Guest: David Ramsay Steele

WOODS: All right, you've got a collection of essays; they're all great, but the interesting thing about it is, the book is called *The Mystery of Fascism*, and yet that's one of the many essays in here, and the rest of the essays don't really have anything to do with fascism. So you made an editorial decision there.

STEELE: Right, it's like when you have a rock album and you name the album after the track that was a runaway hit. Because that essay of mine on "The Mystery of Fascism" has attracted more attention than anything else I've written.

WOODS: Wow, okay, so that I did not know. Let's talk about that essay. I've covered fascism a bunch of times. In fact, at TomWoods.com/1578, which is our show notes page, I will link to all the different fascism episodes. And what they all have in common, I would say, is we're trying to come up with a definition of fascism. We're trying to understand the phenomenon so that we can inoculate ourselves against the use of this term as a general term of abuse, which of course is how it is used today. I mean, almost nobody who calls somebody a fascist today has any idea what he's talking about.

STEELE: That's true.

WOODS: Yeah, so talk about this essay. What's the point? And when was it written and what were the circumstances?

STEELE: It was written some time ago. I can't remember, but the early 2000s. And the main thrust of the essay is simply to draw people's attention to the left-wing roots of fascism. Fascism grew out of something called national syndicalism, which was something that developed in the ultra left, the ultra-hard left, especially in southern Europe in the years prior to the First World War. And Mussolini was the leading Marxist, the leading Marxist socialist writer prior to the First World War. And it was considered an article of fate — this was, remember, before communist parties were formed and separated themselves from the broader socialist movement. So Mussolini was tipped to be the leader of a future socialist Italy, either revolutionary like Lenin or constitutional. It was expected. He was the Che Guevara of his day; he was a glamour boy of the left, especially the hard left, and people like Lenin cheered on when Mussolini and his group took control of the socialist party.

So, I mean, I could go on at this point, but the interesting thing is to explain how this individual and his followers who were thoroughly rooted in the left — and very knowledgeable people, for the most part, highly educated people who'd read a lot — how they ended up being leaders of this movement, which today we think of as being the epitome of the right. And so that's the way the essay, my oft-quoted and oft-cited essay, comes at it, and I try to explain how this happened. And it certainly didn't happen because Mussolini sold out and took money from the capitalists in order to do their bidding. Apart from anything else, most capitalists didn't want fascism, just as most capitalists in Germany didn't want Nazism. So that explanation just doesn't work.

But anyway, going to what you're talking about today where people use the word *fascism*, I think it's fascinating the way people use it. I mean, a few months ago, Tucker Carlson started calling China Fascist China. He never did that before, and he occasionally would have called it Communist China or just China. And what it was is just that his hostility to China is solidifying.

As you know, today the left wants to go to war with Russia and the right wants to go to war with China. That's the difference between them. And so to say *Fascist China* just shows that Tucker Carlson thoroughly disapproves of China. It doesn't tell you anything really about China. I suppose you could say it tells you that China is not a liberal democracy. I suppose that's fair. But of course, there are many, many political institutions in history which have not been liberal democratic that have not been fascist.

WOODS: That's true, which is why so many of these at least implicit definitions of fascism that people have just don't work, because they prove too much. Every country in the world would be fascist if it's — and there are even some well-meaning American libertarians who think that we'll define fascism so that it involves some kind of relationship between government and business. Okay, well, you've now successfully defined the entire planet Earth as fascist.

STEELE: Right.

WOODS: So that can't be it. So I've gone through and probably identified ten features of actual fascism that I've discussed in previous episodes, but what's interesting to me today, just because it came up in a recent discussion I was having, is people will say that Ludwig von Mises was sympathetic to fascism, that those —

STEELE: He did praise it very lavishly in one passage in I think the 1920s. But I think he was not very well informed about its origins, and he thought of it just as a firm response to the rise of Bolshevism, that these were people who were doing something to prevent the spread of the communist party theory in southern Europe. The same thing goes for Winston Churchill. Winston Churchill gave some very lavish praise to Mussolini in the early days, in the mid 1920s. In the mid 1920s, all kinds of people were praising fascism, and it wasn't clear whether it was left or right.

WOODS: Right, right. As a matter of fact, there's a book, it's an old book now from the early '70s, by John Diggins, who's deceased now —

STEELE: Oh, right, right.

