything they want about white people, and not only will they not get under fire for it, I personally will laugh at the joke and think that they are a brilliant comic. (laughs)

**WOODS:** Yeah, right, right. Now, the whole walking on eggshells thing on any of these sort of issues, is ridiculous. It's beneath us as human beings. And to see libertarians jumping in on this, knowing full well that accusations like this are very difficult to disprove, they are extremely murky, and they are the sort of things that the state uses to destroy people. To see that being appropriated by libertarians, instead of taking a skeptical look at these claims, when in my view the vast majority of these claims are unfounded. They are made against people who are otherwise quite decent. This is really quite appalling. And the fact that there are libertarians who love P.J. O'Rourke—who is a funny guy, I will grant you that, but he's pretty consistently pro-war. They can overlook being pro-war! War is the worst thing the state can possibly do, and they can say, well, this is just a policy disagreement we have with this guy. But that guy over there, well, I dug up a newsletter of his from 20 years ago, and even though obviously, just looking

at the guy you can tell he doesn't believe that, but that is enough to make me denounce him today, but this other guy, yeah, he really probably shouldn't support that war, but doggone it, he's funny.

**CANTWELL:** Oh, yeah, tell me about it. As we spoke about, I am expelled from the Free State Project, Tom, for just discussing defensive force. And meanwhile, they are welcoming to police and politicians and soldiers and people who have all different types of policy ideas from war right down to communism. You are welcome amongst this group of fine folks, but say something that upsets them a little bit, and they will freak out, even if you're a consistent non-aggressionist. And this is way too common, that people will be friends with all types of people, with all types of ideas, but they will take an issue like self-defense, or they will take an issue like race, and they will try to rub you off the map.

**WOODS:** Well, what I have been doing on this program, especially recently, is to bring in people who would not normally be associated with me, or the circles that I travel in, people who might teach at a particular university or people who might indeed have sympathies with the left, and just bring them on here and talk to them, and I find when I do that, that's very well received. We're keeping the lines of communication open, and that's been really good so far. But I don't want to be thought of on the other side as the guy who on the other side is constantly nitpicking and looking for reasons to exclude people. I am not looking for reasons to exclude people. Sometimes people hand them to me on a silver platter. I want us to be working together, but inevitably as a movement like this becomes more popular, becomes larger, there will be people who will join it because they are opportunists and not because they read Murray Rothbard's *For a New Liberty*. Those people need to be smoked out and identified—not because this is a cult, because obviously we're not expelling people from anything. We have no power to do that, but because in any movement—if somebody came to my chess club and said, "I think the king should be able to move across as many squares as he wants to," I can't play chess with that guy. I have to clarify that for the sake of the integrity of the game. I take that to be what you're doing, and indirectly at least, and sometimes directly, it's what I am trying to do.

**CANTWELL:** Absolutely! Look, it's one thing to let the guy stick around and learn how to play chess. It's another thing to let him teach the class.

**WOODS:** There you go, perfect!

**CANTWELL:** That's what I think is so dangerous about this. We've got people who really just plain don't understand libertarianism. We have to by our own strict definition of libertarianism. If they claim to believe in non-aggression, and they are not advocating force, then we have to call them libertarians, but let's just say it frankly: they don't understand it. So when they are giving speaking engagements, and they are given priority, and they are taken seriously, I think it's really important to call these people out and say, look, this is not a good description of what it is that we purport to adhere to, and allowing that to go unchecked, that's dangerous. They'll do to libertarianism what they did to liberalism, and in five years Barack Obama will comfortably call himself a libertarian without changing any of his policies.

**WOODS:** Yeah, exactly right, exactly right, and just the other day at LewRockwell.com, Danny Sanchez had a good piece pointing out in particular that John Stuart Mill, who is loved by a lot of libertarians, made exactly that transition. His view was that yeah, we should be against aggression, but we should be against any kind of social sanction that might make some group uncomfortable. And before you knew it he was a full-fledged modern liberal, because that was more important to him than strict libertarianism, and so we do not want to go down that road.