



## Episode 1,474: What Is Fascism?

Guest: Gerard Casey

**WOODS:** Well, I'm very glad to have you back. It's been a long time. We've discussed quite a few topics in *Freedom's Progress*, but it's such a huge book, it's more or less inexhaustible, so you and I thought we might talk about fascism today, because you do devote some time to that as a political idea. And it's particularly important to get this one right, because a lot of people just use the word fascism somewhat carelessly, as a generic term of abuse. But it does, in fact, have a precise meaning, so in order for us to dive into this discussion, we should start with some kind of working definition or understanding of what fascism really is and was.

**CASEY:** Yeah, very good, Tom. It's great to be back. Thank you very much for the invitation. Well, fascism, I suppose, in its narrowest signification, picks out the political movement spearheaded by Mussolini in Italy between, whatever it was, 1922 I think and then obviously the collapse of that regime in 1943. It has a broader signification, and people often use the term fascist to describe national socialism, which is in fact different in some ways. So the question then is, are there sort of generic characteristics that a regime could have which would allow it to be correctly described as fascist? And I think there's obviously a scholarly discussion on this, and some people take one position, some the other.

But my view is that, yes, fascism describes a type of regime, which is characterized by a number of factors. So let's see what they would be. Collectivism — I'm going to talk about that as tribalism, a kind of ultra-nationalism, especially in the form of the rebirth of the nation — authoritarianism, totalitarianism, corporatism, and obviously a heavy emphasis on the military, and perhaps of all, what's known in Nazism as the Führerprinzip, which is the leadership principle, which of course requires a great leader. In the case of those two movements, Hitler and Mussolini.

**WOODS:** I also think of fascism in broad terms as conceiving of the state as the embodiment of the people's will, or maybe the leader, the Führerprinzip is the idea that the leader really embodies the people's will, and the state is the instrument through which that people realizes its destiny in history.

**CASEY:** Yes, that is true. I mean, again, fascism is one of these essentially contested terms, and scholars have a wonderful time writing back and forth and disagreeing with one another on it. But I think it's true to say what you've just said. I think that's absolutely correct.

**WOODS:** There's a passage in Mises' book *Liberalism* in which he says something along the lines of the other side has its flags and its national songs and its captivating slogans, whereas we liberals — meaning liberals in the classical sense, of course — have none of that. What we

have is reason, and we are unfurling the banner of reason and urging mankind to rally to it. And that could not be farther removed from fascism, which you describe as a form of irrationalism, that looks at what somebody like a Mises is saying and just thinks these are just disembodied principles. There's no flesh and blood to them. There's no life in any of them. It's abstractions that a philosopher would write on a chalkboard, whereas we are appealing to the experiences and the common history and, indeed, the common blood of our people.

**CASEY:** Yeah, that's very true. It would be hard even if our parliamentary systems were better than they are, which they're not, to get wildly excited about it. I know those people who are professionally involved in politics, for them, it's their life's blood, but for most human beings with lives to live elsewhere, it's a matter of mostly indifference and painful sort of suffering. Whereas the appeal of fascism was that it appealed to the sort of flesh and blood, to the concrete, to the instinctive or the unconscious, and it prioritized that. Insofar as there's a philosophy of fascism, that's what it was. And rejected what it saw as a kind of effete rationalism, concerned with sort of logic chopping and moving things around. Blood and soil in the Nazi version; it was the same sort of thing, slightly less dramatic, in the Italian version. But yes, that characterizes it. So something to get worked up about, something to get excited about, something that could appeal. And I mean, who hasn't seen, for example, those newsreel footage of Hitler, standing up there, declaiming. And assuming that the collective audience wasn't simply putting it on, they were being genuinely moved by what he had to say. Whether they were right to be so moved is another question, but they were genuinely moved. And that's something which, I mean, the thing has to be granted to fascism. It did appeal to something in people.

