

WHY LIBERALISM FAILED

(PATRICK J. DENEEN)

December 19, 2017

Poor Francis Fukuyama. He has been a punching bag ever since he unwisely declared the end of history, more than twenty-five years ago. Fukuyama, of course, meant that the globe had, at the end of ideologies, reached an equilibrium, an even, calm sea of liberal democracy, and all that was left was cleanup. Patrick Deneen is here to kick Fukuyama some more, and to announce that not only is liberalism a defective ideology, it is doomed just as were the other, more flash-in-the-pan ideologies. The systemic failure of liberalism is on the horizon, or underway, and Deneen's project is to offer thoughts on how we got here, and what is next. Thus, *Why Liberalism Failed* fits squarely into my current interest, Reaction—the call for the creation of a new political order built on the ashes of the old.

By “liberalism,” Deneen means the philosophy of the Enlightenment, built on the core idea of maximizing human liberty, with its ultimate philosophical roots in Francis Bacon, adapted by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and mediated through John Stuart Mill. Deneen begins with his central claim—that liberalism is reaching its end, because it was a beautiful-seeming thing, built on lies. Liberalism is like the Queen in Snow White, a mortal who over time has become ugly, but who retains the outward form of beauty through a blend of careful management and acts of evil. But as with other ideologies, such as communism, it must fail, because it denies human nature, and it loses legitimacy as the resulting gaps between its claims and the reality of lived human experience become ever more visible. In the end, the Queen, and all ideologies, are exposed for what they are, and die.

The failure of this liberalism is not the failure of today's *political* liberals, or what might generally be called progressives. Deneen ascribes blame for the rise and fall of liberalism equally to both progressives and to most American conservatives, what are sometimes called classical liberals. Both liberals and such conservatives pursue autonomic individualism while ignoring the deeper reality that such overemphasis on individualism is anti-human and doomed to failure. The failures of liberalism are failures of the state and the market, which are intertwined,

not opposed, and the resulting plant is watered equally by conservatives and liberals. There is no Jack cutting at the base of this beanstalk; when it falls, it will be because it has rotted from within.

Deneen, therefore, calls it “Unsustainable Liberalism.” He begins with a history lesson, pointing out that the human desire for liberty far pre-dates liberalism, but that liberty from the ancient Greeks onward, up until the Enlightenment, meant ordered liberty. That is, it was the opposite of wholesale autonomy. Instead, it was the tutored choice of each person to choose virtue and self-rule, creating freedom from the tyranny of appetites in the individual and from tyranny of individuals in the *polis*. (This history is covered at more length, and better, in *Conserving America?*, a book of essays that Deneen published in 2016.) But liberalism, heralded by Machiavelli, rejected the cultivation of virtue as the basis of good government and a good society, in favor of a “realist” understanding of people as unalterably bad, and required to be managed as such by the creation of institutions that constrained them. This was followed by Hobbes’s and Locke’s removal of “the essential supports for a training in virtue,” which “came to be viewed as sources of oppression, arbitrariness, and limitation.” And, finally, to permit maximum human flourishing, liberalism, following Francis Bacon, demanded that nature itself must be overcome, first to reliably maximize her material bounty, and later to deny even her existence so as not to limit individual choice, in both cases to maximize human power and autonomy. All this, of course, was in opposition to “the classical and Christian understanding of liberty.”

Liberalism itself tells us constantly it is a success. And it certainly is “an encompassing political ecosystem in which we have swum, unaware of its existence.” Questioning liberalism seems like questioning air. Any problems with our society, and any rejection of the premises or conclusions of liberalism, are seen as merely resulting from not enough liberalism. The response is to call for liberalism to better enforce its dictates everywhere, using a more forceful application of liberalism—Ryszard Legutko’s “coercion to freedom.”

