

Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part II: The Crux of Deneen's Critique of Liberalism

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the second of a five-part essay by the Hoover Institution's Peter Berkowitz on the challenges faced by liberal democracy in America in light of Patrick Deneen's recent book "Why Liberalism Failed." You can find Part I here.*

Patrick Deneen, professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, has written an angry and breathless polemic against liberalism in the large sense — that is, the school of political thought that holds that human beings are by nature free and equal, and that the chief purpose of government is to secure individual rights. In “Why Liberalism Failed,” Deneen blames the modern tradition of freedom, embodied in the American experiment in self-government, for disfiguring contemporary politics and inflicting untold damage to the human spirit. At the same time, he issues a sweeping philosophical indictment of liberalism’s intellectual roots and moral ambitions.

But his anti-liberal zealotry gets the best of him. His polemical ire corrupts his philosophical analysis, and his philosophical extravagances blunt his polemic’s plausibility. The result is a work that powerfully advocates the recovery of lost ideas and the renewal of forgotten political practices while concealing the lessons of moderation taught by those sources to be recovered and renewed, thereby suppressing the reasons they offer for preserving the modern tradition of freedom.

What Deneen calls “the liberal project” was born, he argues, in rebellion against classical Greek and Christian conceptions of liberty that stressed the cultivation of virtue as indispensable to the practice of self-government. In their stead, Deneen asserts, liberalism equates liberty with the emancipation of desire and with the liberation of the individual from artificial and natural constraints. It counts on the expert design of political institutions to direct the private pursuit of self-interest to the public advantage. In this endeavor, he maintains, liberalism has both succeeded spectacularly and failed abysmally. Our contemporary travails do not reflect a betrayal of liberalism’s founding premises and original promises but rather, according to Deneen’s signature contention, their authentic fulfillment.

Liberalism’s evils are many and varied, he argues, and exceed in some respects those of the worst regimes of the past. Liberalism imposes a system of “surveillance and control” that surpasses that of “tyrants of old.” It sustains an aristocracy that can be more “pernicious” than the premodern varieties. And while less cruel than 20th-century fascism and

communism, it is a “more insidious” ideology by dint of its ability to infiltrate beliefs and institutions and to delude citizens into experiencing estrangement from tradition and dependence on the state as freedom.

In Deneen’s telling, the miseries of contemporary America are all-enveloping and stem from liberalism’s despotic hegemony. While acknowledging that it in part “arose by appeal to an ennobling set of political ideals,” liberalism, he writes, “realized new and comprehensive forms of degradation.” It creates a death spiral in which “statism enables individualism” through increasingly invasive regulation of family, community, and faith even as “individualism demands statism” to drain authority from the remnants of civil society that limit the self by teaching moral responsibility and fostering enduring social relations. It diminishes “effort and sacrifice” while exacerbating inequality and extending workers’ alienation beyond the crushing dimension outlined by Marx to “a profound new form of geographic alienation, the physical separation of beneficiaries of the globalized economy from those left behind.” It wants to “tempt us to Promethean forms of individual or generational self-aggrandizement or the abusive effort to liberate ourselves from the limits and sanctions of nature.”

Furthermore, by encouraging the conquest of nature, an obsession with the present, and “placelessness” as an ideal, liberalism “subtly, unobtrusively, and pervasively undermines all cultures and liberates individuals into the irresponsibility of anticulture.” Even while proclaiming its devotion to the rule of law, liberalism fosters “lawlessness” by hollowing “every social norm and custom in favor of legal codes.” It “undermines liberal education” at our colleges and universities “by replacing a definition of liberty as an education in self-government with liberty as autonomy and the absence of constraint.” Liberalism’s “great failing and ultimate weakness” is “its incapacity to foster self-governance.” Committed to forming “a liberal populace shaped primarily by individual interest and commitments to private ends,” it generates a “civic catastrophe” by subverting “civic literacy, voting, and public spiritedness.”

