

Christina Hoff Sommers Interview: On the 'monster' Harvey Weinstein, campus kangaroo courts, and reclaiming feminism

American Enterprise Institute scholar Christina Hoff Sommers will be speaking at Intellectual Takeout's [gala on Oct. 30](#).

A graduate of NYU who received her Ph.D. in philosophy from Brandeis University, Sommers joined AEI as the W.H. Brady fellow in 1997. She had previously taught philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Clark University.

A best-selling author, Sommers has authored such books as *Who Stole Feminism* and *The War on Boys*. She has spoken at more than 100 colleges across the United States, in lecture and debate, and has appeared on numerous TV programs, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *60 Minutes*, *The Daily Show*, and *Nightline*.

As a prelude to the event, we sat down with Dr. Sommers to discuss feminism, the state of higher education, sexual assault, and the so-called "war on boys."

[Editor's note: This interview has been abridged and edited for clarity.]

Q: It's been 17 years since you wrote an article for the *Atlantic* entitled "The War Against Boys." Your [book on the subject](#) followed one year later. Has your thesis been vindicated?

CHS: Yes. The war seems to continue, unabated, though it's more a war of attrition. We neglect the academic needs of boys. There is no sign of anything changing, at least that I can see. The college gap keeps widening. It's dismaying.

Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of the Department of Education, recently announced that the government was rescinding the "Dear Colleague" letter of 2011, which offered "guidance" on how universities should treat accusations of sexual assault under Title IX. What will be the legacy of the policy?

I was very relieved to hear she was rescinding the policy. Many of our campuses have descended into a kind of sexual McCarthyism. We saw the suspension of due process and the presumption of innocence. Hundreds of students, maybe more, have been subject to these college rape tribunals, this kangaroo court injustice. DeVos made it clear that she takes the problem of sexual assault seriously, but she's going to require the schools to deal with these cases in ways which are consistent with American law.

Last year you returned to Massachusetts for a talk on political correctness, which was also attended by political commentator Steven Crowder and former Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos. What was that like?

It was surprising. The ferocity of some of the audience members was amazing. At first, I thought it was funny; I thought they'd quiet down. I disagree with Milo on a lot of things, so I was going to debate him. But no one could speak. And I'd been on other campuses, like Oberlin College, where students came with placards and organized a safe room. I apparently said something that made them feel unsafe. It's strange. It's as if the activism on campuses has been hijacked by melodrama.

When did this happen? You taught philosophy at UMass Boston and Clark University for years. When did the campus become so

uncivil?

It all seemed to change about 2013 or 2014. If you talk to someone who graduated a year or two before that, they will not remember anything like that. Something changed, and I think it was in part the rewriting of the Title IX statute by the Department of Education. It warned colleges that they had to start policing language. If anyone said anything of a sexual nature that made you uncomfortable, that was actionable harassment, according to the Department of Education. Well, that covers a lot of ground. The Supreme Court set a very high standard for harassment, understanding that there are free speech implications. Just hearing someone make a sexist quip doesn't rise to the level of harassment, according to the court, but according to the Department of Education it does.

It created conditions in which hyper-sensitive, grievance-collecting students could suddenly file charges. For years we've had people on the campus constantly taking offense. But now they were empowered by the Department of Education to make a federal case out of it.

I have three small children. Two of them are little boys. Any advice for parents raising boys in our culture?

Parents should know that girls are the privileged gender in education. From preschool to graduate school, across all ethnic and class lines, females tend to get the better grades, win the honors, and are more likely to go to college.

When did this happen?

What happened was in the 80s and 90s there were a number of alarming books— like *Reviving Ophelia*, Carol Gilligan's work—and people became very worried about girls. And they launched programs to help them, and some of these were excellent. The ones to strengthen girls in math and science, for example. But where were the programs to help boys where they were languishing? Reading, writing, school engagement,

college attendance.

What I see from Congress, schools of education, the Department of Education, they are looking the other way. And if you have a typical male child, he'll be less interested in school than his sister, less happy to be there, more likely to get in trouble, and more likely to do poorly. And it's not entirely his fault. The school can be a very hostile environment for a little boy.

We've seen cases of little boys seven or eight years old suspended from school for playing cops and robbers. A little boy in Maryland chewed a pop tart into the shape of a gun and he was suspended. But more than that, a lot of the readings tend to be geared more toward the interests of girls. There is a very low tolerance for male antics and very little understanding of what boys need to learn.

Do men have difficulty talking about this "war on boys"? Can they do it without sounding whiny?

It's very tricky.

