
Liberal Dystopia

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Why Liberalism Failed, by Patrick J. Deneen. *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 248 pp. \$30 cloth. 264 pp. \$18 paper.*

In 1949, an iconic book labeled communism “the god that failed.”¹ Now the failure of another ideology is highlighted by another book, one that might, perhaps, become iconic. The difference between the two cases is, however, vast. In the U.S. and the West generally, there was nothing especially controversial—outside of particular circles—about condemning communism in 1949. The god Patrick Deneen treats, however, is liberalism, widely seen as the ideology of the contemporary Western world. Indeed, liberalism has been

our dominant political ideology for centuries. The failure of liberalism would thus be an event of staggering world-historical importance compared to which the failure of communism appears almost insignificant.

Deneen’s book is therefore important, but not in the sense to which academics are accustomed. It does not purport to be a meticulously researched scholarly work offering close analysis; its form is essentially that of an extended essay, “written in a brief span” (xvii). Nor is its thesis entirely new or unique. The book’s most fundamental ideas are basically familiar to many political theorists and related thinkers, especially ones of the traditional-conservative variety, and have been creeping into “middlebrow” public discourse as

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¹Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949).

well. This is less a stringently argued academic book than a “popular” work. Its greatest value lies in Deneen’s ability to lay out the problem in a simplified but coherent, concise, and compelling way, conveying to a relatively broad audience what may be a central issue of our time. The problem addressed by this book is not esoteric but fundamental and has great practical relevance.

Deneen’s thesis, to paraphrase an old communist saying about capitalism, is that liberalism contains the seeds of its own destruction. According to Deneen, the destruction, or degeneration, of liberalism is well advanced. As Deneen puts it, “A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom” (3). These are the inevitable results of embracing liberalism: “Rather than seeing the accumulating catastrophe as evidence of our failure to live up to liberalism’s ideals, we need rather to see clearly that the ruins it has produced are the signs of its very success” (4). While many criticize various aspects of the contemporary liberal order, most attribute its deficiencies to poor execution or to extraneous factors. Deneen, in contrast, finds our problems to be inherent in liberalism itself. For him, liberalism was doomed from the start. This distinguishes him from, among others,

those who are sharply critical of left-liberalism or progressivism, but who uncritically celebrate the classical liberal tradition, a group that in the U.S. oddly includes many who label themselves “conservatives.”

To a significant degree, Deneen’s arguments hinge on his particular understanding of liberalism—an understanding that is not universally embraced. Significantly, Deneen distinguishes liberalism from many of the characteristics commonly associated with it: “constitutionalism, separation of powers, separate spheres of church and state, rights and protections against arbitrary rule, federalism, rule of law, and limited government” (23). To varying degrees, these features of good government have pre-modern roots, and Deneen is generally supportive of them. Some critics of Deneen, particularly of the libertarian, left-liberal, and neoconservative-leaning sort, have suggested or implied that his views are “illiberal.” If “illiberal” is employed to designate a failure to uncritically embrace all of liberal ideology, this is correct. But to the extent that “illiberal” is understood in the usual way—as designating hostility to all the trappings of the liberal order, and support for some sort of authoritarian, repressive state—this particular charge is clearly false. Indeed, one of Deneen’s central complaints about “liberalism,” as he understands it, is that, instead of supporting the desirable “commitments” of liberalism—constitutionalism, limited government, etc.—it sets up dynamics that end

up working against them. He maintains that “liberalism . . . in many cases attained its ends by redefining shared words and concepts and, through that redefinition, colonizing existing institutions with fundamentally different anthropological assumptions” (23). Over the long term, this “colonization” is proving fatal to those institutions.

Deneen offers a partial definition of the “liberalism” he opposes:

Liberalism is most fundamentally constituted by a pair of deeper anthropological assumptions that give liberal institutions a particular orientation and cast: 1) anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice, and 2) human separation from and opposition to nature. These two revolutions . . . introduce a radically new definition of “liberty” (31).

