

# Patrick Deneen's Common-Good Conservatism Manifesto

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"No sensible reader of the news could look at America and think it is flourishing," sensibly writes Patrick Deneen in the first sentence of *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*. His sharp observations that follow about the new version of the old conflict between the people and the elites illuminate destabilizing tensions within liberal democracy in America and elsewhere in the West. His restatement of the classical account of the mixed regime underscores the enduring political imperative to balance conflicting principles and interests. His astute reflections on the vices of expert knowledge and the virtues of custom and commonsense highlight freedom's dependence on tradition and experience. His shrewd critique of identity politics and the diversity, equity, and inclusion industry exposes mechanisms by which the highly educated and prosperous divide and delegitimize the working class. And some of his near-term public-policy proposals to improve the federal government, reform higher education, and bolster family and community would strengthen the country. Still, no sensible reader of Deneen's book could think that the regime change he espouses provides humane and workable long-term remedies to what ails the nation.

Deneen's new polemic takes up where the anti-liberal zealotry of his previous one left off. A University of Notre Dame political science professor, Deneen published *Why Liberalism Failed* in 2018 to acclaim, not least from Barack Obama. The former president admired the book's "cogent insights into the loss of meaning and community that many in the West feel, issues that liberal democracies ignore at their own peril." Obama's anodyne praise obscured the radical critique of American political ideas and institutions that paradoxically made Deneen a hero to common-good conservatives and turned him into a celebrity public intellectual engaging in national and transnational discussion about the decline of the West.

Deneen argued in 2018 that nearly all the West's troubles worth mentioning—and America's in particular—derive from the "liberalism" in liberal democracy. By liberalism, he meant the roughly 400-year-old modern tradition of individual liberty, equality under the law, limited government, free markets, and extensive and diverse civil society—consisting of families, communities, religious institutions, and civic associations—that liberal democracy

safeguards. Liberalism, Deneen charged, not only eroded "meaning and community" but also poisoned culture, education, the economy, the environment, moral and intellectual virtue, citizenship, family, religious faith, and just about every other human good under the sun.

Liberalism's metastasizing malignity having finally come into focus in the first decades of the 21st century—Marx and Nietzsche claimed as much from rival vantage points in the 19th century—the time for ordinary politics was ending. "We may rather be witnessing an increasingly systemic failure, due to the bankruptcy of its underlying political philosophy, of the political system we have largely taken for granted," Deneen wrote. "The fabric of beliefs that gave rise to the nearly 250-year-old-American constitutional experiment may be nearing an end."

To reach the chilling verdict that liberalism deserves to die because of the ruination it has systemically visited on our moral and political lives, Deneen—like progressive proponents of the systemic racism thesis—rigged the evidence. He reduced the modern tradition of freedom—a rich and complex school that encompasses John Locke, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Abraham Lincoln, Friedrich Hayek, and Raymond Aron—to an insidious ideology that "proposed transforming all aspects of human life to conform to a preconceived political plan." He read back into the modern tradition of freedom the postmodern dogmas that human beings are self-creating sources of value and that government's job is "to grant pure and unmitigated freedom." And, without troubling to put America's failings—and blessings—in comparative and historical perspective, he contended that liberalism proved "true to itself" by generating devastating social and political pathology, economic injustice, and moral indignity.

Although demonstrating to his own satisfaction that the American constitutional order was irredeemably flawed and doomed from the start to self-destruct, Deneen declined on principle in 2018 to offer an alternative political theory and explicitly rejected revolutionary politics. Five years ago, he stressed that "the impulse to devise a new and better political theory in wake of liberalism's simultaneous triumph and demise is a temptation that must be resisted." Acquiescence to the impulse would repeat liberalism's error: "The search for a comprehensive theory is what gave rise to liberalism and successor ideologies in the first place." Needed was "Not a better theory, but better practices." Since "political revolution" against the liberal order "would produce only disorder and misery," Deneen counseled retreat to local, tight-knit communities "focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life." Lost on the political science professor was the irony that American constitutional government—thanks in no small measure to religious liberty, federalism, and civil society—provided just the setting for such "experiments in living."

