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Is Liberalism the Problem? Review of Patrick Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed

Ross W. McCullough
George Fox University, rmccullough@georgefox.edu

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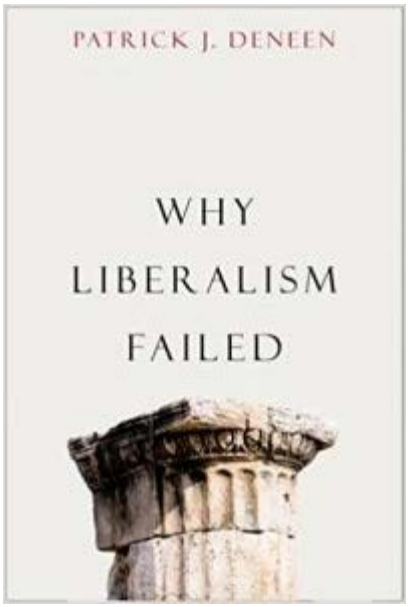

Patrick J. Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed, Yale University Press, 2018, 248pp, $30.00

A specter is haunting conservatism — the specter, indeed, of Marx. Those conservatives too young to remember the Cold War are increasingly suspicious of the economic and political prescriptions of the older anticommunism: capitalism as opposed to socialism; individual rights as opposed to collectivism. If they are not sure of Marx's solutions, they at least share with him a sense of the problems, especially the meaninglessness and atomization of our social order. The alternative right is an alternative to precisely this fading consensus, wagering that race and nation have survived the ravages of liberal capitalism and can be a home again. But they in their own way are only the dark creatures of a broad, Enlightenment liberalism, their whiteness forged in the colonial encounter rather more than in the premodern past. Religious conservatives, in turn, have flitted from the supernatural constitutionalism of the older Christian right, in which America is God's chosen nation, to an emphasis on natural law, in which our shared sense of right and wrong, of what marriage is and isn't, can ground a common politics, to finally an unsettled flirtation with premodern forms of Christian polity, in which church and state should be distinct but integrally related in some way. What was solid is melting into air.

Patrick Deneen is the doyen of these dissatisfactions, having advanced them well before Trump, before even the failures of our financial and military adventurism became obvious a decade ago. His new book has its sights upon those hazy uplands where the non-liberals of the left, ambivalent about the sexual revolution, and the non-liberals of the right, ambivalent about ethno-nationalism, converge. That such leftists and rightists barely exist is more or less Deneen's point: they indicate a way beyond liberalism, and liberalism has corrupted or destroyed them. The left it has seduced with sexual liberation and the power of the state, the right with individualism and the power of the market. Both have acceded to a false understanding of human freedom, one in which any constraint on individual expression is seen as infringement. This is a hedgehog of a book, and here lies its singular trick: to trace changes in politics, economics, technology, and education back to this misbegotten freedom. The centralized state, the untrammeled market, the technological sciences, the vocational university all become means by which this freedom is extended, first against the arbitrary constraints of custom and culture, finally against the constraints of nature itself. Today's conservatives may resist the second of these in the name of the first, today's progressives may

champion the second in ways that qualify the first, but both are successful only in extending, not in checking, the loss of constraints, because both accept the erroneous liberty behind it all.

If this seems like a tidy story, the One Big Idea that drives history, that is in part Deneen's rhetorical strategy. The book works like rainwater, wearing down by repetition; and this reflects Deneen's estimation that our liberalism is both complacent and near its end. It must constantly be adverted to; it may by enough adversion be washed away. But it also reflects an extension of Tocqueville's critique of democracy to the liberalism that lies behind democracy's modern form. This concentration of Tocqueville's critique of a multifaceted political regime to its one root ideology gives Deneen's history a Hegelian cast. Combined with his interest in material conditions and social dislocation, picked up in part from leftists like Alasdair MacIntrye, Deneen's analysis betrays its own haunting of Marx. Deneen sometimes plays this specter for the frisson of critique, as in his suggestion that our new ruling class is just using liberal ideology to sustain its position. But more often, and here closer to Hegel, he sees the ideas motivating this class not as mere superstructure but as the fundamental driver of change.

This, roughly, is Deneen's dynamic of history. First, you have ideas about what human beings and human society are. The important ideas have a certain unity, connected to some fundamental principle, and a certain power to extend themselves into everyday life. This extension is the unfolding of history. But there is also a mismatch between these ideas and, second, the nature of the human social reality they seek to capture. This nature is at some level unchangeable, and as the ideas extend themselves, their mismatch with reality becomes more pronounced.

Third, then, the governing idea proves finally unworkable and the reigning order collapses. Deneen introduces this sequence with the ideologies of fascism and communism, but the book's epigraph, which notes the failure of the middle ages, suggests that the chivalric Christian ideals of our preliberal past produced a similar dissonance. And most of the book is Deneen's argument that the ideology of liberalism is at, or very near, this crisis point.