Men aren't going to organize around their oppression. Not many of them. It's probably going to be left to mothers to help boys in school. Mothers will organize to help their kids. We saw, for example, these horrible injustices to young men taken through these kangaroo courts in these college rape tribunals. There was a group of mothers with falsely accused sons who proved to be a very effective force in bringing about reform. The group is called [FACE](#).

If you look at the way society organizes, there is a lot more concern for the health, education, and well-being of women. But when people hear men complain, many think it sounds like whining or it sounds unmanly. I worry the activists take advantage of that. We've seen outrageous injustice against young men on campuses, and these activists seem to do it without hesitation. They don't appear to feel the least bit

sorry that someone has been falsely accused. That's very hard for me to understand.

Have you met Camille Paglia? It seems like the two of you might get along.

Oh my goodness, we've been friends and allies for years. You can probably find a couple YouTube clips of us talking, lamenting the fact that we've been fighting this battle for years. In the first culture war, the one in the early 90s, we won. We won the arguments. The *New York Times* was on our side. *New York* magazine. Famous historians. At the time, no one was on board with the radical PC brigade. People found it ludicrous and funny. What happened was, we won the arguments and they won the assistant professorships. So a kind of extreme form of political correctness got tenure.

These young radical scholars feel no obligation to bring in a moderate, a libertarian, or—heaven forbid—a conservative. They see America as this vast network of oppressive policies and practices. The whole system has to be taken down. They don't want anyone in there who might be an apologist for the status quo.

Educated women in particular seem to reflexively embrace what you call “gender feminism” over equity feminism? Why?

I don't know. I honestly don't understand it. I don't know why I don't have more female allies.

That leads to my next question. Can those who are classically liberal, like yourself, win back feminism?

I think about that every day. How can we win? How can rationality, free expression, and civility between men and women prevail? I don't understand why more academic women aren't coming forward to help people like Camille and me. There are some, but very few. I find myself thinking, *Wow, there aren't many women scholars fighting hardline gender feminism. Why am I doing it. Is there something wrong with me?* (laughter)

I really search my mind. I try to find evidence for this oppressive patriarchy. I see evidence that things aren't perfect; there's room for improvement; bad things happen. But I don't see evidence of systemic male hegemony. Everything put forth as evidence – like the wage gap – can be explained by choices men and women make in terms of college majors and fields they enter. When you control for those mundane things, the gap closes and even vanishes entirely, according to some analyses.

We hear about a rape culture, but rapists are despised in the United States; people want them arrested and punished. Regarding the campus, serious studies and research, such as the Bureau of Justice statistics, show that sexual assault is a problem, but it's not an epidemic. But these advocacy groups believe their own research and methodology, which makes it look like walking on an American campus like Wesleyan or Swarthmore is as dangerous for a woman as the war-torn Congo.

What's the solution?

If we have good information and good studies, then we can address the problem in a rational way and maybe make a difference. But if you're exaggerating women's victimology and completely ignoring the bad things that are happening to men, then you're just going to have what we have today: a lot of ideology, a lot of propaganda, and no solutions, or very few of them.

You're a good follow on Twitter. You've been all over this Harvey Weinstein story. Assuming all of these accusations against him are true—and there are many allegations—what does this mean for Weinstein and for Hollywood?

When the story first broke, I didn't know what to make of it. But these stories are very well corroborated. They all tell the same surface story; he had the same method with so many women. He was just this predatory monster, and there were a lot of enablers. And that is what Hollywood has to answer for. There can always be a sociopath or a monster among us. But how did this go on when so many people knew about it? Even people in the New York media. The *New York Times* and others knew in 2004 and yet the story only comes out now. This sycophantic relationship between the New York press and Hollywood is to blame. This story should have been told a long time ago. If true, these were sexual assaults and even rape in some cases. It's very hard to understand how this could go on so long. This was a very corrupt relationship.

Everything in our culture seems political these days. Why is that?

I don't know. But it's exhausting.

Part of it is the election of Donald Trump. That was traumatizing for a lot of people, including me. He was not my candidate.

Initially, I think people thought he was this Machiavellian, patriarchal, oppressive, hegemon. He might be some of that, but he mostly seems cantankerous and erratic. I just don't know if he has the attention span to be an effective Machiavellian who wields power in a coherent way.

Are you still a registered Democrat?

Yes. The Democratic Party was sort of the family religion. My parents were [Yellow Dog Democrats](#). My first political memory was shaking hands with Adlai Stevenson in a shopping mall. I'm just hoping the Democratic Party will come back to the center.

What are you reading right now?

I'm reading philosophy books for a paper I'm working on about where "intersectionality" came from.

I'm reading Bruce Bawer's book *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*, Roger Scruton's *Thinkers of the New Left*, Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. I'm just going through a lot of literature to try to find out how we got where we are today.

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[Image Credit: Youtube]