But Deneen says liberalism’s putative success at making us happier and freer is an illusion. Rather, liberalism is caught in a downward spiral, in which the ill societal effects of unbridled autonomy require more government force, proscriptions, and surveillance, while simultaneously the same is required to achieve ever more emancipation

and individual liberty. The state becomes the object of love, or at least the binding force, for an atomized and isolated population. The economics of liberal democracy create a new aristocracy of winners and an underclass of losers, with the latter only pacified by the promise of increased future consumption due to promised overall economic growth. Education that forms the human being to be a full member of society has disappeared in favor of servile education in money-making, with more money always seen as better. And that same education has indoctrinated society in a key requirement of liberalism's perceived success—the unsustainable extraction from nature of goods intended to maximize the utility of today's generation (and maintain the quietude of economic losers), with no thought for moderation or for future generations. Worse, nature is conquered with technology that, put in the hands of individuals rather than resource extractors, promises yet more liberation but only delivers a combination of jitters and loneliness. "Liberalism's end game is unsustainable in every respect: it cannot perpetually enforce order upon a collection of autonomous individuals increasingly shorn of constitutive social norms, nor can it provide endless material growth in a world of limits. We can either elect a future of self-limitation born of the practice and experience of self-governance in local communities, or we can back inexorably into a future in which extreme license coexists with extreme oppression."

Deneen next turns to aspects of liberalism other than its unsustainability. First is culture, or, more precisely, "Liberalism as Anticulture." Not all things called culture are in fact culture, which is properly viewed as "a set of generational customs, practices, and rituals that are grounded in local and particular settings." "Pop culture" is not culture at all. Similarly, what liberalism offers as culture is instead something not grounded in nature; not grounded in time; and not grounded in place. "Whereas culture is an accumulation of local and historical experience and memory, liberal 'culture' is the vacuum that remains when local experience has been eviscerated, memory is lost, and every place becomes every other place."

This anticulture is the result of two trends in liberalism—the homogenization created by market liberalism, and the destruction of local customs and practices by the overweening liberal state in the service and pursuit of emancipation, which holds that "legitimate limits upon

liberty can arise only from the authority of the consent-based state.” “Liberalism makes humanity into mayflies,” rejecting the bonds of time connecting us to the past, in the form of the arts and history, and to the future, in the form of mortgaging our descendants’ patrimony by stripping the Earth. Deneen relies heavily on Alexis deTocqueville in this analysis, as do many civil institutionalist conservatives (that is, those who focus on cultural renewal through a revival of civil society outside the state), since he predicted much of the outline of modern American society. Deneen also cites Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose famous 1978 commencement address at Harvard University (for which he was excoriated at the time) noted this hollowing out of “every social norm and custom” as being at the heart of liberalism.

As far as emancipation, I think (though Deneen does not address this) the only emancipation worth having in America is that of African Americans, whether in the nineteenth, twentieth, or, indeed, the twenty-first centuries. The experience of black people in America is unique, and uniquely bad, and it is an actual, lived, historical experience, not some Gramscian fantasy of hegemony funneled through Foucault. All other so-called emancipations are the tools of those who would destroy us; they are grants to act in certain ways or to receive unearned benefits, given by the Cthulhu state to those who either do not require or should not have such grants or benefits, at the expense of the rest of the community. Emancipation should be a dirty word and its users should be punished with a day in the stocks in the town square.

Anyway, the next two chapters attack modern technology for enabling the destructive behavior of liberalism; and for destroying the classical liberal arts, both by exalting studies that lead to success in the market over the classical “liberal arts,” the humanities, and by the destruction of what remains of the classical liberal arts by liberalism’s refashioning of them into vehicles for deconstruction and emancipation. It is this latter point, I think, that is most critical (the atomizing tendencies of technology are widely known and acknowledged, after all, even by liberals). Howsoever we got here, and whatever value they used to offer, there is no restoration of the classical liberal arts in the universities of today. We should nuke them all from orbit, refusing any taxpayer dollars to the support of anything but the servile arts. We should leave the universities to educate only in technical matters,

and throw all teachers of humanities out on the street, where they can peddle their Gender Studies and Latino Studies potions to the (unemployed) gullible in dark alleys. The few professors who do offer real learning will find new employment in colleges that offer real value (of which there are still a few, like Hillsdale College). Or we can rely on our own resources to hire them directly to educate our own young. In both cases we will deny the use of common resources to poison the minds of the young. Better no humanities than what is taught today. I don't like this conclusion (and it's mine, not Deneen's), since I am the child and grandchild of humanities professors, and have friends who are thus employed, but that's the way it has to be. Dying things should be killed quickly, in this case, that they may have the chance to be reborn.