WOODS: — called *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*. And I remember consulting that years ago. And then reading a review of it to refresh my memory about the thesis, I found this just this one interesting note, that Diggins shows how "the fascist facade of solidarity, discipline, and moral purpose could appeal to progressives disillusioned by the apparent decline into private materialism at home." So it happens to be the case that you can read articles in, let's say, *The New Republic* magazine, which was the flagship progressive publication, that were rather intrigued by what was going on in Fascist Italy, and thought that, unlike the decadent, laissez-faire United States, a country like Italy had some kind of declared purpose. The country together had a shared solidarity, and they were moving forward according to a shared vision. You can easily see that kind of vocabulary being picked up by progressives. So for them to say today, *Well, back in such-and-such year, so-and-so made this remark*, well, so did you people. And at least Mises has the advantage of after he said what he said — and again, as you say, he was just saying: at least they kept away the real barbarians. I mean, Mussolini is nothing compared to Bolsheviks. He is not a grain of sand on the beach compared to those people. But immediately after his remarks on fascism, he then goes into a systematic critique and demolition of the whole system. So it's absurd and irrational to accuse him of that.

STEELE: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. You know, I'm sitting about two and a half blocks away from a street which is now called Balboa Avenue. And that was named — it's still called Balboa Avenue. It's amazing that the politically-correct woke people haven't got onto it, but it's still called Balboa Avenue. It was named after the number-two person in Fascist Italy who happened to be an aviator and who flew across the Atlantic with 25 planes and landed in Lake Michigan and was fated in Chicago, and so a street was named after him. His name was Italo

Balbo. He then went to New York for a ticker tape parade, and he and a few of his select ace aviators went to the White House for lunch with President Roosevelt. And President Roosevelt expressed his admiration for the achievements of Italy under Mussolini and Balbo. So you can see it was quite cozy.

And then moving further afield, Sigmund Freud sent an autographed copy of one of his new books to Mussolini. He was a great admirer of Mussolini, and he inscribed it "To the hero of culture." Both Mussolini and Sigmund Freud, they had an amateur interest in archaeology and they collected ancient artifacts. So that was a bond between them. And then there were the early lyrics of the song "You're the Top": "You're the top. You're the great Houdini. You're the top. You are Mussolini." After a few years, that was changed [laughing]. But there was this wave of sympathy and approval for fascism.

And remember that before 1938, there was no racism in fascism. This is the original fascism, where the word comes from, and there was no anti-Semitism whatsoever. In fact, there were a lot of highly placed Jews in the Fascist Party in Italy. This all changed because of Mussolini's deal with Hitler in 1938. But up until then, it was completely — and in fact, not only was it bereft of anti-Semitism, but Mussolini in the early '30s was seen as somebody who would stand up to Hitler, because he sent troops to the Austrian border to prevent the coup by the Nazis. The first attempt to bring about *Anschluss* with Austria, Mussolini sent troops and put a stop to it. It was all a bluff, but that's what he did. And at that time, Hitler climbed down and apologized and said he greatly regretted the death of the Chancellor Adolphus, who had been killed in his coup. Mussolini tore down a statue in Italy of a person who happened to be German and replaced it with a statue of an ancient Roman general who had conquered a lot of Germanic lands.

So, you know, there was this period where there was no assumption that Hitler and Mussolini would ever be on the same side. In fact, it was assumed they would have contrary interest because of the South Tirol, which was then part of Austria and where there was a big Italian population and where, according to fascist doctrine, they should be claiming that for Italy. So there was a very broad sort of consensus of progressive opinion that fascism was very interesting and something to be admired.

WOODS: I'd like to move on to what is inevitably an unrelated essay, because that's the nature of a book like this, but it's one that caught my eye because it reflects something that Matt Ridley just wrote a few weeks ago, and I —

STEELE: Yes, these people eventually catch up with me.

WOODS: They catch up with David Ramsay Steele. I figured that was what I was observing. I don't know when you wrote "The Fallacy of Sheer Bulk," but in there, you're — well, actually, rather than have me spell out the thesis of it why don't you explain the idea of that essay? And then I want to read a corroborating passage from Matt Ridley, who's also been a guest on *The Tom Woods Show*.

STEELE: Yes. Well, it struck me when I was reading David Graeber, who is always an intellectual of the current left and who is actually quite a good writer and spells things out very clearly, which is one of the reasons I like reading his stuff, and he makes the remark that you can't have perpetual economic growth in a finite world. And it struck me that a lot of people on the left like Graeber, they think of economic growth as meaning the piling up of more and more physical stuff. So they, think of, if the GDP goes up by 2%, that means there's 2% more physical stuff surrounding people. And obviously, there is going to be a limit to that eventually, although we don't seem to be anywhere near it, but that still, the idea that economic growth is equivalent with the growth of physical manufactured items.

Well, of course, economic growth often takes the form of a reduction in the volume of physical stuff. A good example would be an iPhone, which is a lot smaller, takes up much less space than an old-fashioned telephone, and even more so is the comparison dramatic if you

compare it with an old fashioned telephone, plus a camera, plus a computer. There's been a huge reduction there in the physical space taken up by the artifact, yet it represents economic growth. So the point is, although in the early stages of industrialization, you observe manufactured objects appearing in profusion, ultimately this starts to level off, because there are many opportunities to reduce the physical volume taken up by the manufactured items.

