

Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part V: Rediscovering Liberalism

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EDITOR’S NOTE: *This is the fifth and final part of an 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 the first four parts here: Part I, Part II, Part III, Part IV.*

In “Why Liberalism Failed,” Patrick Deneen makes an eye-opening contribution to the critique of liberalism. Equating liberalism with the modern tradition of freedom, he distills abuses of state power, nature, culture, technology, and education that are undertaken in freedom’s name yet leave citizens less self-sufficient, less disposed to cooperate, and less capable of looking beyond material goods and social status to the cultivation of character and to the claims of duty.

By blaming all our woes on liberalism, however, Deneen reveals his captivity to the immoderation that fuels much of the moral and political disorder from which he seeks to break free. His anti-liberal zealotry impels him to exaggerate liberalism’s faults and suppress its fine points. It also gives reason to believe that the problem lies less in liberalism, as Deneen contends, than in the failure to understand the liberal tradition.

The 18th-century British statesman Edmund Burke was the first great critic from within the modern tradition of freedom of its tendency to beget scorn of tradition, faith, and the virtues. In making the case for liberty properly understood in “Reflections on the Revolution in France” (1790), he launched the conservative or right wing of the modern tradition of freedom in opposition to the revolutionaries across the Channel, who inaugurated the tradition’s progressive or left wing. Burke’s critique of the French Revolution, along with stances he took on America, Ireland, and India during his nearly 30 years in Parliament — stances that illustrate the prudent application of principle to practice — yield three theses about politics that provide guidance for thinking through the challenges of our day.

First, the chief cause of disarray and depravity in politics is not regimes or schools of thought but human nature. In the “Reflections,” Burke wrote,

History consists, for the greater part, of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites, which shake the public with the same “—troublous storms that toss / The private state, and render life unsweet.” These vices are the *causes* of those storms. Religion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, rights of men, are the *pretexts*. (Emphasis in the original.)

In agreement with the classics and biblical faith and in opposition to the left wing of the modern tradition of freedom, Burke maintains that the ineliminable imperfections of politics derive from the inherent imperfections of human nature. More just regimes and wiser statesmen may diminish the miseries that vice generates but cannot eradicate them and will always struggle to keep them in check.

Second, prudent politics takes account of a nation's governing principles, distinctive character, and shared values. For that reason, Burke implored the British government in 1775 in his Speech on Conciliation to grant the American colonists' demand for representation on matters of taxation. He pointedly denied that the colonists possessed a legal right to representation. But that, he stressed, was beside the point. Owing to "the fierce love of liberty" ingrained in Americans through their religion, culture, education, practices of self-government, and geopolitical circumstances, they could not be satisfied with anything less than formal participation in decisions about the taxes imposed on them. Burke presciently warned Parliament that failure to accommodate American demands — nurtured by their shared tradition of freedom — jeopardized Britain's hold on the colonies.

Third, in an age of individual freedom, natural rights are indispensable to the vindication of justice. Critics on the right and on the left observe correctly that the invocation of abstract rights can dissolve tradition, subvert local attachments, and erode political order. Burke pioneered those criticisms. He also clarified their limits. In the "Reflections," he rebuked the French revolutionaries for supposing that "the rights of men" authorized the blanket repudiation of inherited faith, the established regime, and the country's settled laws and their replacement with new modes of moral judgment and political order derived from pure reason. Yet the promulgation of "false claims of right" and "pretended rights," argued Burke, should not be allowed to disguise the truth about rights. Accordingly, he also affirmed in the "Reflections" "the *real* rights of men" (emphasis in the original) — rights that were deeply rooted in British law and custom and that corresponded closely to the rights that Locke expected well-constituted governments to protect. This was hardly a departure from Burke's long-held views. In the 1780s, he paid a high political price for putting principle ahead of expediency to argue that universal and natural rights required Britain to tolerate Catholics in Ireland and to accord India's indigenous population fair and humane treatment.

These theses drawn from Burke's analysis of 18th-century British politics yield observations pertinent to the inclination in 21st-century American politics on the left and on the right to hold liberalism responsible for all that is misshapen and out of joint in the country. It is not liberalism but human nature — refracted, to be sure, through the American constitutional order, contemporary culture, and modern realities — that is the irreducible source of the muddled desires and the acute anxieties, the spitefulness and the sanctimoniousness, the fervor and the one-sidedness that loom large in American politics today. Like all respectable regimes, regimes devoted to individual freedom exacerbate some unruly tendencies and encourage other desirable ones. So long as citizens remain human beings, however, regimes purged of ill-conceived and shameful conduct will thrive only in the utopian imagination.