Deneen then turns to "The New Aristocracy," in which he reinforces the point that liberalism (as shown by, among other things, the Enlightenment focus on unleashing the abilities of those most favored by talents at birth) necessarily creates a divide between the successful and the rest. This divide expands over time, as we can see in contemporary America, and is pernicious. Liberalism's response is, as Ronald Reagan used to say, "a rising tide lifts all boats." But not all boats are lifted any more, and even if they were, the fracture of society into a class of the powerful who get more powerful and more wealthy, and a class of Morlocks who, over time, are somewhat more able to consume trinkets is not a winning strategy. We need more Burke, and less Mill.

Penultimately, Deneen turns to "The Degradation of Citizenship." Here he specifically attacks "liberal democracy," although Ryszard Legutko does it better. Deneen notes that those who push liberal democracy mean that democracy is good only so long as voters choose what is approved by liberalism; otherwise, it is "illiberal democracy" (a term gaining more and more currency, I have noticed). Deneen cites Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy*, which attacks democracy on this basis, demanding that more people just like Jason Brennan be given power to dictate the direction of society (thus making, oddly, Jason Brennan my ally in pursuing Reaction). Liberalism wants democracy to be limited to expressing preferences of the masses, which, if approved by their betters, can then be implemented by the mandarin administrative state. All this means that the individual human is not expected to be a citizen in any meaningful sense, so he is not—Deneen, unlike Brennan, thinks

that liberalism caused this problem, and that in Tocqueville's time the average person had more of the indicia of classical citizenship. I am not so sure this is the case, but it is Deneen's claim.

Finally, Deneen offers, if not solutions, at least a way forward. First, though, he sees two main problems with the end of liberalism (assuming it collapses, rather than metastasizes into totalitarianism). One is that in the mind of most people, propagandized by liberalism itself, liberalism is responsible for the success of the "deepest longings of the West, political liberty and human dignity." The rejoinder to those who reject liberalism is that anyone who rejects liberalism embraces slavery and the divine right of kings. This is of course not true, among other reasons because all the core "good things" of liberalism were not originated by liberalism, but by earlier Western Christian thought (though the pre-liberal West often failed to meet its own aspirations), and because liberalism itself increasingly replaces chattel slavery with ideological slavery and the divine right of kings with the equally, or more, tyrannical rule of the administrative state. Nonetheless, Deneen hedges here, intimating that he believes that liberalism has "achievements" and it also has "rightful demands—particularly for justice and dignity." But he does not admit of any real achievements of liberalism, and by his own analysis, demands for *real* justice and dignity (as opposed to bogus, never-ending "emancipation") are universal and far antedate liberalism, so if liberalism demands them, it is merely mimesis, not some fresh or independent way in which liberalism benefits humanity.

The other problem is more distant but more difficult (especially if Deneen is right that liberalism is doomed, whatever rejoinders it may have to criticisms of it). It is that to break the world is necessarily to create chaos, "disorder and misery," and would probably result in liberalism's "replacement with a new and doubtless not very different ideology. . . . A better course will consist in smaller, local forms of resistance: practices more than theories, the building of resilient new cultures against the anticulture of liberalism." Citing (unsurprisingly) Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option*, Deneen says "we should focus on developing practices that foster new forms of culture, household economics, and polis life." As I have said elsewhere, to the extent such an option takes hold, it will have to fight for its life, and not with words only. Deneen nods toward this, suggesting that such "options" will be "permitted to exist so long

as they are nonthreatening to the liberal order's main business." But he does not follow this line of thought, perhaps figuring the problem will solve itself if, indeed, liberalism is inherently unsustainable, and ultimately will lack the power to suppress new movements. I am less sanguine, but he could be right.