Much of the book’s logic and language hinges on this particular political-philosophical conception of liberalism as an ideology that is distinguishable from the aforementioned trappings of liberalism—trappings that, per Deneen, are really pre-liberal in origin and are not tied to liberal ideology’s unique anthropological assumptions. What Deneen seeks is, at least in part, the retention of many of “liberalism’s main commitments” without its destructive ideological baggage. The “anthropological assumptions” of liberalism as an ideology ultimately destroy the desirable trappings of the liberal order by undermining the very bases for a sound society and state.

Deneen argues that—while the idea of freedom formerly incorpo-

rated an emphasis on internal restraint, through which one brought oneself into conformity with a universal order as understood through the community—freedom is now “anarchic,” encompassing an unconstrained pursuit of self-interest. Indeed, for Deneen, liberalism is all about self-interest—and not some sort of ‘enlightened’ community-oriented self-interest. It is about self-interest crudely understood, the pursuit of power and pleasure. And, to facilitate this pursuit of self-interest, the liberal order Deneen criticizes enshrines two forces: the large-scale, indeed global, free-market economy and the powerful, intrusive state. Together, these work to guarantee and promote the freedom and equality that liberalism promises. Yet both fail. Echoing Tocqueville and Robert Nisbet—both of whom he cites—Deneen describes how the atomized, voluntaristic conceptions of liberalism inevitably lead to an ever-expanding state and how the liberal project is therefore ultimately self-defeating.

Deneen is sharply critical of the American “Founders” and the U.S. Constitution, something that, like the liberal project itself, appears to Deneen to have been doomed from the start. In a brief discussion of *Federalist 10*, he maintains that Madison holds that government exists to protect liberty, “and it does so by encouraging the pursuit of self-interest among both the citizenry and public servants” (101). Now, Deneen is correct that the American Framers broke from the ancient republican

heavy reliance on a high level of civic virtue and sought to craft a republic that would accommodate self-interest. They did this because they recognized that people are inevitably self-interested and that a republic overly dependent upon a high level of civic virtue is likely to be short-lived. They did not, however, dismiss civic virtue, or general morality, or consider them unimportant or unnecessary; numerous statements from various Framers or Founders make clear the importance that they attached to virtue as a support for their constitutional republicanism, as do actions by early presidents. And, while they wanted citizens to have freedom to achieve their individual purposes, it is an overstatement, to the point of outright distortion, to maintain that they sought to *promote* a focus on self-interest. That the subject of freedom was practically indistinguishable from the subject of responsibility was to the Framers self-evident. What they sought was a way of reconciling the need for freedom with the need for order and respect for the common good. An inordinate pursuit of self-interest threatened republican institutions. Indeed, in *Federalist 10*, the central *problem* that Madison seeks to address is “faction,” an unfortunate or regrettable manifestation of self-interest. Deneen’s sole support for his claim is the famous quote, “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” Here lies a major problem.

First, this quotation, referring to the system of checks and balances in the national government, meant that

the unavoidable personal ambition of government officials would be mitigated by pitting officials against each other. It did not mean that private ambition, or narrow self-interest, was to be encouraged. Second, the “ambition” quotation comes from the discussion of separation of powers in *Federalist 51*. It does not come from the discussion of “faction” and of the broader problems of democracy in *Federalist 10*. Deneen’s misuse of this quotation gives the false impression that Madison’s primary solution to faction is pitting citizens’ ambitions against each other. What he proposes is something he hopes will protect the common good, making large factions difficult to form in the first place and making it difficult for them to realize their public policy wishes. Again, Madison wants to minimize the force of narrow self-interest in politics, not encourage it. Notably, Deneen does not provide a citation for the “ambition” quotation, and he never tells his readers that it does not come from *Federalist 10*, the paper that he explicitly addresses, but from another paper on a different topic. Moreover, later in the book, Deneen repeats this misleading use of the *Federalist 51* quotation in another, similar paragraph addressing *Federalist 10*.

