

Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part I: Our Immoderation

By Peter Berkowitz
September 14, 2018

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first 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."*

Our politics increasingly encourages citizens — members of the intellectual and political elite particularly — to take to an extreme the perennial human propensity to take one's opinions to an extreme. This imperils liberal democracy in America.

More than most forms of government, American liberal democracy is a hybrid, multi-dimensional regime. Grounded above all in the conviction that human beings are by nature free and equal, the American constitutional order embodies a mix of principles. It draws upon and shelters a variety of traditions. And it calls upon citizens to tolerate a diversity of beliefs and practices, including beliefs with which they may intensely disagree and practices of which they may strongly disapprove.

To accommodate these manifold tendencies, the Constitution establishes complex institutional arrangements that summon the political moderation — that is, the ability to combine and reconcile

competing claims about sound policy and justice — on which the American experiment in self-government depends.

Resisting the Constitution's incentives to combine and reconcile, leading figures on the left and right seem bent on heightening tensions and magnifying divisions. Donald Trump's ascent to the White House exacerbated both camps' growing determination, in evidence well before Trump upended the 2016 presidential campaign, to insist that the apocalypse is just around the corner. Powerful conservative voices argued that a Hillary Clinton victory would irreversibly entrench a ubiquitous progressivism that ruthlessly uses government to redistribute wealth, regulate the economy, and restrict worship and speech. Since the election,

many prominent progressive voices, joined by a few vehement conservatives (and ex-conservatives), have accused Trump of wrecking democracy in America by debasing political discourse, trampling on norms, corrupting political institutions, empowering working-class bigots and white supremacists, and undermining the rule of law.

To doubt that the United States is on the brink is not to deny that the country confronts formidable challenges. On the increasingly risible grounds of disinterested expertise, our profligate and inexorably expanding federal government has subjected the nation to a morass of intrusive, inefficient, and often indecipherable rules and regulations. Senior figures in the permanent bureaucracy have set aside impartial administration of the law to commandeer state power to advance partisan agendas. A civilized immigration policy consistent with the rule of law and the right of sovereign nation-states to control their borders eludes both parties. Our foreign policy establishment fails to persuasively articulate America's interests abroad, let alone connect them to the country's governing principles and highest ideals and advance them effectively in the global arena. While the stock market has done very well since Trump's November 2016 victory and unemployment has reached impressive lows following his 2017 deregulation orders and tax reform, income inequality in America widens, good jobs flow out of the country's industrial heartland, and the national debt balloons to massive proportions. Popular culture frequently revels in the low, the mean, and the tawdry. The combined dysfunction of the state, the economy, and culture operates to fray the fabric of family life, erode the underpinnings of faith, and sap vitality from communities. And many members of the prestige media appear to believe that their professional responsibilities require them to put bringing down the president ahead of getting the story right, even as the president goes overboard in declaring the press "the enemy of the people."

Our educational institutions make matters worse. They lend their authority to the scurrilous charge that free speech, due process, and a core curriculum rooted in Western civilization promote persecution based on race, class, and gender. And they cultivate the self-aggrandizing claim that the greater the victim status of the group with which one identifies, the more deserving is one's speech, the less the formalities of due process should stand in the way of one's accusations and ambitions, and the more the curriculum should elaborate one's oppression and vindicate one's demands.

It would be reasonable to hope that so weighty an assemblage of problems and perils would focus minds and occasion cooperation in defense of America's all-but-unmatched achievements in securing individual freedom and equality under law, producing economic prosperity, and welcoming new citizens from around the world. Yet party elites avidly indulge the vulgar pleasure of detesting the other side, while many members of Trump's populist coalition resent the elites of both parties whom, they have reason to believe, unite in detesting them.

In a much-discussed book published earlier this year, Patrick Deneen goes beyond those who think that the United States stands on the brink of systematic collapse. In his view, America as we know it has lost its moral legitimacy and deserves to disappear, though Deneen acknowledges that he is unable to specify the new form of political order that ought to replace it. In "Why Liberalism Failed," he places the blame for America's drastic plight — more or less shared, he suggests, by liberal democracies throughout the West — on liberalism.