So what's really going on is not an accumulation of more and more physical stuff, but an arrangement of matter so that it better serves the wishes and the wants of the consumers, so that people are better off and happier. So that's what economic growth is. It's increasing human happiness by rearranging the world of matter. Of course matter can neither be created nor destroyed, at least not by humans, and so we're not creating matter. But neither are we just creating a lot of manufactured items. What we're doing is rearranging the world in various detailed ways so that people are better off. That's one more reason why economic growth is a good thing.

WOODS: Let me share this passage from an article that appeared this very month in *The Spectator*. He says, in effect, riffing on what you've just said, "A normal drink can today contains 13 grams of aluminum, much of it recycled. In 1959, it contained 85 grams." And then he says, "As for Britain, our consumption of stuff probably peaked around the turn of the century, an achievement that has gone almost entirely unnoticed. The quantity of all resources consumed per person in Britain — domestic extraction of biomass, metals, minerals and fossil fuels plus imports minus exports — fell by a third between 2000 and 2017, from 13.7 tons to 9.4 tons. That's a faster decline than the increase in the number of people, so it means fewer resources consumed overall."

And then he repeats your point. He says, "If this doesn't seem to make sense, think about your own home. Cell phones have the computing power of room-sized computers of the 1970s. I use mine instead of a camera, radio, torch, compass, map, calendar, watch, CD player, newspaper, and pack of cards. LED light bulbs consume about a quarter as much electricity as incandescent bulbs for the same light. Modern buildings generally contain less steel and more of it is recycled. Offices are not yet paperless, but they use much less paper. And even when we have cases where the use of stuff is not falling," he gives many examples of it rising more slowly than expected. So this is, as he says and as you're suggesting, rather an interesting phenomenon. And yet, I don't know, I would be surprised if 10% of the population was even aware of it.

STEELE: Right, I think people like — well, you know, economics is not taught in high school, and given the political opinions of most high school teachers, it's probably a good thing that it isn't. But it means that people have absolutely no conception of some of these very fundamental insights of economics.

WOODS: I have not discussed, at least not very much, on the podcast Thomas Szasz. And maybe I should, but the reason is just that I don't know enough about him. I don't know enough about his thesis to do it justice, and I don't like getting into conversations where I don't feel like I'm qualified. But he is a very important figure, and you discuss him in your book somewhat critically, although you say that you very much respect a good deal of what he's had to say. Was the name of the — I mean, he wrote a lot, but there was a book with a really provocative title. Was it something like *The Myth of Mental Illness*?

STEELE: That's right, and I think that was 1961, *The Myth of Mental Illness*. And actually, I'm a great admirer of Thomas Szasz, and I've always thought it was a pity that that's the book everybody, if they feel they want to find out something about Szasz, they read, although it is certainly very important historically, that he put forward this view at that particular point. A lot of his other books are a lot more entertaining. But anyway — because he wrote about 40 books.

He goes to great pains in that book to argue that there is literally no such thing as mental illness, that when we say that someone's mind is sick, we're using a metaphor, just like when we say that the economy is sick, or the state of the novel is sick, or something like that. It's purely metaphorical, and we shouldn't think that medicine can tell us anything about these phenomena of people's, what he calls, problems in living. And throughout his life, he was a strong campaigner against various forms of psychiatric coercion. And he writes as though there is a tight connection between his definition of mental illness, to show that there is no such thing, and his opposition to some of these coercive state measures.

The thing I point out is that there is no such a tight connection, and also, that his statement that mental illness is literally a myth is a kind of piece of pedantic nitpicking, because it's like saying the sun doesn't really set, which is true and shows that you have a grasp of astrophysics, but it's pedantic to bring it up when someone starts talking about the sunset. My point is that today — now, this wasn't true when Szasz started writing, but today I would say the great majority of people in the mental health field would accept a definition of mental illness, something like this: a brain illness that has mental consequences. Now, is it a myth that there is such a thing as a condition of the brain that has mental consequences? I would say it's not a myth, and in fact, I think it's a good bet that there are such things.

Now of course, it's understandable that Szasz would come at it a bit differently, because he came out of psychoanalysis. He was originally a psychoanalyst. And he could have been, more or less, a leading figure in psychoanalysis. Someone described him as the crown prince of psychoanalysis. But he turned his back on that and became an anti-psychiatrist, although he always hated that term. So back then, very few people would have accepted, under the influence of Freud and Jung and all the people who followed them, very few people would have accepted that mental illness means a brain illness, whereas today, the great majority of mental health people accept that. So that's how things have changed. So in a sense, they've come round to Szasz's view, because when they say *mental illness*, they mean a brain illness.