**WOODS:** It's not difficult to understand why you would use the word tribalism, therefore, in this context, but you also use the word transcendence. What are you driving at there?

**CASEY:** Well, I don't mean anything very fancy by transcendence, because transcendence is an experience we all have in very humdrum ways. So people who follow sports, for example, get attached to their team, and even though their team doesn't know that they exist and would happily carry on without them, nonetheless, they say things like "We won today." And who's this "we"? Are you part of the team? No, but in a sense, you identify with it, and its victories are your victories, its losses are your losses. And it takes you out of yourself, gives you something greater than your own humdrum life to experience. The same would be true, for example, on a slightly higher plane, for example, in music. When you go to a concert and you experience a first-class symphony orchestra playing, let's say, Sibelius' Symphony No. 5 in an outstanding performance, and you're part of this great crowd and you share this experience. And for a short time, you are, as it were, taken out of yourself. And so similarly, in a political way, the fascist movement provided a kind of transcendence. It gave people whose lives were maybe miserable and who didn't have a lot something beyond themselves and their own petty interests to live for, something to identify with, especially in its successes, but even in its failures.

**WOODS:** Let me just ask you a question that's a little bit off the topic here, but you also use the word tribalism in reference to a contemporary phenomenon, namely Bolshevism. And there, it's not as obvious how it applies, because obviously the fascists are appealing to particular people, whereas the Bolsheviks no doubt think of themselves as universalists. So how are they also tribalists?

**CASEY:** Oh, that's true, there are differences, and even though I described them all as forms of tribalism, it doesn't preclude there being differences between them. The Bolsheviks did portray themselves as being internationalists. Still, in fact, their activities were confined largely to specific national groups. And in effect, for example, with the major form of Bolshevism which was in the Soviet Union, was simply a form of Russian imperialism of the old style. Nonetheless, they each had, as it were, a tribe, whether it was the Volk, the people in Nazism, or the nation in Italian fascism. So the proletariat, the class plays the role of, if you like, the anointed group, and the local group, as it were, which makes it the tribe. And to be part of that proletariat, for whom heaven awaited at some future, if a very far off date, was to be part of that tribe. And so people sacrificed, genuinely did. Many people were committed to this and endured horrible sufferings and hardships for what they thought was the attainment of a greater goal. They were to be disappointed, of course, but nonetheless, they genuinely did believe that that's what they were working towards.

**WOODS:** I want to turn now to how the fascists conceive of freedom, because they would reject the idea that they reject freedom; it's just a matter of how they conceive of freedom. So how do the fascists conceive of freedom? What does it mean to be free for a fascist?

**CASEY:** Well, again, one might think, unreflectively, that freedom means having the ability to do as you wish without other people imposing their will to prevent you from doing it. But that from the fascist point of view is a sort of vulgar, liberal conception of freedom, freedom as a sort of mere instinct or caprice. Whereas real freedom, as far as they're concerned, is activity in conformity with law, and of course, the law is then determined by the guardians of the state, who are of course the leaders of the fascist party.

Readers who are politically savvy will of course recognize in this a distinctly Rousseauian theme. In other words, the idea is that there can be a gap between an agent's merely apparent will and what is determined to be his real will. So from the fascist point of view, sort of taking up the Rousseauian theme, you might think that in order to be free, you should be able to do as your like. But they will say to you, no, no, no. Your real freedom consists in following the laws and the norms that are set down by the leaders of the fascist state, because we know, of course, what's good for you and what's truly fulfilling for you, whereas you, unilluminated as you are, my think that what you're seeking will in fact be truly protective of you. But in fact, it isn't, so we have to you, as it were, look out for like sort of ersatz parents.

**WOODS:** Maybe that flows into the issue of totalitarianism. What precisely is it about fascism that makes it totalitarian? Not all nationalism is fascist, for example. Maybe we could ask that question. How do we distinguish — like at what point does it become something qualitatively other than just plain old nationalism?