By liberalism, Deneen means the modern tradition of freedom that came into its own in England in the 17th and 18th centuries, that served as a powerful source of inspiration to the founding of the United States, that spread throughout the West, and that informs countries around the globe that protect individual rights and rest political power on the consent of the governed. He maintains that our prospects for decent lives hinge on grasping the malign influence of

John Locke, who in the late 17th century provided a groundbreaking statement of the liberal ideas that, Deneen insists, relentlessly deceive and dehumanize. From a perspective that, he asserts, transcends the debate between contemporary left and right, he purports to expose liberalism's poisonous origins in erroneous theoretical doctrines and base moral intentions, to lay bare the calamitous social and political pathologies it generates, and to pave the way for the development of new and more humane forms of political community.

Deneen's extreme contentions are arresting and illuminating. He shows how the vain pursuit of total freedom underwrites myriad follies, inequities, and cruelties of contemporary political life. He highlights the moral costs of progress and our strategies for evading them. He mounts a compelling case for recovering dimensions of morality and politics — the virtues, duty, family, faith, community, local associations, and self-government — that intellectual and political elites tend to neglect or condemn. A compassion for those who suffer, a devotion to piety and moral excellence, and a keen appreciation of the paradoxes of freedom and thralldom in contemporary America suffuse his writing.

But Deneen can't make his radical hopes for a new form of political community cohere with his traditionalist appeal to the wisdom of classical political philosophy and Christian teaching. Mixing and matching venerable criticisms of the modern tradition of freedom from the left and the right, he falls prey to an anti-liberal zealotry that induces him to exaggerate the defects of the modern tradition he rejects and to import revolutionary implications into the premodern traditions to which he professes allegiance. As a result of equating liberalism with its most extreme variant, and of overlooking the lessons of moderation woven into classical and biblical wisdom as well as into the modern tradition of freedom, he intensifies confusion about the sources of our infirmities and misdirects political and intellectual energies away from viable reforms. In the quest to overcome the spirit of the age, Deneen has produced a book that embodies a propensity — taking one's opinions to an extreme — that typifies the age.

The exploration of zealotry in the critique of liberalism — **as in its defense** — can furnish a soberer understanding of our predicament. Amid the cacophony of discontent that marks the moment, assessing Deneen's arguments offers an opportunity to clarify the blend of traditions, principles, and virtues that nourishes liberal democracy in America.

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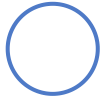


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Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part II: The Crux of Deneen's Critique of Liberalism

By Peter Berkowitz
September 19, 2018

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 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 an authoritarian China

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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Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part III: Locke and the Liberal Tradition

By Peter Berkowitz
September 21, 2018

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third 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."* Please find Part I [here](#) and Part II [here](#).

In "Why Liberalism Failed," Patrick Deneen attributes to John Locke's liberalism the purpose of emancipating individuals from every imaginable form of constraint. This undergirds Deneen's thesis that liberalism promulgates false and self-defeating ideas about human nature, morality, and politics. In fact, Locke's fundamental moral and political premise that human beings are by nature free and equal — imposes significant limits on individual conduct and government action.

In Chapter 2 of "The Second Treatise on Government" (1689), Locke emphasizes that the "perfect freedom" that inheres in each individual concerns the relations of human beings to one another. "[A]ll Men are naturally in," he writes, "**a State of perfect Freedom** to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man" (emphasis in the original). Not absolutely unfettered choice but

(emphasis in the original). Not absolutely unfettered choice but choice unfettered by one particular sort of constraint — the arbitrary command of one or more human beings — stands at the center of Locke's conception of freedom.

That no human being is born lawfully subordinate to another does not mean that all values are, or ought to be, created by human beings. Nor could it, since equality in freedom is itself for Locke a fixed and uncreated moral principle, as is the law of nature.

Together, they set definite limits. While the state of nature is “a **State of Liberty**,” Locke writes, “it is **not a State of License**” (emphasis in the original). Both the law of nature and Christianity, according to Locke, teach that human beings are free, equal, and created by God, and therefore “no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions.” All human beings are equal for Locke in the sense that none is by nature subject to the authority of another while all are subject to basic moral requirements.

To deflate Locke's accomplishment, Deneen contends that ideas and institutions central to the modern tradition of freedom — such as individual liberty, limited government, and separation of powers — had been developing in the West for centuries before Locke restated them in the “Second Treatise.” So they had. But Deneen wrongly maintains that what is valuable in Locke is not distinctive, and that what is distinctive in Locke is pernicious.