Because ideologies are the fruit of theoretical reflection that imposes itself in a top-down way upon practice rather than reflection that emerges from the bottom-up out of practices, the match between ideology and reality is never particularly good. So, fourth, the solution is to return to practices without a universal theory – especially local, historically rooted, environmentally attuned practices – and allow whatever order is to govern the postliberal world to emerge in a non-ideological way from there.

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The substance of Deneen's book, and its strength, is its provocation that liberalism makes us less free: that it creates a state and a market and an idea of individuality that together destroy those civil and social and familial associations in which our freedom can flourish. Those whose optimism about the existing order has survived our recent adventurism, and is surviving our current adventures, stand to gain the most by the book. If optimists should in general read pessimists, optimists on this point should read Deneen.

Still, Deneen's larger picture is rather overdrawn. Consider the second point of his dynamic. Deneen notes that liberalism creates in history the atomized subject that it first posits in theory. It changes us, especially through its technologies: the political technology of the American Constitution, the architectural technologies of the patio and the suburb, the digital and possibly transhumanist technologies of today. Deneen's faith is that "for all this, nature is never spent / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" – these technologies cannot destroy us finally; our sociality will ultimately rebel against them. But it is not clear why we should share the faith. For Hopkins, whose lines these are, it is "because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast." And perhaps the same is true for Deneen, a conservative Catholic. But absent some Providence, absent even Providence secularized as dialectic, the race between the transformative powers of technology and the dilatory rejoinders of human nature is not assured. Perhaps transhumanism and virtual reality and opioids and who knows what else together conspire to produce a stable, centralized, inegalitarian liberal cosmopolis: a finger wagged in your face at some freshly discovered barbarism – forever.

More broadly, it is not clear that liberalism has the sort of unity that Deneen ascribes to it. Deneen uses the term *expressive individualism*, but he ignores Charles Taylor's famous diagnosis of the thing. Where Deneen sees expressive individualism as grounded in a voluntarist understanding of freedom, Taylor connects it to Romantic notions of authenticity: the expressive individual is not free to do whatever she wants; she is free only and finally to be herself. At bottom there is not a liberty unmoored from moral considerations but a moral demand unmoored from social expectations. We cannot express just anything; we must express who we are. And who we are is not just brought about by our expressions but is something that our expressions must correspond to; it is finally a deep and holy thing. If, say, transgender activism in the academy tends to follow Deneen's logic, its popular expression is much closer to Taylor's. The choice for Bruce to become Caitlyn Jenner was not sheer voluntarism but was felt as an obligation. It was not Hopkins but someone more immediately influential who said, "I'm beautiful in my way / 'Cause God makes no mistakes / I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way."

The point is not that Taylor is right and Deneen is wrong; the point is that both of these lines are influential; both of them have a claim to characterizing the liberal age. The contemporary university is aimed not just at "endless possibilities of self-creation" but also at the difficult task of self-discovery, of who I am and what I am meant to do with my life in a world where these

things cannot be read off my social location but are essentially, almost mystically, individual. Science is aimed not just at the domination of nature, nor the scientific disciplines just at vocational training. The greatest prestige is still reserved for the disciplines of unadulterated wonder: physics is the queen of the sciences, and the more abstruse and astronomical, the more regal; pure mathematics still looks down on applied (by implication: impure) mathematics. Kant says in the Second Critique: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” Though the ethics of our interiority is no longer quite Kantian, it still draws liberal admiration; and there remains a strong untutored sense of the vastness of both the universe and the self that commands our devotion.

Deneen sees the liberal left, which he associates with the progressive movement, as fixed upon remaking nature to serve our wills. But this is to ignore the fundamental ambiguity of nature that this Romantic line of liberalism has tapped into. The normativity of nature is distorted in all sorts of ways, whether because of some aboriginal fall or because of the lack of fit between the evolutionary demands of sapient hunter gatherers and the moral demands of a global society. The refashioning of nature is as often a humane as a post-humane program. And where it is humane and where post-humane requires a judgment about what counts as natural, a judgment that is not self-evident. If Deneen thinks that all his opponents are finally the opponents also of nature, this is only because of his particular construal of the natural, and his particular conceit that they share it. In that sense, Deneen has not entirely escaped the tendency to appeal to a self-evident nature, a tendency that emerges as its own kind of liberal response to the pluralism of early modernity: a shared understanding of nature can ground politics when persistent disagreement has rendered the supernatural foundation unstable.

