

## ROTTEN FROM THE ROOT

Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale, 2018.

Patrick Deneen, in his new book *Why Liberalism Failed*, blames the United States' founding political philosophy as the root cause of many of our contemporary woes. He contends that liberalism—the political philosophy as distinct from the position of the Democratic Party—imposes “an ideological remaking of the world in the image of a false anthropology” (19). As this ideology has become more ingrained in politics and culture, the ever-multiplying crises of the contemporary world bear out its falseness. Because this ideology began with a lie about human nature, it has failed.

Deneen identifies two principles of liberalism. First, liberalism redefines freedom. According to classical thought, man achieves freedom in the virtuous governance of his life and passions. Thus “liberty had long been believed to be the condition of self-rule that forestalled tyranny” (23). Opposing this notion, thinkers like Locke conceived of the free man as the one most able to pursue whatever private goods he wanted without external hindrances. They believed “that ancient norms of behavior could be lifted in the name of a new form of liberation” (41). In the liberal thought-experiment-turned-political-system, government arises as a contract between private individuals who give up some freedoms “based on the calculation of individual self-interest” (34). The very term “liberty” received a new meaning, which required new means for achieving it.

The second principle of liberalism, then, is the belief “that conquering nature would supply the fuel to permit nearly infinite choices” (41). The individual needs to be freed from the limits inscribed in his own nature. And here, Deneen argues, liberalism sowed the seeds of its own failure. He cites catastrophic environmental degradation, the rising levels of anxiety among the young, and massive amounts of student debt, as well as other

signs of system-breakdown. All of these, he argues, can be traced to the lie that our freedom involves achieving private ends, ends which have not been instructed by nature, tradition, or culture understood as “an accumulation of local and historical experience and memory” (89). In sum, liberalism’s “twin outcomes” are “the depletion of moral self-command and the depletion of material resources” (41).

Deneen is not the first to tell this story, though his condemnation of liberalism is perhaps one of the most emphatic. His book’s more helpful contributions come in his exposition of the pervasiveness of liberal ideology. Deneen argues that our changing attitudes towards technology, the liberal arts, economic and political inequality, and civic engagement all exhibit in one way or another the failed logic of liberalism.

For instance, in our efforts at civic engagement we experience the national government as a distant, vague entity. As our focus shifts from local to national concerns, we lose our sense of participation in civic life. This emphasis on the federal level can leave us apathetic about such remote cares, or make us angry at forces we cannot influence. Yet the national government is also the protector, even provider, of the conditions by which we can achieve our private hopes and dreams:

Thus, for liberal theory, while the individual ‘creates’ the state through the social contract, in a practical sense, the liberal state ‘creates’ the individual by providing the conditions for the expansion of liberty, increasingly defined as the capacity of humans to expand their mastery over circumstance. (49)

This is true whether one leans more to the right as a “classical liberal” or to the left as a “progressive liberal.” Both political inclinations focus primarily on the individual’s rights (whether political, economic, religious, sexual, etc.) and the distant

state, leaving little place for the sustenance and flourishing of such essential institutions as family and local community.

Likewise our relationship with technology ranges from paranoid fear in the face of a remote yet inevitable power to a consumptive addiction to the newest gadget. Technological development meets with both euphoria and a sense of dread; rather than “controlling our technology to our own betterment, we find that the technology ends up either ruling or destroying us” (93). In these examples, Deneen traces the manner in which a foundational commitment to the selfish will of the individual, “freed” from nature and tradition, leads, in both culture and political life, to “naked” individuals who are alone and isolated and subjected to impersonal yet looming power structures (17).

Deneen makes the important observation that we sometimes think of this as an inevitable state of affairs. Liberalism outlasted its twentieth-century ideological rivals in communism and socialism and so may appear to be the only remaining option—“the end of history,” in Francis Fukuyama’s famous rendering. Technological developments can sweep across our cultural landscape, making us feel as if we have no choice but to buy in. Drawing on examples of communities such as the Amish, who decide whether or not to use a new technology through a consideration of its anticipated effect on the common good, Deneen shows that this sense of inevitable “progress” need not overmaster us.

In my view, Deneen could do more to criticize in a similar way the imagined inevitability of the pervasiveness of liberal ideology itself. It is true that many in contemporary society pursue individual goods over and against the common good, and that one of the reasons for this is our political and cultural paradigm. But his depiction of the history of ideas at times makes it seem as if the current state of affairs developed almost necessarily, from a bad seed to a rotten fruit. For example, he writes, “as it becomes more fully itself, [liberalism] generates endemic pathologies” (179). The ideology has become an agent. Especially in the book’s closing pages, however, he acknowledges that individuals and

smaller communities do have the freedom to live in a manner more grounded in tradition and centered on virtue, and in fact this may be our only hope going forward. Thus, on the one hand Deneen's polemic against liberalism may at times leave the reader feeling paralyzed before inevitable forces, on the other he himself encourages individuals to choose to live in ways not totally dictated by the forces he describes.

In a more practical way his book serves as an examination of conscience for those of us who share his concerns that private, selfish interest has found its way to the core of our beliefs and practices. We can ask ourselves: How often do we fall into the trap of thinking of real freedom as a lack of external constraints? In what ways do we imagine ourselves as isolated individuals in pursuit of purely private goods, and how has this belief shaped our lives? How have we let our technologies control us? Have we let education simply be a means towards an economic or political end, or have we sought soul-forming education so that we will have enough self-control to pursue the common good and our true happiness? How might we encourage a vital civic life by committing ourselves more thoughtfully and sacrificially to the needs of our families and local communities?

By demonstrating the urgency of these questions, Deneen's book makes room for a positive vision of "liberty after liberalism" (198), a liberty that must begin with a cultivation of true interior freedom and virtue-forming communities.

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