The conviction that human beings are by nature free and equal serves as the defining idea of Locke's political thinking — and of the modern tradition of freedom to which he made a seminal contribution. Although deriving support from classical and Christian sources, the conviction was not shared by Plato and Aristotle, who recognized human excellence as the standard for judging political orders, nor was it propounded by medieval Christianity, which rooted political legitimacy in faith and religious authority.

In contrast, Locke reaffirms the case for individual liberty, limited government, and separation of powers on the premise that human reason is capable of discerning that no human being is born with a title to rule over another and that none is born to another's service. Locke did not impose this premise on a recalcitrant humanity but rather gave moral, political, and even theological expression to the individualism that had been developing in Europe for centuries, in part owing to the interweaving influence of classical and biblical ideas. Since Locke's time, the proposition that human beings are by nature free and equal has become even more deeply rooted in the beliefs, practices, and associations of the West; it has motivated the American experiment in self-government; and it has given nourishment wherever the hunger for self-government has arisen.

Deneen takes aim at a phantasm when he blasts Locke's account of the state of nature as initiating a “false anthropology” that, by “radically redefining human nature” in terms of “radical autonomy” authorizes, indeed demands, the liberation of desire and the abolition of constraint. Writing in an era of religious war and of growing doubt about kings' claims to rule by divine right, Locke did not undertake to reorient human striving, to reinvent political institutions, or, for that matter, to produce a comprehensive treatise on politics. His plainly stated purpose in the “Second Treatise” is highly restricted: He aims to re-ground **political** power — which he believes revolves around protecting rights, particularly those of property and of religion — in the freedom shared equally by all. To accomplish this, he must explain how vulnerable, fallible, and self-interested human beings who are prone to serious differences of opinion about property, happiness, and salvation but share an ability to reason, grasp morality, and behave justly — that is, people like us — can, without routine resort to force and violence, resolve the controversies that inevitably divide them. Political community rightly grounded and political power properly limited is the solution. This enables free and equal individuals to secure the freedom that is theirs by right and concentrate on the pursuit of material prosperity and religious duty. Locke's account of the state of nature and his doctrine of consent serve his narrow but trailblazing aim.

The state of nature, for Locke, primarily functions as a **judicial** construct. It describes legal relations, or rather the disastrous consequences that arise from their lack. This is manifest in Locke's assertion that “all **Princes** and Rulers of **Independent** Governments all through the World, are in a State of Nature” (emphasis in the original). That is, they coexist without an established, settled authority for resolving the disputes that inescapably arise among them, and therefore they live precariously. The state of nature exposes the unavoidable descent into violence, or a state of war, that results from the absence of a clearly agreed-upon authority for deciding controversies among individuals and groups of individuals, who each have an equal right to make judgments about their self-preservation and a shared propensity to interpret justice's demands in their own favor and to discount or disregard the just claims of others. The

propensity to interpret justice's demands in their own favor and to discount or disregard the just claims of others. The instability and disorder inhering in the state of nature, as Locke understands it, bring into focus individuals' abiding interest in choosing to limit their freedom by agreeing to political institutions for making, enforcing, and interpreting law.

This limitation on freedom — a double limitation in that it restricts individuals' use of their private judgment in society while confining government's power to the regulation of life, liberty, and property — enhances freedom. Once established, political authority enables individuals to concentrate on caring for themselves and their families; laboring, saving, and enjoying the fruits of their labor; worshipping as reason and conscience dictate; and seeking happiness as best they understand it. Despite Deneen's determined effort to create an unbridgeable gap between them, Locke would agree with Aristotle's observation in Book I of the "Politics" that while human beings form cities, or complete political communities, "for the sake of living," they maintain them "for the sake of living well."

As for consent, Deneen believes it involves a sinister stratagem intended to transform all morality into an expression of human will. In reality, however, the doctrine serves Locke as a mechanism for reconciling the claims of individual freedom with the imperatives of political authority. Consent captures the idea that individuals, being by nature free and equal, can only properly submit to man-made law by an exercise of their own judgment. The form of consent that is politically pertinent, according to Locke, involves agreement with others to establish authoritative political institutions to protect their rights. For the most part, this consent does not, and is not intended to, reflect agreement about the wisdom, enforcement, or interpretation of particular laws. Consent, as Locke conceives it, obliges individuals to obey even laws that they deem flawed or ill-conceived provided those laws emerge from a government and decision-making process they can reasonably see as an expression of their choice. But consent also implies limits. Those who overthrow, or systematically flout and disable, properly established political institutions — including those who hold high office — infringe on citizens' freedom, thwart the purpose of political society, and dissolve citizens' obligations to obey the law.