Now, Szasz goes to great lengths to point out that things like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and things like that, no one's ever demonstrated that these are brain diseases. And that's absolutely true, and it's worth taking the full force of that, that it's a conjecture. It's not something that has been proven. So Szasz is right to that extent. But my point is that it's quite reasonable to accept a conjecture that is not yet proven if it explains a lot, and I think that some of the behavior of people can be explained on the hypothesis that they have a brain condition. So that's my point there.

WOODS: I'd like to conclude — because I want people to check out your book. It's got all kinds of provocative essays in it, and it's a lot of fun, and it's very enlightening to read. I'd like to finish with one that could easily be an entire episode of — which I would even like to consider if I could find two good debaters — having a debate on the program about it. Might be Michael Huemer or Gary Chartier might be possibilities. But I'm thinking about the vegetarian chapter. Now, again, these are from the popular section. This is not meant to be a scholarly article. But you take on one moral argument for vegetarianism in this chapter, and so I'd like to hear that, but then I know I'm going to get all the vegetarians or vegans writing to me and saying, *Now, wait a minute, we have to hear the other side* — which I absolutely accept that. Yes, we do, and I would love to debate this. But you know, you're the person I'm talking to right now, and you have an essay on it. What's the argument you're looking at, and what's wrong with it?

STEELE: Well, a very popular argument, I would say it is the most popular argument for vegetarianism, is the suffering caused to animals. So it's a moral argument, and the premise of the argument is that we shouldn't behave in such a way as to increase the amount of suffering. So my point is simply this: that when we kill an ox, we're killing an ox that if we weren't around, would be killed by a lion, because it's part of the framework of really existing nature that predators kill prey and eat them. And my argument is that it cannot be morally obligatory on us to reduce the amount of suffering below what it would be if we didn't exist.

So in other words, if in fact the amount of suffering to animals is the same or less than it would be if humans didn't do anything, then the argument falls because it's based on the total amount of suffering. So that's my argument.

WOODS: Now, I know that you've acknowledged that there are some mass methods of farming that involve, let's say when it comes to animals, extremely inhumane conditions. And animals who would not have existed in large part if there hadn't been a human appetite, they wouldn't have been raised in the first place, so they wouldn't have been around to suffer at all. But now, a great many of them do exist basically for the sole purpose of nourishing the human appetite, satisfying that appetite. So it does raise the question: what — regardless of whether it's legally enforceable. That would be a separate argument. But what moral obligations do we have toward animals?

STEELE: Yes, well, I accept that it is immoral to do certain things that cause suffering to animals. I accept that completely. And I would say that some farming methods would be morally unacceptable for that reason. My point is simply that the mere fact that we kill animals to eat them, that ipso facto is not immoral. That's my position. So we could have a further discussion of whether different farming methods or different hunting methods are more humane than others, and I would certainly prefer the more humane methods. And also, the meat tastes better.

WOODS: We've barely scratched the surface here, but that's how I like to do it with authors: leave people wanting more, as I always say, so they'll go check you out. So the book we've been discussing, of course, is *The Mystery of Fascism: David Ramsay Steele's Greatest Hits*. I'm linking to it at TomWoods.com/1578. If there is a website or anything else, social media or anything you'd like me to link to, please let me know so the audience hear it, and I'll link to it on the page. Otherwise, we'll urge people to check out the book.

STEELE: A lot of my talks are on YouTube, so I don't know how you link to them or anything, but including a recent one on "The Mystery of Fascism," where I do talk all about fascism for a couple of hours.

WOODS: Oh, okay. Well, then I'll look that up, and we'll link to that.

STEELE: Yeah, if you just put "David Ramsay Steele" — remember Ramsay is AY and Steele has an E on the end — on YouTube, you'll find I've got dozens of talks up there. Most of my talks are at the College of Complexes, and the acoustics are terrible, but then, you know, that's that.

WOODS: Ah, I've been a speaker at events where you would think the sponsoring organization is sophisticated enough to have a real audio system setup. You would think. I won't mention names, but it's shocking, some of these organizations. They haven't got a thing.

STEELE: Well, if you want to know what waitresses say to customers in this working-class diner where the College of Complexes currently has its venue, then if you watch my talks, you'll certainly hear that.

WOODS: Well, I know exactly you're talking about. I got to the point where I started bringing — well, here's another thing about what you can do with a cell phone. I have an app that I can record myself, and I just knew that it's not going to be the best, but it's going to be much better than what these bozos are going to produce, and I'll be darned if I'm coming all this way to give a talk and I have no recording of it when it's all over. Get out of here. All right, anyway, good luck with the book. It's a lot of fun, very provocative to read, and I hope people will do that. Thanks so much.

STEELE: Well, thank you very much. Thank you.