There are those, including many self-identified “conservatives,” who fetishize the U.S. Constitution, as if its words had been dictated by God and that if we were only more faithful to them all would be well. While the consequences of this are

less serious than those of fetishizing the Declaration of Independence, it is an error nonetheless. Yet Deneen errs the other way, making the Constitution a source of positive harm, on the thinnest of evidence, and without engagement with any of its many favorable conservative characterizations, such as those by Russell Kirk or George Carey. As we have seen, Deneen began his book by distinguishing a harmful liberal ideology from many of the desirable trappings of the liberal order, which he finds to have largely pre-liberal origins. A much more rigorous effort is needed, however, to make his case that the U.S. Constitution represents the former and not the latter, and that the Framers were driven only by the particular, narrow, ideological conception of liberalism that Deneen identifies. This issue, indeed, extends beyond the American case, since it involves the question of what the liberal order is about, and whether it may possess more currents of thought than those seized on by Deneen.

Deneen refers—again and again—to *Federalist 10*'s reference to "diversity in the faculties of men" and transforms this line into a mandate by the Framers for government to promote ever-expanding diversity. He does so despite the fact that it is not the protection of "diversity" but the protection of men's "faculties" that Madison identifies as a task for government (presumably, so that citizens can be free and not slaves), and despite the fact that the "diversity" of those faculties is cited by

Madison as a cause of faction. The Constitution's line, "to promote the progress of science and the useful arts," buried in a long list of government powers as a justification for patents and trademarks, is also seized on repeatedly and elevated to a central goal without much argument. Deneen is correct when he notes the nationalizing, centralizing, and elitist dimensions of the Framers' project. To a great degree, these are a given; they were the primary drivers of the contention between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. The authors and promoters of the Constitution were openly aiming to convert a very loose association of small states into a country. Deneen, however, explicitly links them to the Progressives of the early twentieth century, implying that the two projects were the same and that the Progressives would have met with the Framers' approval. Again, this sweeping point is offered on the thinnest reeds of evidence, and, here as elsewhere, with no engagement with opposing views.

One might suggest that what Deneen identifies as problems with the U.S. Constitution are really problems with the global rise of the nation-state and commercial society. While these are of course not unrelated to liberalism, they are not identical with it, and identifying precise relationships and causes and effects would require considerable discussion. More broadly, Deneen devotes a sizable portion of the book to very brief, casual treatments of particular aspects of contemporary society, but

the precise relationships of these various subjects to liberalism are often not fleshed out. Furthermore, these treatments do not always reflect expertise on the particular topics addressed. Taken together, these commentaries come across as gripping about the contemporary world in general. There is, indeed, much to gripe about in the contemporary world, but treatment of fewer topics, with a fuller development of the critiques and with more detailed discussion of their relationships to liberalism, would have been more helpful. Is late modernity, and every aspect of it (including technology and such), identical with liberalism, or the fruit of it? Do we have to throw out all of it? If not, why not, and how do we proceed? One cannot expect a book like this to fully address all such questions, but one could at least hope to see them more fully recognized.

On the one hand, Deneen defines “liberalism” very narrowly, setting aside much that is desirable about the modern world as pre-liberal in origin, which implies that we may keep what is desirable while disposing of the problematic “anthropological assumptions.” On the other hand, Deneen at times appears to suggest that the harmful assumptions drive and dominate everything—from the framing of the U.S. Constitution to, it seems, almost all aspects of life today. This cries out for a more subtle treatment of the complexities of the liberal order. Thinkers like Tocqueville and Nisbet and, for that matter, Edmund Burke,

can certainly be broadly classified as “liberal,” in some ways at least. Yet they are, presumably, not part of the problem, but helpful figures who point toward solutions. Perhaps, rather than setting up a narrowly, highly abstractly defined “liberalism” as the opponent of all that is good, what is needed is a broader conception of liberalism, or, at least, a careful exploration of positive and negative aspects of the liberal order and of how these interact. In part because of the lack of this kind of careful thought and scholarship, we are starting to see discussions of the problems of the modern world polarize unhelpfully into “liberal” and “illiberal” camps.