Apart from immigrants who have acquired citizenship, however, who among us has expressly consented to the Constitution and the laws of the land promulgated under it? In response to that serious if obvious sort of objection, which Deneen treats as devastating, Locke replies that consent is generally "tacit" — that is, expressed by action. Those who enjoy the benefits of living under a regime that protects basic freedoms — and who therefore may leave if they choose — signal their consent by remaining. The doctrine of tacit consent is not without its problems, but in sharp contrast to the radical ambitions Deneen imputes to Locke, it is a conservative teaching that infers choice from practice and is skewed in favor of inherited ways and gradual reform.

Although one would never know it from the scorn that Deneen heaps on him for supposedly expelling religion and the virtues from political life, Locke vigorously defends religion as man's highest duty, and devotes an entire book to exploring the cultivation of the virtues that underwrite freedom. To be sure, Locke rejects premodern views that the state should establish religion and cultivate virtue, but not out of hostility to either. To the contrary. In "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689), Locke stringently limits government power to the protection of life, liberty, and property, in significant measure, to safeguard religion from abuse by worldly authorities, of which history — and the epic events of his own lifetime — provided no shortage of examples. And in "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" (1693), he explores the centrality of the family to forming character. He sets forth in great detail the moral and intellectual virtues that conduce to freedom and the methods by which those virtues are best instilled. Contrary to Deneen's assertion that liberalism originates in the rejection of the classical and Christian view that virtue and freedom depend on the discipline of desire, Locke equates the virtues of freedom with self-rule.

Determined to deny that Locke teaches virtue, Deneen goes so far as to disguise Locke's appeal to the virtues in the "Second Treatise" by rebuking him for it. He charges that Locke introduced invidious standards and paved the way contemporary inequality by arguing in his classic account of property in Chapter 5 that the "Industrious and Rational," ... Locke's words, justly accumulate property while the "Quarrelsome and Contentious" suffer in the pursuit of worldly goods. Why Deneen believes the classical Greek and Christian catalogues of the virtues would not encourage formation of morally and politically relevant distinctions among human beings is unclear.

Locke's ideas are not the only ones Deneen distorts in the attempt to convict liberalism of crimes against the human spirit. To place immoralism at liberalism's core, he conflates it and modernity by treating Machiavelli as a liberal, even though the Florentine does not hold that all human beings are by nature free and equal. To show that the American Constitution, which emphatically establishes a federal government of limited and enumerated powers, is part of a nefarious liberal plot to create a government of "incalculable, hence unlimited power" Deneen cites Hamilton's

notorious liberal plot to create a government of incalculable, hence unlimited power, Deneen cites Hamilton's argument in "The Federalist" No. 34 that presidents possess "indefinite power" to deal with emergencies. But emergencies are by definition the exception; allowances must be made, as Aristotle emphasized in "The Ethics," for the inherent inability of written law to adequately cover all contingencies; and "indefinite" is not a synonym for "unlimited," as has been discovered by many a teenager who failed to heed parents' instructions to return home at a reasonable hour. To demonstrate the terrifying comprehensiveness of liberalism's ambitions, Deneen highlights "Heideggerian theories that placed primacy on the liberation of the will," even though Heidegger belongs among the most resolute and penetrating critics of theories that placed primacy on liberation of the will.

Beyond the misrepresentations of individual thinkers, Deneen also systematically subjects liberalism to a misleading test. Throughout his book he condemns liberal *practice* for failing to meet the highest standards set by classical and Christian teaching. But classical *practice* and Christian *practice* also fall drastically short of classical and Christian teachings' highest standards. Volatility and decadence, to say nothing of slavery, abounded in classical Greek democracy. Medieval Christianity also upheld slavery. And it brought forth the murderous Crusades, practiced far-reaching censorship culminating in the Inquisition, and remorselessly expelled Jews from England and many parts of Europe.

Deneen would be quite right to argue that the vices of classical Greece do not refute the teachings of Plato and Aristotle and that Christian sins do not disprove Christian faith. He should have reasoned similarly when it came to the modern tradition of freedom.