This time around, Deneen again scorns the American regime as "structurally liberal" and "exhausted." To pursue reforms in the face of the nation's formidable challenges—income inequality; enormous and mounting national debt; urban blight; deteriorating family structure

and the sexualization of popular culture; addiction to drugs, entertainment, and social media; and authoritarian demands from left and right—is to miss the point, he contends, because America's manifold ills stem from a pervasive evil: an "increasingly tyrannical liberalism."

While reaffirming that America's descent into tyranny "is not a contradiction of liberalism, but its fulfillment," Deneen reverses himself in *Regime Change* without acknowledgment or explanation concerning what is to be done. Succumbing to the dangerous delusions of comprehensive theorizing against which he solemnly warned in 2018, he expounds in his new book "a new and better political theory" to guide the construction of a "postliberal order." And notwithstanding his earnest counsel five years ago against unleashing the turmoil of revolution, he advances a new regime of sentiments, morals, and purposes.

Adjusting Marx's revolutionary formula in *The Communist Manifesto* to the demands of the moment, Deneen envisages fellow members of the educated and credentialed class joining him in emancipating themselves from modern freedom's delusions and corruptions to embrace his sweeping plans for remaking the nation. Operating as "'class traitors' to act on behalf of the broad working class, articulating the actual motives and effects of widespread elite actions," Deneen and his comrades will form a new "ruling class" that frees the people from false consciousness by understanding them better than they understand themselves. "Even if relatively small, an elite cadre skilled at directing and elevating popular resentments, combined with the political power of the many, can bolster populist political prospects as a working governmental and institutional force." He urges that "a new elite can be formed, or the old elite reformed, to adopt a wider understanding of what constitutes their own good—a good that is indivisible and common—and to steer America to a state of flourishing."

How Deneen's new ruling class will handle production, commerce, finance, diplomacy, and defense is anyone's guess. He also leaves mysterious the extent to which his elite vanguard will protect liberty under the law while implementing its elevated conception of the common good. It would have been clarifying for the would-be revolutionary to examine why previous Marx-inspired efforts by self-appointed elites to manipulate popular resentments and reconstruct society based on comprehensive visions of the good—Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution come to mind—have produced cruelty and death on an epic scale.

Instead, Deneen turns to the classical tradition of the mixed regime launched by Aristotle's *Politics* to elaborate a grand theory that he calls "aristopopulism." Deneen rightly maintains that the conflict between the few and the many, to which the mixed regime is a response, persists in liberal democracy. Yet the new regime he sketches, which fuses aristocracy and populism by enlisting the elites to uphold custom and community on the people's behalf, departs in ill-advised ways from Aristotle's sober political science.

Aristotle, for example, cautions against grand theorizing about politics. Deneen revels in it. Aristotle dispassionately examines political institutions and citizens' character to identify incremental reforms for preserving the typically defective regimes within which self-interested and fallible human beings reside. Deneen parodies American manners and mores and demonizes the U.S. political system in hopes of transforming the nation. Aristotle focuses on improving small, homogenous cities. Deneen decries, and seeks to remake, a transcontinental, religiously and ethnically diverse nation-state. Aristotle explores the benefits and disadvantages of a wide range of regimes. Deneen considers only liberal democracy in America's disadvantages while overlooking its many and varied benefits—among them, a freedom of speech so expansive that it allows tenured professors to achieve fame and fortune by advocating regime change.