**CASEY:** Yeah, well, nationalism runs the gamut from, I suppose the most benign form of it, which is a sort of mild preference for people from your own part of the world who speak more or less like you and understand the peculiar forms of sport that you engage in and that sort of thing. Okay, people you feel at home with. So for example, if you're in a foreign airport and you hear people speaking with a similar accent to you, it sort of makes you feel at home in that sense. So nationalism in that sense, sharing a sort of mild set of not particularly important characteristics. But then nationalism takes up different forms. So of course, nationalism combined with the state, as we saw in the 19th century, is a sort of a potent mixture, but even that has limitations.

What makes it totalitarianism to be really problematic is that, here, the state or the Volk or the proletariat or whoever the locus of virtue is, is taken to be the organizing principle around which everything has to be organized. That's the whole point. It's total, so that all events, everything, activity, sports, education, the economy, industry, management of industry, all have to be controlled by the state. Everything for the state, nothing against the state, in the Mussolinian diktat. That's what makes it to be totalitarian.

**WOODS:** All right, now I want to raise the interesting, probably fruitless question about whether fascism is properly considered a phenomenon of the left or the right. And I've gone back and forth on this over the years. I know, as you certainly do, that Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, who was an extremely learned scholar, took the position that it was a phenomenon of the left. In fact, he had a book called *Leftism*, and it was later updated as *Leftism Revisited: From Hitler to Pol Pot*. And of course, right there in the title he's telling you Hitler's on the left. It's just meant to rub your nose in it. But on the other hand, I've had people say like Paul Gottfried say to me, no, no, look, it obviously is a phenomenon of the right, because there are certain leftist ideas that it does not hold. Like it doesn't hold egalitarianism, for example. It certainly does not believe all people are equal or anything like that. So how do you sort through this? I said it was fruitless, but I mean, I just mean that it's a kind of a debating society question. That doesn't make it uninteresting. I find it intensely interesting.

**CASEY:** Yeah, okay. Well, reluctant that I am to disagree with Paul Gottfried, I'd have to say that, as far as I'm concerned, fascism is a creature of the left. I don't want to get into a discussion about etymology here or anything like that, but I mean, let's look at where it comes from. So for example, Mussolini is a socialist, was a socialist, before he became a fascist, edited the socialist paper. And the word socialism is, in fact, part of the word Nazi. One of the problems with using "Nazi" is that of course it elides the socialist, so it's the National Socialist Party. And the difference between Nazism or national socialism and Bolshevism is that the Bolsheviks thought that they were socialists of an international variety, whereas the Nazis had limited their socialism to the nation state. But while those who are happy to fling those names around as terms of abuse at people on the sort of right of the scale or conservatives generally tend to forget that, in fact, the word socialism is part of the word Nazi.

Now, you might say, well, okay, that's purely verbal. Is there anything more to it than that? Well, the answer is yes. I mean, if you look at what Mussolini set out as their program in the Fasci di Combattimento, so he had, for example, an eight-hour working day, minimum wage, worker participation, the management of industry to be given over to proletarian organizations, the provision of state secular education, progressive tax, and the confiscation of ecclesiastical property and revenues. Now, that sounds all very left-wing to me.

And then when you switch over to Germany, you find that their program, at least the original program, though it was modified later on, was concerned with the abolition of all so-called unearned income, confiscation of war profits, the nationalization of corporations, profit sharing in industrial enterprises, the reconstruction of the national system of education so that the curricula is brought into line with practical life, creation of a national press, prohibition and prosecution of newspapers whose output was not conducive to national welfare, and so on and so forth. All of that seems to me — and I'd be happy to hear arguments on the other side, but all of that seems to me to be pretty solidly socialist and left.

There are those people, for example, Frank McDonough, who, in his book on Hitler in Nazi Germany, described these as being limited and puts inverted commas around the "socialist." But I have to say that, in order to do this, you have to have a really strange and bizarre hermeneutical ability to deny what seems to me to be the obvious socialist thrust of those demands.

