

## Review Essay

### From Peak Oil to Peak Liberalism\*

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How did Patrick Deneen go from the back to the first in the queue of liberalism's critics? His new book, *Why Liberalism Failed*, is certainly not the first to register a substantial critique of the dominant political system in the West since the American and French Revolutions. For Roman Catholics, the rejection of liberalism began with the beleaguered popes of the nineteenth century who tried to maintain their place in Europe's complicated balance of power. Pius IX's condemnation of liberalism in the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) only ratified what other popes had already determined and set the course for the Vatican until John XXIII called for a council (the Second Vatican Council, 1962–1965) that would update Roman Catholicism for modern times. The teachings and decrees of those bishops and cardinals rendered religious freedom acceptable in ways that made it possible for Roman Catholics in the United States, with the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray at the helm, to understand the American founding as basically compatible with Roman Catholicism (thanks to Murray's argument that the American founders relied on older Western notions of natural law).

The people most responsible for popularizing and extending the Murrayite synthesis, from William F. Buckley Jr. to Richard John Neuhaus, did take flak from critics for naively baptizing the United States' liberal polity in Rome's holy water. A forceful chorus of dissent to this postconciliar Americanism included

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\* Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

David L. Schindler,<sup>1</sup> Eugene McCarragher,<sup>2</sup> and William Cavanaugh,<sup>3</sup> each of whom faulted the United States' politics for different reasons, which included hyper-individualism and selfishness, unjustified use of force, and overestimation of free markets. Robert Kraynak, a conservative Roman Catholic political philosopher, offered a different critique of modern society's infatuation with democracy.<sup>4</sup>

For Protestants, objections to liberalism have not been as numerous or as complete, but they have produced substantial arguments about the flaws of the recent West. Abraham Kuyper, the prime minister of the Netherlands at the turn of the twentieth century, who was a pastor, theologian, professor, and newspaper editor (for starters) before entering politics, formulated a radical rejection of the French Revolution that relied upon an antithesis between liberalism's inherently godless assumptions and Christianity's premise that God is the source of order in the family, school, and society.<sup>5</sup> The twentieth century witnessed other significant critiques of liberalism (both political and religious) from the Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen,<sup>6</sup> the apologist who popularized Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer,<sup>7</sup> the evangelical theologian David F. Wells,<sup>8</sup> and also the University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter.<sup>9</sup>

These objections to liberalism do not even take into account a longer strain of criticism from the ranks of social scientists and public intellectuals without an obvious religious orientation. Edmund Burke may have fired the starter's gun of conservatism with his reflections on the French Revolution, while soon after Alexis de Tocqueville dissected democracy in the United States in respectful but substantial ways. More recently, Robert Nisbet argued strenuously about the ways that modern society uproots persons from bonds of family and community.<sup>10</sup> James Burnham, editor at the *National Review*, diagnosed the sickness of Western civilization thanks to the excesses of liberal society.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, Wendell Berry added his agrarian voice to the chorus of critics.<sup>12</sup> More recently, another writer associated with Burnham's magazine, Jonah Goldberg, updated and tried to improve his predecessor's assessment of liberalism's ailments.<sup>13</sup>

But none of these indictments of liberalism seem to have leveled the intellectual punch that Deneen's has. Panel discussions at universities, reviews in the nation's top newspapers, and commentary by elite op-ed writers—not to mention a slew of reviews in journals, magazines, and on social media—have followed in the wake of this relatively brief book from Yale University Press. Much of Deneen's assessment appears to be unaware of the longer train of liberalism's critics, even though the author himself admits a debt to Burke, Berry, Nisbet, and Tocqueville.

What is going on?