One can get a fatalistic sense from this book. On the one hand, Deneen attempts to distinguish between harmful liberal ideologies and the desirable trappings of the liberal order, suggesting that we can have the latter without the former. On the other hand, from the ways that he discusses the contemporary world and historical developments leading to it one sometimes gets the impression that everything was doomed from the start. One can then be tempted to throw up one’s hands regarding a response. For Deneen’s part, he falls back on something vaguely similar to Rod Dreher’s “Benedict Option.” That is, he alludes to a private or small-community, localist response. This has some merit, but it also has serious limitations. For one thing, transforming a society in this way is a tall order. For another, it may assume a much higher level

of toleration in liberal society than it actually possesses. Deneen himself complains that, far from being tolerant, the contemporary liberal order “enforces uniformity and homogeneity,” so one would wonder to what extent, if any, small-scale, countercultural actions could resist that order’s hegemony, both culturally and forcibly imposed.

Throughout the book, we hear about what liberalism does and what “liberalism wants.” This is perfectly acceptable shorthand language; indeed, strenuous attempts to avoid it would be awkward. But, of course, “liberalism” doesn’t actually do or want anything; it’s a way of thinking, not an agent. It refers to a set of beliefs or views held, often compactly or in only partly articulated ways, by people, who are the actual agents. The harm caused by liberal ideology is, first, cultural harm. Under the influence of some forms of liberal rhetoric, people adopt, often unconsciously, ways of thinking that lead to poor choices in their own lives and in public policy. More extensive and more precise discussion of how this harm occurs, and of how it could be avoided, would be welcome. What exactly are we dealing with? A deeper and clearer understanding is necessary to a sound response. But, instead of such an historically sensitive treatment, what is presented comes across as a model in which a reified “liberalism” remakes the world on its own, according to a pre-ordained plan of its own. Oddly for a book on liberalism, Deneen’s work may leave the reader with

more questions about precisely what liberalism is than he or she started with. This is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, it is very important to prompt deeper thinking about liberalism. However, Deneen’s approach of splitting liberalism into a harmful ideology and often-desirable real-world “commitments” demands much more development, explication, and support than is provided here. This is especially true because, to the extent that one can get a sense of what Deneen is defending, it appears to bear a considerable resemblance to what we commonly think of, rightly or wrongly, as the liberal order.

Some of the criticisms made here may be “unfair” in that, taken together, they effectively call on the book to be something other than what it is. As has been noted, this work does not claim to be a rigorously argued, political-philosophical monograph; it is an extended essay geared toward a more popular audience and “written in a brief span.” The desire for more than this springs from the fact that Deneen’s central issue is so vitally important. If we are to respond to it effectively it must be analyzed in greater depth and with greater care. It’s clear that the particular elements of liberal thought emphasized by Deneen—whether they are taken to be the whole of “liberalism” or not—have become more and more dominant in, and representative of, our world over time, and do not provide a sound, long-term grounding for a state or society. Many thinkers over

the years have recognized that a simplistic focus on liberty and a simplistic understanding of human beings can only yield desirable results as shallow overlays on top of a richer, more complex, more traditionally grounded society. How do we restore and maintain such a society? In particular, how do we rebuild a society that possesses features of the modern order that we like while jettisoning the destructive strains of liberal thought?

This book does not go very far toward answering such questions. But, certainly, any recovery has to start with recognition of the deficiencies of liberal ideology and of the late-modern order it has helped create.

And, in this regard, *Why Liberalism Failed* is helpful. Political responses to failures of liberalism often tend to take the form of a doubling-down on the more problematic aspects of liberal ideology, an illiberal turn away from even a semblance of a free, republican order, or a perverse combination of the two. To the extent that this book prompts substantive, informed discussion of the challenges we face in the form of a degenerating liberal order, it may help us move toward preserving the best aspects of the late-modern world, while building a more humane and sustainable order, whether or not we call it "liberal."