**WOODS:** All right, that's a pretty good case, I'll grant you. That is a more than reasonable case. Now, let's try to bring this up to the present day, because people will say that in Eastern Europe and in some political parties in Western Europe, there's a resurgence of fascism. Is that how you would describe what's happening in Europe? Is it a resurgence of fascism?

**CASEY:** It's difficult to say. I'm not trying to dodge the question, but from the limited amount of information I've got, it looks on the face of it to be more or less recrudescence of your sort of 19th century nationalism rather than fascism. In other words, where we are not necessarily committed to the idea, which seems to be a key idea of fascism, which is the idea of the rebirth of the nation, but rather an attempt simply to fight against the increasing internationalization of, for example, the European Union. It may be that it has fascistic elements, and it may be that it will move more clearly in that direction as time goes on. It's really hard to say. But at the moment, if I had put money in it, I would simply plump for nationalism, rather than fascism.

**WOODS:** All right, so having said that, let's go back a little bit. You have in the chapter in your book a little bit of treatment of the subject of fascism in the United States. Now, it's interesting to note as we look back on, let's say, the 1920s and maybe even 1930s in the US, that there is some favorable – well, more than just some favorable – treatment in the press of the example of Fascist Italy. The *New Republic* magazine, for example, which is still around today, seems to have been quite fond of the Italian fascist example, because they liked the idea that Mussolini had and the fascists had, that we can take – this was exactly what the progressives in the US said in World War I, that they looked at World War I, they looked at this great undertaking, where we took the resources of society and instead of thinking of our own selfish, private interests, we devoted them to some common enterprise. So if we can do that during wartime, then surely we can all band together for something important, namely the resurrection of the nation itself, and keep that spirit of all of us working together, the public good over the private benefit. And that was what the fascists were talking about, and obviously, that resonated with some folks in the US. So what do you have to say on that general subject?

**CASEY:** No, I think that's exactly true. In fact, that brings us back to something we talked about a bit earlier, namely the notion of transcendence. And anyone who's ever served in the military will know that, especially if you've come from a background, for example, where your family wasn't particularly strong or supportive and so on, without getting all romantic about it, you can find yourself, as it were, with a band of brothers, where you're committed to engaging in activities where you sink the purely selfish part of yourself and an act, if you like, for the good of the group. And we all recognize that that, in fact, has its place in life. In fact, we do it voluntarily. We join associations and so on, and we sometimes give up our time and, indeed, our resources to advance the good of the particular group.

What came about – I mean, apart from the 19th century development of the philosophy of rationalism, what really gave the push to the development of the fascism of the 20th century

was, of course, the First World War. And here, for the first time ever, really, the total resources of the nation were developed, were appropriated, if you like, for the purposes of war. Again, it's true, of course, that every war involves the destruction and the rerouting of resources that would have been used productively elsewhere for destructive purposes. But it was the for the first time, for example, that in Britain, for example, that conscription was introduced, so that you didn't simply depend on people volunteering to serve, but in fact, they were forced by law to do it. And of course, you have the same thing in the United States.

And what a lot of people took from this was: look, when a war is on, everybody has to pull together and nobody is permitted to dissent or go off on his own particular track or do his own particular thing. Everything must be devoted to the achievement of victory in the war. And there's something, as it were, stimulating and attractive about that. The problem is that it requires effectively the militarization of society as a whole and, indeed, its continuing militarization. And therefore, it's not for nothing that – again, to move back from the United States to the European model – when you saw Mussolini and Hitler, you almost invariably saw them in military uniform, right? This is the idea. They were, if you like, the leaders, the war leaders, and then when the war is on, if you'd like, everything has to give way to it. The expression is, "There's a war on." Whenever you were, as it were, tempted to complain about shortages or rations and so on, you were told, "There's a war on."