Part IV of "Anti-Liberal Zealotry" will appear next week.

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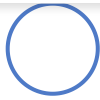


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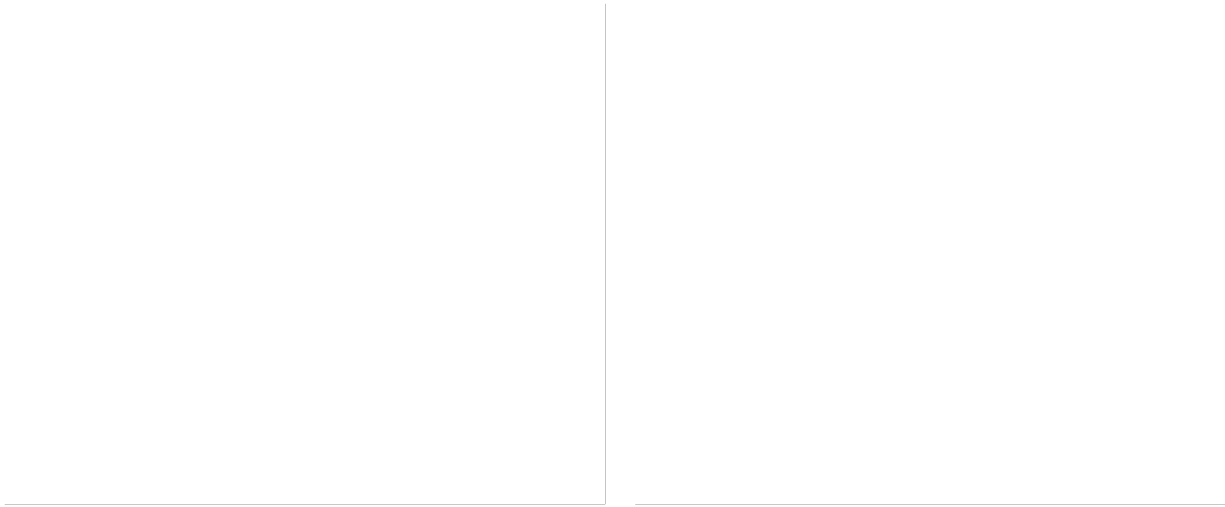
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Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part IV: Classical and Modern Lessons of Moderation

By Peter Berkowitz
September 26, 2018

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth 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.'* Read the first three parts by following these links: [Part I](#), [Part II](#), [Part III](#).

In "Why Liberalism Failed," Patrick Deneen contends that today's liberal regimes deserve to perish because they do not live up to the classical conception of political excellence. But the spirit of his critique clashes with the purpose of the ancients' examination of the best regime.

Plato and Aristotle considered the best regime — the regime devoted to virtue — to be practically unobtainable. Most people would live most of the time, they assumed, in inferior regimes that failed to foster the moral and intellectual virtues while spawning an abundance of vices. Plato and Aristotle did not therefore conclude that study of the best regime was unnecessary; nor did they generally argue for despising, abandoning, or overthrowing the inferior regimes. For classical political philosophy, study of human excellence and the just city explained why complete justice in politics was beyond reach. It also taught that for the most part statesmen and citizens ought to be occupied with preserving the imperfect regimes in which they inevitably find themselves by preventing deterioration into something worse. Philosophical exploration of the virtuous life and the best regime furnished standards by which the various inferior regimes could be properly evaluated, and in light of which their ailments could be diagnosed accurately and dealt with effectively.

Classical political philosophy inscribes this lesson of moderation in its account of democracy — the regime premised on freedom and committed to equality, and in which the people rule — and extends it. Plato in Book VIII of “The Republic” and Aristotle in Books IV–VI of “The Politics” show that what Deneen believes to be the special error of modern liberalism — the fostering of citizens who live enslaved to their desires rather than in accordance with virtue — is actually the defining defect of what Deneen calls “small-scale democracy,” which he considers an antidote to liberalism. At the same time, the classics indicate that democracy — or preferably, a regime that mixes democracy and oligarchy, combining rule by the people with rule by the few (who tend to be the wealthy) — is usually the best regime one can reasonably hope for.

