

Why Liberalism Failed

Patrick Deneen. 2018. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. ISBN 978-0-30022-3446. \$30.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Steven McMullen, Hope College

Few academic books about political theory have as immediate an impact on the political and academic world as did Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*. Published in 2018 (Paperback in 2019), the book was picked up by some key figures, including President Barak Obama, which gave it immediate visibility. Added to this was the sense among the intelligentsia after the 2016 election that American democracy was facing a crisis. The setting was ripe for a short, provocative book to skyrocket to fame. Given the thesis and title, however, one might not have expected this book to be a bestseller. The "liberalism" that is the focus of the book refers to liberalism in the old sense – the political and economic philosophy that puts individuals and rights at the center of political theory. Loosely, the author's topic is democratic capitalism. It may be that the author picked the perfect historical moment to tell Americans why it seemed like everything was falling apart around them.

Deneen's thesis is that our political and economic system, which he calls a grand and materially successful 250-year experiment, is facing a crisis of its own making. It cannot hold together. The series of failings at the heart of the liberal ideology, he argues, have resulted in a slow-moving disintegration of the political, economic, and especially cultural foundation of society. His argument is that liberalism depends on a kind of deep hubris. We believe that we can abstract and aggregate our society beyond the natural constraints of nature, community, and virtue. Our politics and economics increasingly depend on people behaving as individualistic agents without character. Communities are swamped by the titanic battle between government and the market. Education is increasingly geared toward individualistic producers and away from the pursuit of truth and virtue. Technology and industry trample on ecological, psychological, and biological limits. Our institutions lose broad support as they lose sight of the common good.

The sweeping argument leaves little room for deep nuanced justification, and so will be frustrating for those who find they disagree. Indeed, most will find something to disagree with here. His book seems to be designed to provoke readers to critically examine assumptions that

we too often take for granted, and to push people to think outside the narrow range of normal ideological disagreements. It is fair to say that we are all liberals now, and so, by Deneen's reckoning, we are all part of the problem.

How Liberalism Failed

In the first chapter Deneen works to identify the broad outlines of liberal ideology as well as the system of thought it replaced. Liberal ideology is premised on a change in the way we think about liberty. Deneen describes a classical and Christian view of liberty that required self-discipline and the cultivation of virtue. This in turn facilitates self-rule and resists tyranny. The whole social system was thought to depend upon, and built to cultivate, a kind of self-mastery. The early liberal thinkers viewed this religious and traditional thinking as oppressive, however, and replaced it with "an anthropological individualism and a voluntarist conception of choice" (p. 31). Liberty came to mean, primarily, a lack of external constraint. The system designed around this new vision of liberty was built on the reliability of humanities basest inclinations, rather than aspiring to our better nature (p. 24). Finally, this new political philosophy was undergirded by an enlightenment sense that nature, and natural limits, were barriers to conquer via the natural and social sciences (p. 26).

Over time, a core set of liberal assumptions: (i) stability through conflict and balance, (ii) welfare as lack of constraint, and (iii) progress through technological mastery, became so common that the ideology became immune to critique. Deneen argues that the total success of this ideological project is part of what makes it unsustainable. Even when this ideological movement resulted in crumbling communities, a decline of social norms, and failing ecosystems, the obvious menu of solutions is always more liberalism: an expansion of individual autonomy and technological mastery.

Deneen sidesteps the biggest divide in modern political/economic thought, by arguing that both left-leaning pro-government liberalism and right-leaning pro-market liberalism are two sides of the same ideology. While there are big important differences between the luminaries of the right and left, such as Hayek and Rawls, most also share substantial agreement. Liberals on both sides see politics as a project of

coordinating autonomous individuals and both see a kind of rationality at the heart of interactions that make up our social order.

The argument at the heart of his second chapter is that the conflict between the market and the state reinforces the totality of the liberal order. Deneen observes that the market and the state are deeply complementary. The state creates the rules and framework for market exchange. The creative destruction and volatility of the market creates a need for safety net programs. Moreover both the market and the state relate to people as individuals, and thus crowd out community production and institutions. The end result is a centuries-long cultural shift toward an individual-market-state society without any intermediary stable institutions. Liberal ideology gives us a way to understand the state and the market, and in the end the state and the market create a society that looks like the one theorized by liberal thinkers.

In the third chapter Deneen argues that the rise of liberalism has undermined culture. The institutions and customs that make up the culture of a locality get lost in the globalized commercialization of all times and places at once. The liberal pursuit of liberty and autonomy creates new conflicts where cultural conventions once placed constraints. The result is a growth in the regulatory state, now needed to adjudicate the conflicts. In the end individual and communal responsibility are replaced by a cosmopolitan anonymity. Where banks once had relationships with customers and obligations to communities, there are now massive banks with local branches governed by increased regulation. Colleges that once committed to instilling virtues providing boundaries have become bureaucracies limiting only the extremes of student hedonism outside of the classroom.

The fourth chapter focuses on the entanglement of liberal conceptions of progress with technological development. Deneen notes that we place faith in technology even while we fear its inevitability and the dangerous effects it can have on culture. He examines the now common concerns about social media on mental health and attention, as well as Jacques Ellul's critique of technology as an independent cultural force. His argument turns, however, as he examines liberal institutions as a kind of cultural technology, and a determinant of the direction of technological innovation. The technologies that shape our world are often those that reinforce the liberal project: insurance, suburbs, and social media all exemplify and support the individualism at the heart of liberal culture.