Spot-the-liberalism is a tiresome game on the left, and there is no point in playing it upon the right – not least because all parties, including Deneen, agree that some elements of the liberal order should be preserved in whatever succeeds it. The question is whether Deneen wants this element going forward, preserving an appeal to nature’s self-evidence in the absence of revelation. This has its obvious benefits in a pluralistic age; but it has the defect of doing less work than its advocates hope. Deneen’s Catholic antecedents were less optimistic: they held that nature was not self-evident without the scriptures, nor the scriptures without the Church; that Protestants could pretend to a foundation in the Bible and liberals a foundation in the natural only because of the unanimity secured by the long heritage of Catholic Christianity, even among its heretics. But their conclusion was that the political realm too needed to acknowledge the Church in order to function properly. And would Deneen follow them there?

The appeal to revelation is clearly not liberal; the appeal to nature, like the appeals to voluntarism and authenticity, is ambiguously so. And the point to fix and rivet is that liberalism is riven by such ambiguities. Deneen reads identity politics as finally about individual liberation, but it is at least as much about group-belonging or solidarity in the face of the liberal order. (Deneen asks why “cohesive ethnic groups” like the Kurds don’t get recognition on campuses, as if there were enough Kurds at Deneen’s Notre Dame to keep a group going; and as if African-Americans, either the first or second group one thinks of with identity politics, were not a cohesive ethnic group.) Sometimes these identities can be chosen, sometimes not: Bruce Jenner could become a woman, but Rachel Dolezal couldn’t become black. Sometimes their politics is expressed individualistically, sometimes not: “it’s my body” and “defend women’s bodies” share a conclusion but are not quite the same argument. Sometimes progressives use the state to secure individual liberty, sometimes to redress class injustice. To read these more social and less voluntarist sides of liberalism as stemming from the same misdefined liberty and not as the cry of the soul in the soulless world is only to make enemies out of would-be friends.

If this is a question about the first point of Deneen’s historical dynamic, on the unity of the idea of liberalism, it raises worries also for the third. For if liberalism can be disaggregated in the way I have begun to do, then why think we face a total collapse rather than constantly shifting emphases and mutations? Even more, if Deneen is right that liberalism is failing to realize its own ideals, then liberalism itself provides the resources for its reform. One need only persuade some share of liberals that freedom and equality and human dignity are better served by, for example, relying on the state less and on civil society more. This requires that the centralized American state run out of the political capital it gained in the struggle for civil rights, just as the centralized European authorities are running out of the political capital gained by continental peace. But if Deneen is right, if the progressive movement has in fact used the state in a way that undermines its own ideals, this capital should soon be drawn down. And then why not think progressives could be persuaded to turn to mediating institutions to guarantee those same ideals? Why not think that we could further qualify those ideals with the other goods that Deneen excludes from the essence of liberalism but that are ambient nonetheless – like authenticity, or belonging?

Deneen is pessimistic here because he has too much faith in the cunning of history: the strange force of his liberalism, its preternatural cohesion, would overtake any such development. But the contingencies of liberalism’s emergence should make us careful about asserting what is not possible. History has less cunning than whimsy, its odd path dependencies reversed sometimes with a start. This sort of thing may not work, but it also may: the resources for reversal are there all around us, and we have very little idea of how things go from here.

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All of this suggests that Deneen's preference for the bottom-up over the top-down is premature. It is premature from the perspective of his conservative Catholic confreres because the world, both top and bottom, is fallen, and the only Idea that is not a distorting ideology is the one passed on in the Church. This idea may diffuse like Benedict through the Dark Ages, but it may also convert Constantine. Indeed, the aversion to top-down proposals is itself, on this view, a kind of liberal intuition, as if what comes from above is always in some way erroneous and always in some way an imposition.

The proposal is premature for the non-Hegelian because there are post-liberal resources that have already emerged from the bottom to the top and found expression in, for instance, elements of progressivism. Why can't the top begin to theorize and act on what has emerged from local practice, given that not everything is liberalism? Why can't it begin to cobble together the postliberal, given that whatever emerges will not itself be a unified master theory?

And the proposal is premature from Deneen's own vantage point because Deneen gives us little reason to think that the liberal top will leave the postliberal bottom alone. Even if the economic order made it possible for us to form alternative communities, the truly alternative community will look to liberalism like an encroachment on individual rights – and the immediate cry will be *écrasez l'infâme*.

Because the forces of liberalism are so unified, on Deneen's view, they must be opposed all at once; and because the reordering is so total, it can only be local. Its cohesion means it must be uprooted radically and at one go; its failure to penetrate our shelters means we might find opportunities for uprooting here and there, and for planting anew. We cannot hope to reform it, because it is irreformable; but we can hope to escape it, because it has not always found us where we live.