Overall, this book is not as good as the author's earlier *Conserving America?* I think that Deneen is at his best writing essays, and *Why Liberalism Failed* is too much a set of essays masquerading as a book, without an adequate linkage that gives overall force. Moreover, within the essays, too many ideas are repeated with slight variation of thought and phrasing from chapter to chapter, making the chapters not adequately distinct from each other. Thus, the first chapter, "Unsustainable Liberalism" (published as a standalone essay in 2012 in the magazine *First Things*), is followed by a chapter on "Uniting Individualism and Statism," repeating and expanding points made in the first chapter about the unity of purpose among progressives and classical liberals. Similarly, later chapters on technology and the humanities contain a much more expansive treatment of classical views of liberty than that found earlier in the book, where it would have made more sense. And variations on the point that Hobbes and Locke were wrong to think that the state of nature was one of autonomy are made too many times in too many places. Thus, I found some of the book rambling—the writing itself is clear, but there is a feeling of lack of coalescence about much of the book, perhaps because of the repetition and failure to have a clear progression.

This book does add a theme Deneen has not addressed before, and that is liberalism as exhaustive of nature, and therefore unsustainable. But that is the weakest thread of the book, for predictions of material exhaustion of nature have always been falsified, from Malthus onward, as in the famous 1980 bet between Julian Simon and Paul Ehrlich. In fact, the side effects of resource extraction (other than, perhaps, global warming) are far less than they were in past decades (in part due to the heavy hand of government), and in a possible future world of such magical-yet-feasible technology as practical fusion, asteroid mining, or molecular-scale replicators, the exhaustion of nature would disappear as a problem. Moreover, there is a key question Deneen ignores, which is whether the fantastic economic, and therefore scientific, progress of

the past 200 years is the fruit of liberalism, whatever its costs may be. Certainly, gluttony in the form of resource consumption is a moral bad that causes corruption of virtue, but the reader gets the impression that Deneen emphasizes the exhaustion of nature in part to be able to bind classical liberals to progressive liberals in the downward spiral of liberalism, and thus clearly distinguish himself from classical liberals, so the topic feels a bit shoehorned in.

As to Reaction in theory and practice, I am framing my own analysis of that tendency, to which I increasingly adhere myself. As I noted in my review of Mark Lilla's *The Shipwrecked Mind*, it is possible to divide modern Reaction into a variety of incompatible categories, bound not by the desire to return to some mythical Golden Age, which could be dismissed as mindless nostalgia, but bound by the desire to inform a new age with the lost or ignored wisdom of the past. Most American devotees of reaction, of the intellectual bent, tend toward the reactionary thought of Leo Strauss, in essence holding that the Enlightenment project is the fount of wisdom, but it all went wrong since the Constitution was written. Deneen is one of the major exponents of the opposite tack—that the Enlightenment, i.e., liberalism, is itself the problem. It may have good propagandists (it must, having been given such a propagandistic name, more successful than the failed attempt by the New Atheists to rename anti-theists “brights”), but the Enlightenment is the original sin, and Francis Bacon is the Eve of the modern age.

In political theory, therefore, Deneen is anti-Straussian; he sees the Founders, and the Constitution itself, as exemplars of liberalism, and therefore poisoned. That the Constitution (in its structure and as shown by the *Federalist Papers*) is designed to pit people against each other, rather than seeking virtue, and to enable the exaltation of the competent over the mass of mankind, shows it to be defective. Along the same lines, conservative efforts to promote the Great Books in university education were self-destructive, since most of those Great Books are the problem, not the solution. The Golden Age that informs Deneen is that of Athens as mediated by Aquinas, not Athens as mediated by Machiavelli and Alexander Hamilton. Thus, Deneen's civil institutionalism, based on pre-Enlightenment thought, is the fourth thread of modern Reaction, along with Straussianism, the Augustan approach of those such as Michael Anton, and the warped vision of Curtis Yarvin and the so-called Dark

Enlightenment. Of these threads, civil institutionalists are no doubt the weakest in numbers, but my first cut, or my last cut of 2017, is that a melding of this approach and the Augustan approach may provide the sinews and motor of a new thing, a golem that can destroy and replace liberalism, without, if we are lucky, also turning on its creators.