## Radical Traditionalism

One explanation for the book's impact is that Deneen, a professor of political philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, who has a fairly lengthy paper trail among the ranks of intellectual or traditionalist conservatives, indicts both conservatives (and the GOP) and progressives (and Democrats). His is not simply a complaint about the excesses of liberalism but a full-scale assault that begins in ways reminiscent of "The Port Huron Statement" from the Students for a Democratic Society. Just as those university students had been hopeful about post-World War II American society only to be awakened (today it would be "#woke") by segregation in the South and the threat of nuclear war, so Deneen begins with the "promises" that liberalism made. It was a political philosophy designed to limit government, secure rights, deregulate restrictions on "initiative and ambition," provide free and fair elections, and ensure the rule of law. But after five hundred years liberalism has shown its true colors. Instead of fostering greater equity, facilitating pluralism, protecting human dignity, and expanding liberty, it has produced "titanic inequality," enforced "uniformity and homogeneity," fostered "material and spiritual degradation," and undermined liberty. Deneen's book is a contemporary expression of the disillusionment that prompted the 1960s New Left. Indeed, the reversal of liberalism's promise is no mere straying from the course set out by English Whigs. Liberalism's "pathology" is in fact the true fruition of liberalism's own ideology. The "ruins it has produced," Deneen writes, "are the signs of its very success." Liberal solutions, consequently, will only throw gas on the dumpster fire that is modern society. Instead of increasing liberty, liberalism has only tyrannized people and nations wherever it has gone. Its promise of "seemingly endless vistas without constraints or limits" is simply a cover for something more sinister, like a computer virus that causes an operating system to crash (5).

Deneen extends this fundamental objection to liberalism for the rest of the book but identifies one feature that is basic to liberalism's promise that leads to destruction. He gives examples of liberalism's parasitic ways by looking at politics, economics, education, and technology and along the way observes that the political Left and Right in the United States share a similarly thin notion of liberty. In economics, for instance, Deneen argues that while conservatives enthuse over free markets' power to generate goods, services, and wealth, they fail to notice how capitalism disrupts families, manners and morals, and local institutions, those parts of human existence that might check selfishness. In other words, the logic of capitalism (liberalism's economic face) is toward global and international arrangements that undermine attachments to place, family, and local

authorities. A similar dynamic has played out, Deneen observes, in the realm of sexual relations. In the name of freedom, moderns have learned that older constraints, whether taught at home or church, are repressive and arbitrary. At the same time, as complaints of sexual abuse mount, government officials have no means by which to respond and advise restraint. In which case, the only real check on sexual desire is the threat of legal sanctions. Instead of cultivating “character and virtue,” liberal society threatens sexual excess through law enforcement (85).

The root of liberalism’s success and failure is a flawed understanding of human nature and social relations. That wrong turn began at least with Hobbes and Locke when political theorists understood society (a modicum of order and property rights) as the solution to the state of nature (a dog-eat-dog world where human life is “nasty, brutish, and short”). This idea of human beings as autonomous individuals entering a social contract involved a rejection of older, classical, and Christian ideas about human nature and society. Greeks, Romans, and Christians regarded humans not as autonomous selves but as fundamentally social beings for whom self-government was key to preventing tyranny. “Self-governance in the city,” Deneen writes, “was possible only if the virtue of self-governance governed the souls of citizens,” and such people were only possible through the “ongoing habituation in virtue, through both custom and law” (22). Liberalism rejected (the book ascribes agency to this abstraction) this understanding of politics and instead, as Deneen argues, proposed a different kind of liberty that promised peace and prosperity. It did so first by holding up the possibility of mastery over nature—and so separating humans from the natural order—and second by later insisting that human nature itself was plastic, something that humans can and should control. Gone in the process was the idea of a *telos* or fixed end for human beings, one “given by nature and unalterable” (35). Deneen’s argument depends on this contrast between the older (classical and Christian) and modern understandings of human nature.

What made liberalism even worse was its illegitimate appropriation of this anthropological and political inheritance. “Liberalism’s most basic appeal,” Deneen writes, “was not its rejection of the past but its reliance upon basic concepts that were foundational to Western political identity.” Yet, in using terms that were familiar and reassuring, the architects of liberalism rejected “the classical and Christian understanding of human beings as fundamentally relational creatures.” Instead they proposed that “liberty, rights, and justice could best be achieved by radically redefining human nature.” Liberalism thus broke with the past by substituting a “false anthropology” for the older true one (185). Because in contemporary politics conservatives and liberals both start with this

false understanding of human nature, they wage a ceaseless battle over “the ideal avenue for liberating the individual from constitutive relationships, from unchosen traditions, from restraining custom” (58).