Deneen's dramatic deviation from Aristotle's sober assessment of the few and the many deserves special attention. The few, Aristotle observes, tend not to be the aristocrats endowed with moral and intellectual virtue for whom Deneen's theory calls, but wealthy, keen to dominate, and prone to arrogance. Meanwhile, the many in Aristotle's account are not defined by traditionalist predispositions and longings as in Deneen's romantic rendition of the people, but by modest possessions, envy of the wealthy, and a desire not to be ruled. Both the few and the many want the regime to reflect their divergent opinions about justice, according to Aristotle. The goal, he counsels, is not to refashion the elites' and the people's character as Deneen envisages but rather to reform the regime so that it gives expression to both the wealthy's claims to preeminence and the people's demand for equality. Unlike Deneen, who aims at "the creation of a new elite that is aligned with the values and needs of ordinary working people"—but consistent with the classical liberalism he abhors—Aristotle's mixed regime takes the few and the many as they are and blends oligarchic and democratic institutional elements to accommodate the opposing classes' conflicting political claims.

In contrast, Deneen's aristopopulism idealizes the few and the many. Thanks to their supposed superior moral and intellectual virtue, his aristocrats see through the people's expressed wants, needs, and desires to cultivate their deeper yearnings—which the people can neither defend nor articulate—for binding custom and local community. Yet Deneen says little about how members of what he regards as our contemptible elites will acquire the virtues and fulfill "their responsibility to give voice to the nature of the good itself." Given his scathing critique of existing educational institutions and his failure to consider who will educate the educators, his appeal to the disciplining and elevating task of true liberal education seems fanciful.

Deneen gives scant attention, moreover, to institutional guardrails to prevent his aristocrats from exploiting the sweeping power with which his theory entrusts them and to restrain the people from going overboard in the "powerful political resistance" his aristopopulism commends. His ominous endorsement of "pressure from the people" and of "the application

of **Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends**" (emphasis in the original) reinforces the suspicion that Deneen's ambitious political project authorizes subterfuge, lawlessness, and brutality.

Aristotle's mixed regime, which institutionalizes moderation, constitutes a reproach to Deneen's utopian aristopopulism. The best that is practicably attainable in politics, Aristotle argues, "depends on the middling sort" because "it is readiest to obey reason." Contrary to Deneen, however, Aristotle does not advise combining the few and the many into the middle class. Rather, Aristotle recommends a middle class that "is superior to both of the other parts, but if not, superior to either of them; for when added to one it will tip the scale and prevent the opposing excesses from arising" (*Politics*, Book IV, Chapter 11). And contrary to Deneen's theory, in which a ruling aristocracy improved by the people's "muscular populism" in turn elevates the people, Aristotle argues that rule by the few over the many provides a recipe for instability. The people will "not know how to rule but only how to be ruled, and then only to be ruled like a slave," while the elites will "not know how to be ruled by any sort of rule, but only to rule like a master." The result "is a city not of free persons but of slaves and masters, the ones consumed by envy, the others by contempt."

Perhaps to shroud his radicalism, Deneen purports to recover "an older and forgotten but better form of conservatism, one that seeks the mutual betterment of both the elite and the people." Aristopopulism, he contends, reflects a "conservative common-good political tradition" that revolves around "[c]ontinuity, balance, order, and stability, grounded in the unchanging truths knowable through human reason and also present in the Christian inheritance of the West." Deneen's theorizing, however, not only warps Aristotle but also misuses language, promulgates illusory revisionist history, and suppresses the varieties of the common good.

First, Deneen turns conservatism on its head by contending that it demands upending the inherited political order. In addition, Deneen's goals—stability and balance rooted in reason and the West's Christian inheritance—could well describe those of his sworn enemy, classical liberalism, provided that the modern tradition of freedom's assumptions, aims, and arguments are not, as is Deneen's wont, grossly oversimplified, caricatured, and ridiculed.

Second, to make the case that his revulsion for America reflects true conservatism, Deneen—like Yoram Hazony and Adrian Vermeule—absurdly accuses American conservatives who contend that the United States was founded on classical liberal principles of falsifying the historical record. If, however, a nation whose Declaration of Independence proclaims that government's primary purpose is to secure unalienable rights and whose Constitution elaborates a limited federal government of "few and defined powers" lacks classically liberal credentials, then no nation qualifies.