Like all regimes, argued the classical political philosophers, democracy contains the seeds of its own destruction inasmuch as it tends to take its principles to an extreme while neglecting other pertinent principles. In radicalizing freedom and equality, democracy tends to set the stage for tyranny by unleashing all manner of immoral and politically destructive conduct. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, however, draws the conclusion that democratic citizens — even the dissenters from democratic orthodoxy among them — should therefore reject democracy. Rather, classical political philosophy concentrates on exploring means for tempering democracy’s excesses and curbing the excessive expectations of politics harbored by democracy’s critics. There is good reason to believe that from the perspective of Plato and Aristotle, the American Constitution would represent an admirable means for conserving democracy in light of the circumstances of modernity.

In offering counsel on how to preserve democracy despite its self-destructive proclivities, Plato and Aristotle followed the example set by Socrates. In his prime, he witnessed Athenian democracy’s imperial overreach in the Peloponnesian War. Ultimately, his fellow citizens convicted him of impiety and corrupting the young, and sentenced him to death. Yet in full awareness of democracy’s manifold defects, Socrates sought to his dying breath to mitigate his city’s vices by defending its laws and by teaching about the virtues of citizens and human beings.

Socrates’s devotion to Athens was not merely a matter of prudence. His student, and Aristotle’s teacher, highlights in “The Republic” democracy’s contribution to the discovery of the best regime, the just regime devoted to excellence. Plato showed that democracy — the form of political community with by far the greatest commitment to political freedom then known — provided an invaluable opportunity to encounter a variety of human types and to examine a diversity of opinions, which was crucial to understanding human nature and the possibilities of politics.

Tocqueville, whom Deneen admires but whose implications for liberal democracy in America he disregards, reinforces the classics’ lessons of moderation. Democracy is more than a regime, according to the author of “Democracy in America”; it is also a historical era and form of life marked by “the equality of conditions.” The spread of equality antedates but leaves an indelible stamp on modernity. It influences all aspects of life, argues Tocqueville, and it is, in crucial respects, just and advantageous. It benefits the poor as well as the rich, and it fosters and is fostered by civilization, political stability, the rule of law, science, commerce, enlightenment, and more relaxed and natural social relations.

But democracy’s disadvantages are considerable, Tocqueville also maintains. It untethers the imagination, loosens political bonds, unravels community, dilutes discipline and duty, lowers moral standards, undercuts religion, and dissolves hierarchy in family and society. If measures are not taken to check its inculcation of softness and self-indulgence, democracy can sink into an “administrative despotism” that reduces individuals to a “sort of regulated, mild and peaceful servitude.” Like Plato and Aristotle, Tocqueville attributes to democracy the very moral vices and political harms Deneen faults liberalism for propagating.

Tocqueville further agrees with Plato and Aristotle that the task is not to replace democracy but to forestall its decline. The spirit of democracy, Tocqueville observes, has penetrated deeply into habits of heart and mind, beliefs and practices, and associations and institutions. It can no more be set aside than can the seasons and the ocean tides. So instead of raging against democracy’s disadvantages, he seeks to mitigate its flaws and supply it with virtues. He argues for preserving religious faith, the family, local community, and civic organizations because they fortify the spirit of democratic citizens by disciplining desire, elevating sentiments, bringing individuals together for projects of common interest, and encouraging a sense of duty. Critical as these nongovernmental practices and institutions are to remedying the diseases to which democracy is prone, Tocqueville insists above all on the cultivation of the spirit of liberty as vital to

the success to which democracy is prone, Deneen insists above all on the cultivation of the spirit of liberty as vital to counteracting democracy's pathologies.

The biblical faith that Deneen holds aloft as a primary alternative to liberalism also furnishes good reasons to seek conciliation with the modern tradition of freedom. That is in no small measure because liberalism develops a politics suitable to the new conditions of modernity — with its dramatic disruptions to everyday life driven by science, commerce, technology, and culture — that is consistent with major biblical moral teachings.

Like Lockean liberalism, the Bible begins not with community or human beings in relation to one another but with the individual. According to the first chapter of Genesis, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him.” To underscore that, being created in God’s image, all human beings are equal in the most important respect, the Bible immediately continues, “male and female created He them.” This does not imply that people are not also social and political animals — the Bible amply affirms that they are — but rather that just forms of association must respect what is equally sacred in all.

Like Lockean liberalism, the Bible directs men and women to bring nature under their control. In the very first command He issues to human beings, God declares, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth.” This broad divine grant authorizes the use of nature for human purposes, though it does not confer a license to despoil and lay waste to the earth’s bounty.