Deneen supplies many examples from culture, technology, and politics to demonstrate liberalism’s failure that no doubt contribute to the book’s widespread interest. Indeed, one of the ways for a title to catch on is for an author to connect examples of contemporary culture’s woes and tie them to his or her explanation for what went wrong. Deneen does not fill the book with lurid details, but he throws enough illustrations in to provide red meat for culture warriors on the Right. For instance, he ties the 2008 collapse of the mortgage industry to the campus culture of promiscuous “hookups.” “Training at dorm parties and the fraternities of one’s college were the ideal preparation,” he writes, “for a career in the mortgage bond market, and the financial frat party of Wall Street more generally” (87). On the effects of social media, Deneen laments the loneliness it has cultivated. He quotes one journalist who observed that “Technologies like Facebook . . . are the by-product of a longstanding national appetite for independence.” That autonomy, Deneen adds, “is itself the result of a redefinition of the nature of liberty” (104). So too, he ridicules the politics of university campuses that encourage “students’ groups grounded in racial or sexual identity” but give no attention to “cohesive ethnic groups” such as the Kurds, Hmong, Copts, or even other minorities like 4-H leaders or rural poor. Deneen is, of course, not wrong to comment on the defects and silliness of modern liberal society, but his examples give the feel of adding a Fox News or Rush Limbaugh sensationalism to what otherwise purports to be a work of political theory.

Add to this cultural commentary a radical critique of modern political theory’s basic assumptions and you have the ingredients for a book more likely to generate cocktail hour banter than seminar debate. Indeed, *Why Liberalism Failed* has become the conservative political philosopher’s contribution to recent defiant objections to the liberal institutions that have protected social order since the end of World War II. Black Lives Matter has used race to question not simply the defects of the criminal justice system but even to encourage the idea that the rule of law is rigged. The Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump also have tapped discontent with international arrangements and national policies that seem to place the interests of elites, under the banner of the common good and rising affluence, above the needs of ordinary citizens. Most recently, the #MeToo movement has exposed the selfish privilege of elite men even while its proponents remain hesitant to defend a code that limits unseemly sex for fear of restricting a hard-won sexual freedom. Deneen’s book hits the nerve of current

mood and adds another layer to intersectionality. Already smarting from racial, economic, ethnic, gender, and sexual oppression, Americans need to add anthropology. Now even liberals oppress.

Deneen's bleak estimate of liberal society is not far removed from the kind of pessimism that prevails in writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, who see racial oppression in every nook and cranny of American life. Coates's negative estimate, in titles such as *Between the World and Me*,<sup>14</sup> seems relentless, especially when he refuses to grant any improvement in the condition of African Americans or legal reforms. Civil Rights legislation notwithstanding, man-stealing, slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching are essential for Coates's understanding of black identity. In a similar way, Deneen conflates the entire history of liberal politics. Could it be that liberal society went off the rails in the 1960s with a permissiveness to make up for past restrictions (racial and sexual)? For Deneen, the answer is emphatically "no" because the defects of liberalism go back not simply to the 1960s, or to the Progressives' expansion of the national government, or to flaws in America's constitutional settlement. Instead, liberalism's errors go all the way down to its anthropological premises.

This way of reading history, both for Coates and Deneen, should lead to despair. Unlike Coates, Deneen tries to end the book on an encouraging note by observing that "the way is clear to [build] anew and better," a "liberty after liberalism" (198). The way to do this is through "new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life" (197). But Deneen's turn to the localism of family, school, town, and neighborhood association seems like a Band-Aid compared to the way he begins the book: "Liberalism created the conditions, and the tools, for the ascent of its own worst nightmare" (xiv). The complete rout of human existence by liberalism gives an intentional turn to smaller and personal forms of association the feel of trying to stop global warming by starting a kitchen garden in the backyard. How much will growing a few side dishes and herbs actually reduce an average suburban family's carbon footprint?

