

## REVIEWS

### The Enduring Tension: Capitalism and the Moral Order

**Donald J. Devine**

New York: Encounter Books, 2021 (384 pages)

Donald J. Devine's *The Enduring Tension* offers an eclectic and sweeping defense of what Devine terms modern pluralist capitalism (or pluralist freedom) against criticisms from both radical and conservative thinkers. A prolific author and former federal administrator, professor, and longtime advisor to Ronald Reagan, Devine grounds his defense in a conservative fusionist political philosophy concerned to reconcile liberalism's dual commitments to capitalist markets and traditional morality. A society embracing private property rights and competitive striving, Devine cautions, must somehow tame the unruly energies it unleashes. There must exist some profound, even if undogmatic and informal, consensus that simultaneously legitimizes capitalism's creative destruction and nourishes citizens' cultural and moral values.

Devine begins the task of articulating this consensus by tracing modern capitalism's historical origins. Critics charge capitalism with the destruction of formerly integrated and morally wholesome societies, but Devine sees myriad capitalistic forces already at work in late medieval Europe. Differing from market defenders such as Jonah Goldberg who argue that there was a radical break in the development of capitalism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Devine locates in medieval society the moral and legal resources from which modern competitive markets and representative political institutions were forged. These include individual freedom, religious tolerance, social equality, and a private sphere resistant to comprehensive regulation— notions themselves implicit in the moral teachings of Jesus and Paul.

Thus, far from constituting a disastrous rupture from medieval beliefs and practices, pluralist capitalism shares with these things a common Christian origin. According to Devine, the Christian piety that “dealt the decisive blow to the ancient cosmological order” also nourishes the “individualism that characterized both the feudal nobility and Lockean capitalism.”

Devine joins to these historical investigations a spirited defense of pluralist capitalism against its philosophical and theological critics. Prominent among the latter is the current Roman pontiff whose encyclicals *Laudato Si'* (“Praise Be to You”) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (“Joy of the Gospel”), indict contemporary capitalism for its alleged social injustice, indifference to the poor, environmental degradation, and idolatrous faith in the “sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.” Devine counters that Francis mistakes for modern capitalism the authoritarian “crony capitalism” of his youth in Peronist Argentina. Just as unconvincing to Devine are the influential criticisms of John Locke, liberal capitalism’s preeminent theorist, made by philosophers such as Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss who fault Locke for subordinating morality to capitalist materialism and acquisitiveness. Rather than paving the way for pernicious secular creeds (as Voegelin charges), or concealing a hedonist philosophy under a biblical patina (as does Strauss), Locke mounts a sincere and persuasive defense of market capitalism, including its attendant virtues of fidelity, truthfulness, and promise keeping. Far from inaugurating, in other words, a radically secular and even immoral way of life, the capitalist society celebrated by Locke and his liberal heirs remains a genuinely religious and moral culture.

Not content merely to defend the “deeper beliefs and attitudes” needed to “sustain a capitalist system,” Devine complements these with vigorous rebuttals of the political alternatives critics offer. He quickly dispatches socialism in its twenty-first-century Marxist guises, noting sardonically that Marxist regimes instantiate the “equality” critics find lacking in capitalist societies only by universally terrorizing their inhabitants. Unsurprisingly, few citizens of liberal nations clamor to adopt Chinese, Cuban, or Venezuelan socialism. But the egalitarian promises of North American progressives and European social democrats offer more seductive lures. This is because the material comforts that “expert administration” promises are joined to the psychic gratifications this hazy socialism provides by flattering adherents’ moral and epistemological conceits. After all, it is an immensely gratifying undertaking heroically to cast off domination by alleged economic elites or impersonal market forces. Yet these ambitions inevitably disappoint, since experts vainly substitute their own allegedly superior knowledge and competence for the judgments of ordinary citizens aggregated in deliberative bodies and market exchanges. Offering a wealth of empirical case studies Devine illustrates how progressive governments not only fall short of their stated goals, but blindly generate unintended and unwelcome consequences. These include America’s interminable and increasingly expensive War on Poverty;

COVID public health measures that devastate livelihoods and exacerbate other health challenges; and green energy policies that depress employment and living standards but leave global temperatures unchanged.