And like Lockean liberalism, the Bible places man in a pre-political condition, the Garden of Eden, that showcases the waywardness of human desire and passion, the moral knowledge that precedes political life, and the ill-suitedness of human beings to life outside of political community. One important implication is borne out by the rest of the Bible: Because human beings, while made in God’s image, are also born vulnerable, fallible, and self-interested, political society can at best discipline and elevate but never conquer refractory desire and obdurate passion.

The Garden of Eden story also reveals that the yearning for “pure and unmitigated freedom” that Deneen equates with liberalism is, from the biblical perspective, a temptation built into our humanity. After doling out punishments to the serpent for beguiling the woman, and to the woman and the man for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God says, “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” To prevent Adam and Eve from also achieving immortality by eating from the tree of life, God expels them from the garden. He takes this drastic step because human beings are prone to supposing that to be like Him in one respect entitles them to be like Him in all respects, or that the “supreme and complete freedom” that God demonstrated in creating the world out of nothing is the birthright of every child. The longing for total freedom is not, as Deneen contends, foisted on humanity by liberalism, but a reckless ambition that is inseparably bound up with the beautiful biblical teaching — a sustaining source of the idea of individual freedom and equality under law — that human beings are made in God’s image.

Deneen’s nearly unremitting hostility to liberalism reflects an adversarial stance to the modern tradition of freedom of the sort that, at least when it comes to tradition and culture in general, he condemns as a form of scholarly malpractice and a manifestation of our “technological age.” Whereas the “original mandate” of the humanities was, Deneen writes, “to guide students through their cultural inheritance,” scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries tended to adopt a scientific or positivist approach. In the spirit of progress and technical mastery, they sought to expose the errors and narrowness of canonical works, refute their arguments, and undermine their authority. According to Deneen, contemporary poststructuralists and postmodernists — much as they regarded themselves as vastly more sophisticated — ganged up with the social scientists to participate in the debunking and discrediting of tradition and traditional learning. Rather than receive inherited works with gratitude and explore them with humility as the original teachers of the humanities counseled, they dismantled, reconfigured, and imposed their will on them. Deneen displays just such an orientation in his reduction of liberalism — the tradition also of Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Madison, Mill, and Hayek — to the pursuit of absolute emancipation. In his vehement opposition to the modern tradition of freedom, Deneen flouts the reverence toward tradition he commends, and makes common cause with progressives, scholarly technocrats, and postmodernists whom he censures for their malice toward tradition.

Since Deneen has a great deal to offer, it is a pity that, in the case of the modern tradition of freedom, he betrays his commitment to recapturing tradition. He is at his most convincing in analyzing detrimental features of contemporary liberal democracy — particularly the scorn for inherited wisdom, the demotion of duty in favor of personal preference,

and the obsession with material goods and superficial amusements at the expense of citizenship, friendship, and love — promoted by the individualism and statism that arise from taking the principles of freedom and equality to an extreme. His single-villain genealogy of American morals, however, encourages scorn for his country and ingratitude toward its many blessings. It discourages the shouldering of the responsibility to correct America's errors while conserving its accomplishments. And, at a perilous moment, it legitimates dangerous anti-liberal sentiments and movements at home and around the globe. Were his advice to abandon liberalism heeded and his wish to overcome liberalism fulfilled, the result would be a regime — or state of war — exceedingly less friendly to the beliefs and practices he defends.

In his zeal to vanquish liberalism, Deneen defies the lessons of moderation taught by the pre-modern sources to whose authority he appeals. Contrary to his philosophical polemic, classical works and venerable biblical ideas — as well as the incomparable Tocqueville, whose marvelously manifold sensibility mixes premodern and modern elements — illuminate the lessons of moderation within the modern tradition of freedom itself. One great benefit of examining Deneen's attempt to overcome liberalism is that it brings into focus practical motives and intellectual resources for rediscovering liberalism.

Part V of "Anti-Liberal Zealotry" will be published on Friday.

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Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part V: Rediscovering Liberalism

By Peter Berkowitz
September 28, 2018

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, less capable of looking beyond material goods and social status to the cultivation of character and to the claims of

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 heget scorn of tradition, faith, and the virtues. In

tendency to forget both 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,” argue 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

of joint in the country. It is not liberalism but human nature — 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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