Part of the problem with *Why Liberalism Failed* could be the difference between scholars inclined to using philosophical analysis and readers (like this reviewer) who distrust abstractions. A tendency in intellectual conservatism since the days of William F. Buckley Jr. and Russell Kirk has been to trace the nefarious aspects of contemporary society to bad philosophical origins. Edmund Burke himself may have started this conservative habit when he diagnosed the errors of the French Revolution (but to his credit also saw the benefits in the Old Whig outlook of American revolutionaries). Abraham Kuyper was another

proponent of tracing liberal society's corrosive effects to the godless assumptions of 1789. Yet, some people wonder whether men and women are products of ideas, or whether an understanding of human nature is sufficient to explain our current impasse. As Dimitrios Halikias wrote in his review, "we should remember that a nation is not a philosophy seminar." Even more, a nation is not "an idea unfolding through history, always tending toward totalizing purification." Human existence, for individuals and for nations, is "a bundle of contradictions, a collection of peoples, habits, and cultures."<sup>15</sup> In other words, liberal societies are never merely one thing or a set of activities oriented toward one idea. In some instances, liberal societies encourage the sort of local arrangements and personal virtues that Deneen recommends, and at other times they work against those social and personal goods. To say that the current health of liberal society is the inevitable result of flawed philosophy is to avoid the kind of analysis that might allow parents, pastors and bishops, school system superintendents—people with some authority—to chart a different course for their families, parishioners, and students.

Especially frustrating is Deneen's failure to distinguish better and worse moments in liberalism's past. For instance, when the United States began, the powers of the federal government, even after the vigor supplied by the Constitution, were modest, and local communities and institutions possessed a fair degree of autonomy to organize and shape the lives of members or residents. That was the kind of society that Deneen's favorite political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed as an admirable feature of democracy in America. To be sure, Tocqueville also noticed blemishes in the American social order, ones that Deneen is keen to underline. But the United States of the 1840s is one in which Deneen's little platoons (to borrow Burke's phrase) could go about their work even if they did not quite thrive. Of course, one of the problems of 1840s America was the enormity of slavery. And one of the virtues of post-1960s society is the end not simply to slavery but to official segregation. The moral imperatives behind ending slavery and institutional forms of racism did, for better and worse, change the nature of liberal society. If liberalism promised a small government that allowed local institutions to establish their norms, the defects of that arrangement became obvious when some Americans recognized the immorality of slavery. At the same time, to increase government's power to regulate national and local life to prevent instances of immorality like slavery was to alter the limited powers implicit in the first instances of American liberalism. From slavery to Prohibition to hate-crimes legislation, liberal reform has switched from restraining government to using the state to enforce righteousness. One could argue that liberalism took a

dramatic turn when activists sought to use government to abolish objectionable behavior, rather than allowing the political process to reach a consensus, locally or nationally, in which both sides on an issue might find a compromise.

Aside from tallying up liberalism's assets and liabilities, Deneen's appropriation of classical and Christian truths about human nature and the ends for which people exist may be the most questionable part of the book. On the one hand, the Greek ideal of the self-governing soul is at odds with the Hebrew and Christian accounts of the introduction of sin into the world through the fall. Even if someone takes the Roman Catholic as opposed to the Lutheran and Calvinist notion of humanity's inherent sinfulness by birth, a life of true virtue relies on the grace of baptism that washes away original sin. To be sure, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians have long distinguished between civic (external) and true virtue in order to argue that even non-Christians are capable of good deeds and the pursuit of a common good. Still, if Deneen is going to hang so much of his argument on the flaws in liberalism's anthropology, he should explain the tensions that exist in nonliberal (Greek and Christian) understandings of human nature.