Third, like many of his common-good conservative comrades, Deneen conflates the common good and the greatest good. He wants government not only to protect the exercise of virtue but to promote it wholeheartedly, to rise above ensuring religious freedom to guiding citizens to salvation, and to go beyond providing the toleration and prosperity that allow for the pursuit of happiness to authoritatively defining and administering happiness.

Aristotle would not approve. Central to his political science is the distinction between the common good that is achievable in practice and the greatest good that resides above politics. Aristotle's best regime—the regime devoted to virtue, human flourishing, and the highest happiness—serves as a standard for reforming actual imperfect regimes. It does not provide a model for a viable constitution. Aristotle's advice was to grasp actual regimes' animating principles and tendency to absolutize them; to appreciate the partial truth in classes' competing opinions about justice and their disposition to press their one-sided views to the hilt; and to design institutions and provide education that moderated the propensities to "factional conflict" built into human nature and politics and which encouraged a shared affection for the regime.

Deneen gets things backward. Although professing fidelity, he abandons Aristotelian political science by equating the common good and the greatest good. And while he excoriates it for radically breaking with premodern thought, the American constitutional order, which exemplifies the modern tradition of freedom, demonstrates continuity with Aristotle by limiting the political common good—not to deny the greatest good but to give individuals, families, and communities the opportunity to pursue their conflicting understandings of it.

Contrary to Deneen's contention that the American experiment in ordered liberty aims at "transformative progress," the nation rests on the moral premise that human beings are by nature free and equal. It was formed against the backdrop of ardent clashes over virtue and salvation that marked early modernity, not least the protracted violence between Catholics and Protestants that generated oceans of blood during the 16th-, 17th-, and 18th-century European wars of religion. It derived inspiration from biblical faith, the civic-republican school, and British common law. And it holds that because human beings are born equal in basic rights and fundamental freedoms but differ considerably in their beliefs about happiness and faith, the common good to which individuals should consent is the establishment of democratic government that protects individual rights under the law.

Deneen is, therefore, flat-out wrong to assert that "Liberalism is a denial that there can be any objective good for humans that is not simply the aggregation of individual opinion." The modern tradition of freedom teaches that the securing of individual rights is the part of the objective good that citizens can achieve through government.

This confinement of the political common good reflects no disparagement of tradition, duty, or faith. To the contrary, securing of basic rights and fundamental freedoms depends on the virtues and enables citizens—with their families, communities, and associations—to cultivate

character and pursue their differing conceptions of the good life.

Despite his praise of mixing, Deneen obfuscates the modern tradition of freedom's reconciling and combining of virtue and individual rights. To establish virtue's primacy, he maintains that for English statesman Edmund Burke, "The true 'rights' of citizens are not reducible to individual rights but must foremost consist in the right to be well-governed, a right that rests on an intergenerational capacity to develop the virtues." Yes, but for Burke, good government—including the freedom to cultivate virtue—must be limited government. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the preeminent father of modern conservatism affirms "the *real* rights of men" (emphasis in original), which encompass the classically liberal freedom to be left alone under the law: "Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself."

Burke's love of freedom and of virtue fits well with the constitutional conservatism that grows out of America's founding principles. Rooted in respect for the nation's many-layered moral and political inheritance, constitutional conservatism fosters government that secures rights equally for all, not least by providing—within the confines of its proper powers—for freedom's material and moral preconditions. Grateful for the blessings of liberty, constitutional conservatism today soberly takes the measure of America's fractured institutions, and of the rampant follies and frauds, derelictions of duty and abuses of power, and resentments and enmities that disfigure contemporary politics. And ever mindful of government's limits, constitutional conservatism fashions remedies for the ailments of liberal democracy in America that cohere with the principles of liberal democracy.

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by Patrick J. Deneen  
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