Deneen’s America is a moral and political wasteland. Yet despite having shown to his own satisfaction that liberal democracy in America defiles what it touches and touches everything, Deneen in conclusion urges readers to continue to live under its protection. In the quest for a “humane postliberal alternative,” he eschews revolutionary politics and “the desire to ‘return’ to a preliberal age.” He aims to build on liberalism’s political achievements — which are not really liberalism’s, it turns out, since respect for the individual and limited government were, Deneen stresses, “basic concepts that were foundational to the Western political identity.” Instead of trying to conceive a new ideology to replace liberalism, he advises readers to alter their practice — though not their nation of residency — by separating themselves from the mainstream to the extent possible in order to develop local communities dedicated to self-government and grounded in family, custom, faith, and face-to-face social relations. These would combine those admirable Western political ideas and institutions liberalism hasn’t

destroyed with the true views about liberty and virtue derived from classical Greek and biblical teachings that liberalism brazenly repudiated. Emerging practice, Deneen supposes, will inspire new ideas to guide new and nobler kinds of political community.

Deneen's decorous call to action undercuts his extravagant indictment of liberalism and liberal democracy in America. For the world offers clear alternatives to life in these United States. Yet, nightmarish as he believes existence to be in the regime under which he lives, he does not so much as consider the possibility of building in authoritarian China, imperial Russia, theocratic Iran, or socialist Venezuela the alternative forms of political community he contemplates. That's not just because of the cost of moving, the frustrations of learning a foreign language, and the troubles of finding remunerative labor — to say nothing of the risks the world's illiberal regimes pose of assault, detention, torture, and execution, especially for those such as Deneen who proclaim heterodox opinions.

The principal reason that Deneen appears prepared to stay put despite his thoroughgoing rejection of liberalism is one he cannot very well acknowledge: Liberal regimes are the home for what John Stuart Mill in "On Liberty" called "new experiments in living" — very much including the experiment that Deneen espouses involving rededication to classical and Christian opinions about the good life.

Deneen can take for granted the possibility of establishing in the United States communities that turn their backs on the mainstream because America has remained loyal, in crucial respects, to its classically liberal heritage. The country's foundations were laid in the early 17th century by religious dissenters who brought with them from England a form of political liberty that Locke subsequently elaborated in his writings on government and toleration and which, a century later, Americans embodied in the Constitution. It furnishes individuals — and through individuals communities — maximum protection from government interference consistent with a like liberty for others. The unrivaled combination of freedom, security, prosperity, and diversity generated by liberal democracy in America offers a uniquely safe and comfortable political order in which to pursue the very types of community devoted to the best in the Western heritage for which Deneen yearns. That is not an accident. The turn to local communities insulated from the temptations of the majority culture that Deneen takes to be a repudiation of liberalism is rather a lofty political possibility woven into the core of the modern tradition of freedom.

Deneen obscures these vital dimensions of liberalism by reading into its roots the radical ambition to satisfy through politics the longing for "pure and unmitigated freedom." He relies on jargon developed in the academy in the 1970s and 1980s by a motley assortment of academic liberals, their communitarian critics, and some postmodern enthusiasts — jargon that by the 1990s had petrified into graduate-school clichés. Liberalism's paramount purpose, he maintains, is to create "unencumbered individuals" who embrace an "expressive

individualism” that equates moral worth with “self-creation.” In the attempt to “liberate individuals from arbitrary and unchosen relationships,” liberalism, Deneen declares, has triumphed:

It has remade the world in its image, especially through the realms of politics, economics, education, science, and technology, all aimed at achieving supreme and complete freedom through the liberation of the individual from particular places, relationships, memberships, and even identities — unless they have been chosen, are worn lightly, and can be revised or abandoned at will.

The dream of total freedom and the hope that politics can bestow it comprise, Deneen rightly contends, a snare and a delusion. But it is also a snare and a delusion for Deneen to argue that that vain ambition — a left-wing, postmodern radicalization of the idea of individual freedom in which the modern tradition of freedom is grounded — constitutes liberalism’s original and ultimate teaching. It is like asserting that because democracy presupposes equality, it must seek, in the manner of communism, to remorselessly impose a sweeping egalitarianism. The postmodern radicalization of individual freedom that Deneen promulgates as the essence of liberalism does not describe — indeed it sharply conflicts with — the teachings of John Locke, whom Deneen calls “the first philosopher of liberalism” and accuses of derailing Western civilization.

Part III of “Anti-Liberal Zealotry” will appear this Friday.

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