And that happened in the United States in the First World War. Despite Wilson's election on a noninvolvement pledge and so on, nonetheless, the US eventually in 1917 began to participate. And as a result of that, certain changes, certain really dramatic changes took place in US society, for example, and for the first time, in fact – and this is the interesting thing – long before Mussolini and long before Hitler. So you had the setting up of the first propaganda ministry. You had the jailing of political prisoners. You had the stigmatization of foreigners and immigrants. You had the shutting down of newspapers. You had the recruitment of paramilitary forces to intimidate others. And you had the recruitment of the entertainment industry to provide propaganda. All of that took place in the United States in 1917.

**WOODS:** Why do you think it matters to talk about fascism today? Is it just of historical significance to aid in our understanding, or is there anything we can learn from it or any continuing relevance?

**CASEY:** Well, no, I think it's important, because I think in my chapter I point out that they haven't gone away. In other words, fascism can occur even without the name. In other words, so there's always a temptation in our societies, as a result perhaps of impatience with democratic or pseudo-democratic processes and the inevitable wrangling that goes on in political circles, when people want to get things done. They want a strong leader. And I was shocked, in fact, to read recently in the UK's papers that there, that the many young people, if you like, are receptive to the idea of "strong leadership." And to anyone with any historical knowledge, that kind of language should be very alarming, right? And it's of course the language that Roosevelt was to use in the 1930s, again, in words which were expressly militaristic, and indeed, as it were, threatened to take on the role – in other words, if Congress wouldn't, as it were, step up to the plate and do the job, then he was prepared – indeed, he saw himself as duty-bound – to lead the people in that way. And that, what we talked about earlier, is the Führerprinzip, the idea of the leadership principle, strong leadership. That's always there, sometimes under the surface, and sometimes I would think,

perhaps more recently, at the surface or just popping above the surface yet again. So it's a permanent temptation that has to be fought against and resisted.

**WOODS:** So the book we've been talking about today is *Freedom's Progress: A History of Political Thought*, which I highly recommend. It's just a magisterial book. It's an amazing achievement. But I want to say a word about a book you have coming up in the not-too-distant future, for which I will have you on as a return guest, but maybe you can say something about it.

**CASEY:** Yeah, so the book — you're very kind to refer to it as magisterial — was never intended to be the sort of brick that it is [laughing]. Somebody who read it jokingly said he was going to sue me for repetitive strain injury to his wrist. So I for a long time since I published that book in 2017, I've been doing some research, and I've been concerned, as indeed many people have, by the attack on free speech and, indeed, the attack on procedural justice, for example, as exemplified in the Me Too movement. More about that later. So I started to write a book on free speech, and then I said, well, how would I organize this? I mean, it's a complicated topic. And I thought, well, why not use sort of the central principle of libertarianism, the zero aggression principle, and give an account of free speech and how it would be understood if you use that? And so that's what I've done.

But then I thought, hang on a second, there's another element that's exceptionally worrying in our current environment, and that's the idea that there's, if you like, a certain intolerance of which the attack on free speech is simply a version. And so as I started to think about this, I started to see that the currently fashionable doctrines of diversity, inclusion, and equality are closely linked, if you like, to the same ideas that tend to limit speech. So my book tries to tie all of that together in a coherent way.

**WOODS:** Well, I'm very much looking forward to that. Of course, I look forward to anything that you have to say. So we will definitely revisit that. In the meantime, at [TomWoods.com/1474](https://TomWoods.com/1474), I'll have a link to *Freedom's Progress*, which everybody should own. It is an enormous book, but I mean, it's like, if you look at the price, remember you're getting at least the equivalent of four books in here. And it's written from a libertarian perspective, very engagingly, with just so much knowledge and learning in it. There's no way you're going to regret that purchase. So [TomWoods.com/1474](https://TomWoods.com/1474). Thanks so much, Professor Casey, always a pleasure.

**CASEY:** Thank you, Tom.