As an academic, Deneen has a particular interest in higher education, and he turns to the impact of liberalism on the university in the fifth chapter. He notes that the traditional liberal arts make the most sense in a culture where freedom is something you cultivate through self-mastery. If we are born free and need liberation from the constraints of arbitrary tradition, however, then the study of classic texts is not valuable. Deneen notes that both the right and the left have rejected the liberal arts. The left favors critical theory and radical autonomy; the right favors professional and technical training. Ironically, Deneen notes that the ideas of the classical liberals lead naturally to both of these rejections of the study of the same. The end result is a university that lacks unity, but pursues both political projects at once: investing heavily in scientific research and egalitarian politics under the banner of a liberal arts program that few embrace.

Chapter six follows the critique of higher education with a close look at the kind of meritocratic culture that we have created. Deneen observes that liberal ideology has replaced traditional aristocracy with a new meritocratic aristocracy. In both the old world and the new, economic, political, and cultural power are highly unequal. Where the old aristocracy justified their position through tradition and virtue, the new aristocracy justifies their position through productivity. The right and the left, both in the liberal tradition, respond differently to the new distribution of wealth and power, and propose different balances of government intervention. Both share a rejection of the hereditary aristocracy, however, in favor of the new meritocracy. In doing so, both ideologies reject the cultural norms and obligations that would hold society together.

In chapter seven, Deneen returns to the study of democratic government. Having toured the cultural effects of liberalism, he notes that liberal thinkers, particularly the elites, are often surprisingly anti-democratic. In particular, democratic decision-making is embraced only as long as the result favors the larger liberal trajectory. The original framing of the constitution assumed that liberalism needed to be protected from democracy, and thus crafted a system that made dramatic changes, or anti-liberal changes in particular, very difficult. Deneen notes that the whole system assumes, and encourages, individualist thinking, the pursuit of private ends, and enough creation of wealth to warrant broad public support. By building a system that assumes the worst of people, Deneen concludes, we have created a system in which people are never asked to exhibit the self-mastery that democratic rule requires.

At end of Deneen's wide-ranging critique on the modern world, he offers very little hope for a way forward. He proposes a return to local practices, and a rejection of broad ideologies. After so thorough a critique, however, this suggestion at the end feels too weak. The theme he keeps returning to throughout the book, echoing MacIntyre, is that we have a social order that no longer supports the cultivation of virtue in community. From this, one could easily draw the rough form of a new direction. It would have to involve a larger emphasis on local governing and trade, as he suggests, and a revival of traditional sources of cultural authority (the church, community organizations, extended family, etc). This is not detailed well in his book, though, so readers will have to seek out Deneen's other work for substantive proposals.

How Liberalism Succeeded?

In his conclusion, Deneen notes that any path forward must build on liberalism's successes. It is odd then, that acknowledgment of these successes are so notably absent in his argument. The reader has to search hard for any long treatment of the way liberalism has (too slowly) been the basis for recognition of the rights of women and minorities. When Deneen does talk about women's liberation, it is to disparage the new opportunities that women have in the economy and politics as a "far more encompassing bondage" in wage labor and the workplace (p. 187). Similarly, while his examination of the virtues of local communities is excellent, it seems like there ought to be some acknowledgment that localities resisted the civil rights movement for decades. The freedom to move out of oppressive families, cities, and vocations has been a blessing for many. The acknowledgment of individual rights has been a foundation for civilization-wide moral progress.

Economists will also note that the book gives too little attention to the material gains that have accompanied the liberal order. Deneen often acknowledges that the market economy has produced great wealth, but never notes the degree to which this is an extraordinary accomplishment. At minimum, the billions of people who are not in poverty today, largely as a result of the liberal institutions and culture that are critiqued here, ought to be represented in the narrative. This expansion in wealth is not just consumerist trinkets. We see the material gains in access to

education, longer lifespans, investment in the arts, and freedom from back-breaking toil.

It may well be that Deneen would acknowledge all of these omissions, and that his focus on the failures of liberalism was a rhetorical strategy intended to help the reader understand a difficult truth: that the liberalism we take for granted is not natural, not inevitable, far from perfect, and could collapse as a result of its own success. Even the most sympathetic reader, however, may come to the end of this book, and still reasonably decide that the grand experiment was and is worth the risk.

Liberalism and Economics

In the small group of faculty that I was able to read this book with, very few found themselves in broad agreement with Deneen. Nevertheless, I find myself wanting to recommend this book. For economists in particular, there are too few scholars that are willing to paint a narrative as broad and all-encompassing as this book does. Those that do tend to attack these big questions rarely do so from his ideological position, and almost none of them are as approachable as this book is. Particularly for economists who are uncomfortable with the hegemony that the liberal ideology has in our profession, this book is a great introduction to a very broad historical and political critique. His prose is clean and vivid, and there are few equivocations.

Moreover, the economics profession would do well to address the concerns that Deneen raises. There are too few scholars in our discipline thinking carefully about the limits of the modern conception of liberty. Our frameworks tend to push us toward a libertarian conception: freedom from external constraint. The classical ideals that praised self-mastery and virtue are difficult to integrate. Similarly, the default position of economists is usually to assume that individual welfare and individual freedom are well-aligned. Deneen's concerns about community, technology, and nature raise hard questions for liberals of all stripes.

At the same time, if an economist were interested in the related literature in political theory, this book will not serve as a great introduction to the best liberal thinkers. Deneen does not even try to give a general introduction to Locke or Hobbes, and his treatment of modern liberals

like Rawls and Hayek is cursory. For each of these figures, experts will be disappointed at the lack of nuance, and there are far better texts that give these figures their due. For devoted classical liberals, accustomed to thinking in terms of right vs. left, this book may be quite frustrating. The normal points of contention are often side-stepped in favor of making a broader argument. All those concerns aside, though, the point of this book was to provoke consideration of a wider set of ideas, and it does this admirably. ■