A similar point applies to the ancient Greek idea of *telos*, which Deneen wants to appropriate to argue against the excess of liberalism's lack of restraint. The end of human existence for Christians is not the same as for the Greeks or Romans. Sin and grace, eternal punishment, and blessedness are notions foreign to Aristotle that are also relevant to ways in which contemporary believers might diagnose liberalism. If Christians know that life this side of the new heavens and new earth involves some form of suffering—owing to sin and a desire to be with Christ—then complaints that liberalism prevents human beings from flourishing look more pagan than Christian. That may sound overly otherworldly, but the history of Christian piety (Protestant and Roman Catholic) is littered with examples of believers who endured hardships (some martyrs even welcomed them) in hope for a life of eternal blessedness.

## Catastrophic Moment

Perhaps the best explanation for the mood with which Deneen's book connects comes from the head of the church to which the author belongs (though Deneen's references to Christianity are sparse). Pope Francis has also gained a reputation for offering a dire analysis of the world's affairs. His encyclical *Laudato Si'* was explicitly a call to be alert to the perils of climate change, but Ross Douthat saw rightly that the pope's environmentalism was so much more than a few green policies for the whole world. The *New York Times* columnist called Francis a "catastrophist" and explained the term as someone who sees "a global civilization



that for all its achievements is becoming more atomized and balkanized, more morally bankrupt, more environmentally despoiled.” Catastrophists, Douthat added, “believe that things cannot go on as they are: That the trajectory we’re on will end in crisis, disaster, *dégringolade*.” For that reason, *Laudato Si’* was about more than the natural world and human stewardship. It questioned “the whole ‘technological paradigm’ of our civilization, all the ways (economic and cultural) that we live now.”<sup>16</sup>

To miss this aspect of Deneen’s indictment of liberalism represents its own sort of failure. Indeed, well before Jorge Mario Bergoglio assumed the office of the papacy, Deneen was warning about the collapse of the West under the weight of “peak oil.” Almost a decade ago he was arguing that liberal society exploited the environment by cultivating dependence on fossil fuels:

Oil has been the silent but world-altering source of our collective delusion that we could live in this way and get away with it. It has allowed us to contrive a civilization based upon a theoretical fantasy, and to make it functional for about a century, during which time we took the exceptional for the ordinary, the unnatural for the given, the hubristic for the norm.... Books will be written about how this could have happened. But, perhaps we are not long from the day when conservatives will realize the fantasy they have themselves been purveying, and will demand that we prepare ourselves now for a post-petroleum reinstatement of human culture, cultivation, and tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Whether Deneen was right about short- and long-term prospects for fossil fuel in the run up to the collapse of the housing market, his outlook shows a strong affinity for the desperate diagnosis that Francis has made a hallmark of his tenure as pope. At the same time, if you can be wrong about oil, you may also mistake the health and prospects of liberalism. Deneen’s critique of liberalism’s flawed anthropology and its implications is worthwhile for anyone who has not read similar critiques by conservatives, from Edmund Burke to Roger Scruton. But to turn that line of criticism into an apocalyptic denunciation of the last four hundred years of history in the West is another matter. It is reminiscent of Patrick Allitt’s warnings about environmental catastrophism in *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism*. He observed that if scientists hear claims about global warming, they likely turn to the science of climate. But when historians hear those same claims, they look at the history of such statements. What historians generally find is that “claims of imminent disaster have been far more common throughout history than actual shattering transformations.” Indeed, warnings of impending doom are “an entirely familiar characteristic of the history of Western civilization.”<sup>18</sup> By analogy the same can be said about political systems. Political

theorists, when they hear about the imminent demise of liberal societies, look to political theory. Historians, in contrast, notice that such claims are frequent and that revolutions and systems collapsing are rare. Deneen clearly shows the former tendency. He may well turn out to be correct about the prospects for liberalism. But for now, Deneen's work looks more like a mirror of contemporary opinion than a sustained work of political philosophy.

## Notes

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