Furthermore, the modern tradition of freedom, which has been shaping Americans' expectations and aspirations for centuries stretching back to before the nation's founding, cannot be wished away or silenced. At the same time, it can and should be instructed and refined, called back to its governing principles and founding promises, and invigorated and enriched with the best elements of rival traditions.

And in forming responsible judgments and devising sound policy, the issue is not whether to adhere to universal standards or to follow tradition and custom. The unending task is balancing their competing claims.

These broader considerations suggest that no assessment of America's prospects, however piercing the analysis of freedom's downsides, can hope to be adequate if it fails to give the great achievements of liberal democracy in America their due. That's because these achievements reflect the desire for security, comfort, and recognition woven into human nature. They are part and parcel of the spirit of the modern tradition of freedom. And they honor the rights firmly grounded in the American constitutional order.

Despite America's multifarious discontents and alarming backsliding, these achievements are numerous and wide-ranging, and they converge in democratizing the dignity of the individual. Liberal democracy in America has institutionalized the protection of religious freedom and freedom of speech. It has furnished abundant economic opportunity for the hard working and law abiding as well as for the entrepreneurial spirit; lifted masses out of grinding poverty; and provided a social safety net to support the poor, the infirm, the out of work, and the elderly. It has dramatically increased social mobility and transformed what were once privileges — choosing one's profession and spouse and how to educate one's children — into everyday expectations. It has produced unequalled pluralism at home and demonstrated unrivaled generosity abroad. It has fostered extraordinary gains in science and technology, resulting in a proliferation of creature comforts and, in the field of health, drastic reductions in infant mortality, stunning victories over injury and disease, and dramatic increases in life expectancy. It played a decisive role in defeating fascist and communist totalitarianisms and in building a world order grounded in individual rights, national sovereignty, open markets, and international institutions. It would be difficult to point to a historical epoch or a regime in which respect for individual freedom — including the choice to live in communities that prefer to concentrate on the cultivation of virtue and the pursuit of salvation — has been greater.

In the United States, these achievements commingle with disadvantages that inhere in free societies everywhere and with grave and growing threats particular to the present moment. Friends of liberalism owe liberalism's critics, not least Deneen, a debt of gratitude for illuminating those permanent disadvantages and contemporary threats. But contrary to many of liberalism's fiercest critics, not least Deneen, benefits as well as costs must be included in the mix and both must be assessed judiciously.

Another major benefit of the modern tradition of freedom is that it furnishes an uncommonly advantageous political framework within which to undertake that assessment. That's because liberalism encourages and protects criticism, not least of itself. The critique of liberalism — from Rousseau's attack on 18th-century bourgeois hypocrisy; to the Romantics' 19th-century reproach of the Enlightenment for depreciating sentiment, passion, imagination, and the beauty and mystery of the natural world while idolizing rational calculation, scientific knowledge, technology, and industrialization; to the 20th-century labors by American conservatives to recover the claims of tradition, faith, and the virtues and the principles of limited government; and even including the “radical” Catholic critique of liberalism that Deneen echoes — finds a home within liberal regimes.

The modern tradition of freedom's toleration of criticism is no small achievement. But the true source of the tradition's strength is the disposition it nourishes, at its best, to learn from the criticism it tolerates. This presupposes liberty of thought and discussion but requires the exercise of political moderation — a virtue crucial to giving competing claims about justice their due.

Within the tradition of freedom, the American experiment in self-government has been unusually hospitable to political moderation. At the nation's founding, classical and biblical principles intertwined with liberal ones, producing a rich and variegated cultural inheritance. By separating and dispersing power among the three branches of the federal government and between the federal government and state governments, the constitutional system slowed lawmaking in order to increase deliberation, encourage compromise, and restrain the majority's inclination to violate minorities' rights. And by making the protection of religious liberty and free speech constitutional priorities, liberal democracy in America created a haven for a diversity of opinion, including a diversity of opinion about liberal democracy in America.

To conserve freedom, Americans must rediscover liberalism. That depends on a major reorientation of education in America. Our schools, colleges, and universities should teach the modern tradition of freedom in the spirit of freedom. Educators must dedicate themselves to the transmission of knowledge; to the cultivation of curiosity in inquiry, civility in speech, and care in listening; and to honing students' ability to ask hard questions and explore competing perspectives.

Education for liberty — liberal education — is vital to countering the dangerous and increasingly common tendency of American citizens, especially the elites, to take to an extreme the perennial human propensity to take one's opinions to an extreme. Liberal education furnishes an essential source of sustenance and ballast to liberal democracy in America — a liberal democracy that, more than most, is a blended regime and, as much as any, deserves to be conserved and improved by those who cherish individual freedom and equality under law.

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