But if we think the reverse, that our liberalism is marked more by its extensive than by its intensive features; if we think it has disposed the subject in a way that makes local revolution as impracticable as national revolution, but that its varieties and inconsistencies offer at every scale the possibilities of reform; if we distrust, as Deneen in other capacities seems to do, the all-or-nothing instinct of the revolutionary, then we should look elsewhere for new life. It is only by overreading his own diagnosis and underselling the contingency of his narrative that Deneen arrives at the sort of view that underpins his recommendations; but he might be right about the ligatures of the liberal body while underestimating their fragility. And if they are fragile, the body might be re-fashioned through many small changes over time, without one part immediately coming to the aid of another.

Here Deneen might draw a helpful retort from the identitarians, indeed from Marx. For Marx had his own sort of politics from the bottom. His answer to the question of where to look for help when the subject is everywhere malformed was to turn to those oppressed by capitalism, those who have the eyes still to see its faults. And it is significant that these conservative Catholic complaints have emerged in a period when conservative Catholics increasingly feel themselves oppressed by liberalism. But Deneen's localism makes no mention of the opportunities of the oppressed; his response is held out to anyone with the acuity to see through the dread Idea. He would be better served by a turn to the bottom in just this sense, not as local but as trodden down, of models that look not just like Norcia but like Jackson. This is especially true if he conceives of liberalism's effects as not only western but global: of, say, Africa too as not just awaiting its own liberal moment but as having been at the barrel end of the thing from the colonial period on. There is something absurd, almost an aesthetic offense, in thinking America's postliberal future depends on middle-class experiments in alternative living; there is something appropriate, some deep levity of history, in thinking it depends on missions from Nigeria.

If Deneen overnarrates his truth, still he has a real truth. If he takes too much of the Hegelianism of Marx and too little of the material concerns, still he has material concerns. His fusion of leftists from Polanyi to Lasch to MacIntyre with conservative mainstays like Burke and, on a certain reading, Tocqueville is a promising one.

The great challenge for that promise, the challenge to the ultimate homogenization of classes that is the model in Marx and to the local homogeneities that form the model of the communitarians, is how to do politics across difference. Can there be a common good in the face of uncommon disagreement? The pluralization of society generated much of the impetus for liberalism in the first place, and failing to account for continued pluralization will only frustrate the sputtering impetus toward postliberalism. Deneen punts the question to a future constituted by diverse communal practices, but the question is in part how to make diverse communities possible, how to create the conditions under which his future might be born. Rome has not collapsed; there is no pagan countryside awaiting the order of the abbeys; we have to bend the imperium to allow the abbeys their order. And if our advice to the imperium is not to be mere opportunism, if it is to be true, then it should in some measure reflect the way pluralism is handled in a healthy society.

I do not mean here just the pluralism of, say, the Hapsburgs, where the empire has its true faith – a diversity rather less of the governors than of the governed. I mean the pluralism of someone like **Abraham Kuyper**, where power is devolved to more homogenous communities but also shared at the highest and heterogenous levels. Can a pluralistic society agree on something like liberal protections based on a recognition that power is going to alternate between parties? Can liberals themselves be brought to agree to this, first by recognizing their view as one substantive position among others and then by renouncing a theory of history that

projects their imminent triumph? Will this Dutch diversity issue ultimately only in indifferentism? Or is the best that any group can hope for a kind of strong Augustinianism: when in power, persecute your opponents in love, since their errors make them a danger to self and others; and when out of power, suffer persecution in joy, since you are winning the crown of martyrdom?

If there is a chief disappointment in Deneen's book, it is that he takes these questions to be unprofitable under the current dispensation and so does not assay an answer. But he advances enough of an anthropology to adumbrate the beginnings: that we maintain the ideals of liberalism while sneaking back in some of their older definitions; that we extend the emancipatory logic of our campus debates to the material and cultural conditions that make a free and common life possible; that we turn the state toward a reinvigoration of civil society, including at the cost of individual rights; that we reinforce those lines of the sexual revolution that are worried by its atomization; that we defend the useless sciences; and on and on in an almost *ad hoc* way.

These recommendations proceed in part from Deneen's own anthropology and so are not completely *ad hoc*; they have about as much unity as the liberalism they would replace. Neither constitutes some one theory of politics. But that is part of the attraction for a pluralistic postliberalism: there is no one theory of politics; each party will have its own reasons for supporting the various elements of whatever order emerges. To recommend such an order to a diverse audience, as Deneen does, is to appeal to a shared set of dissatisfactions with liberalism, dissatisfactions that may at bottom be rooted in a common nature but that are understood very differently by different communities. The genius of this book is that, almost against its own intentions, it provides liberals themselves a reason to adopt its dissatisfactions. Deneen's own answer to the title of his book is that liberalism failed because it succeeded; in succeeding, it undermined its own ideals. But this gives far-sighted liberals cause to revisit their very success. In the end, Deneen's lesson is that liberalism can finally succeed only if liberalism fails.

Ross McCullough is a PhD candidate in Religious Studies at Yale University and a doctoral fellow at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.