Now, to be sure, champions of “expert administration” grudgingly acknowledge undeniable policy failures, but characteristically attribute them to insufficient resources or meddling by ignorant laypersons, a.k.a. citizens. Should voters simply cede more funding, staffing, and authority to government, they reason, surely success will crown future efforts. But Devine locates such failures not in experts’ wielding too little power, but rather in their proud obliviousness to the insuperable complexity, opacity, and unpredictability of the social world they presume to master. Indeed, he cautions, precisely to the extent that “scientific understanding increases, new questions are constantly being opened, so the magnitude of what needs explaining increases.” In this way, experts both misunderstand what they claim to know and exaggerate their competence. In truth, their pretensions notwithstanding, there is “no ultimate answer, no perfect constructivist theory, no settled science.”

But if neither socialism nor progressivism legitimately tames the unruly energies unleashed by capitalist markets, what, if anything, might? Devine looks to what he calls pluralist administration or balanced centralization. This is essentially the Founders’ vision of a constitutional and federalist nation in which the central government is denied authority to substitute its directives for citizens’ own. Instead, public business is generally discharged by free citizens cooperating within Smith’s self-regulating markets, Burke’s little platoons, and Tocqueville’s voluntary associations. Only tasks whose accomplishment exceeds their ordinary competence—Devine includes national defense, police, the administration of justice, and narrowly tailored public works—do citizens entrust to government. And even here, delegation proceeds according to the principle of subsidiarity in which powers flow to the closest and most accountable political authorities.

Likewise, moderating and unifying all these actors, governmental and private, must be a national civil religion or comprehensive *mythos* grounded ultimately in “Judeo-Christian beliefs, beginning with the doctrine of a caring Creator” who grants a “moral worth that inheres in every person.” This informal creed is “indispensable to legitimizing a pluralist, federalist, traditionalist, capitalist society with free markets and localized powers under a limited central state.” The alternative to this *mythos* is not the triumph of rational liberty, as progressives and socialists imagine, but instead a retreat to precapitalist and authoritarian forms of consciousness and social life. Like Hayek, whose words he quotes, Devine warns that the imposition “of a planned economy with a just distribution . . . and the replacement of the market by a rational arrangement of a body with coercive powers” inaugurates not a regime of rational liberty, but an impoverished and tyrannical society in thrall to illiberal “superstitions.”

Finally, one must ask: How successful is this ambitious defense of pluralist capitalism? Substantively, I think, quite successful, since *The Enduring Tension* assembles a wealth of evidence and argument, brought vigorously to bear upon an impressively wide range of controversies, both philosophic and empirical. Anchored in a respectful reading of authors ancient and modern, Devine investigates topics as heterogeneous as *Homo sapiens*' social organization, ancient Stoicism, post-war American trends, and twentieth-century-atonal music. Organizationally, however, I wonder if these same ambitions do not too often compel readers to navigate a welter of thematic deviations, topic shifts, and even argumentative cul-de-sacs. In a single paragraph concerned to defend Locke against charges of irreligion, for instance, Devine references, among other writers, the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, Thomas Aquinas, Hayek, Descartes, Voltaire, Adam Smith, Tocqueville, Locke, and Burke!

In sum, this is an apt book for assiduous readers who seek an erudite defense of modern capitalism. It can be profitably read alongside other notable recent efforts such as Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West* (2018), Yoram Hazony's *Conservatism* (2022), F. H. Buckley's *Progressive Conservatism* (2022), George Will's *The Conservative Sensibility* (2019), and Matthew Continetti's *The Right* (2022).

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## The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking

**Roman Krznaric**  
New York: The Experiment, 2020 (336 pages)

In *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking*, philosopher Roman Krznaric argues that we should focus on the long-term and reorient ourselves towards future living. Krznaric's argument is motivated by the ideals of Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine. Salk coined the phrase "good ancestor" and exemplified this concept for future generations through his vaccine research and development. Krznaric seeks to build upon this legacy of being a "good ancestor," by arguing that humanity urgently needs to give far greater consideration to future generations and give greater weight to the long-term over the short-term in nearly every sphere of life.

Krznaric, much in the same vein as Salk before him, contends that it is not only the responsibility but also the duty of the present generation to look after those who will come after them. Future generations cannot vote in current elections, nor can they set present policy, but that does not mean they cannot or should not be considered when we elect leaders or set policy. Krznaric makes the convincing case that