

REGIME CHANGE: TOWARD A POSTLIBERAL FUTURE

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Vladimir Lenin taught that “he who says A must say B.” He was correct, but Patrick Deneen has not listened. Deneen says A, that our Regime, our ruling class, is destructive and evil. But he then refuses to say B, that the Regime is therefore wholly odious and illegitimate, and before any new system is possible, it must be destroyed. Instead, Deneen’s response to A is magical thinking. When the people peacefully complain enough, you see, the Regime will dismantle itself voluntarily and hand over power to a new ruling class, which will hold and implement opposite views on every matter under the sun. This absurd fantasy, even when cushioned within much fancy philosophy, harms rather than advances the postliberal project.

I looked forward to this book, which should have been the culmination of Deneen’s bold decade-long project to discredit and replace the so-called Enlightenment, and should have cemented his position as one of the most important leaders of the postliberal American Right. Beginning in 2016’s *Conserving America?*, and continuing with the outstanding *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen ably described the origin of our present discontents, namely the inherent defects of Enlightenment ideology, that is, Left ideology. I will not repeat his analyses and arguments from those earlier works here, although you should read my summaries of them, and my thoughts on them. But here Deneen’s project dies with a whimper, either because he actually believes, contrary to all history and common sense, that in politics one can get a free lunch, or because he is afraid to identify himself as a genuine enemy of the Regime, thus associating himself with the wrong sort of people, and thereby risk being expelled from polite society, membership in which is wholly controlled by the Regime.

Still, Deneen’s analysis in *Regime Change* is of some value, so let’s examine it. In his earlier works, Deneen’s main focus was liberty and its limitations. The prime aims of Left ideology (what Deneen prefers to call liberalism), as I often say, are a never-ending and always-increasing demand for emancipation from unchosen bonds (that is to say, unlimited liberty), combined with forced egalitarianism, all in service of creating a

utopia. While in an inchoate sense the Left has existed since the Serpent in the Garden, as a political philosophy this dogma only arose with the Enlightenment, which was nothing more than the reification of the most destructive desires of mankind. Here Deneen expands his earlier frame, mapping Left ideology onto a much older political divide, the eternal split between the many and the few.

As Deneen outlines, what exactly constitutes the few and the many differs across societies, but every society has this division, of elite and non-elite, in which a small group has disproportionate control of both wealth and power, leading inevitably to conflict. Before the rise of Left ideology, proposed solutions to this problem revolved around creation of balance between these two broad classes, in order to secure the common good. Given the nature of mankind, results were variable. The Left, since 1789, has upended this search for balance in favor of the search for progress, for the removal of limitations, for supposed emancipation, held to obviate the need for balance. The cretinous John Stuart Mill offers the clearest exposition of this philosophy, which in practice has simply resulted in a new few and a new many, along with the destruction of all Western societies. Deneen's project is to restore the older search for balance.

That's not to say, although Deneen only touches on it and it is a topic for another day, that America's many are a reservoir of virtue; they are in very bad shape indeed, a direct result of emancipation and forced egalitarianism. But the few are worthless and irredeemable, and Deneen counts the ways, in the competent first section of his book. We discuss the managerial elite, identity politics as a political tool, the inevitable creation of new hierarchies, and so on. The result, Deneen tells us repeatedly, is that we live in a tyranny. He is certainly correct there.

The tyranny Deneen identifies is not only the most obvious tyranny, of what is sometimes called the progressive Left, because that is merely one head of the Left hydra. The Left also includes so-called classical liberalism, which is roughly coterminous with what has, since the 1950s, been called "conservatism," a false label, as well as Marxism and its variants. All strands within liberalism posit the need for an elite to lead the way to an emancipated, egalitarian future, differing only in who should compose that elite and how the people participate, especially in their economic life. (Deneen fails to understand how a Left elite can coexist

with simultaneous Left demands for egalitarianism, because he does not understand that call for egalitarianism is simply a call to steal from, then kill, whoever the kulaks of the age are, not a call for real leveling, except in the utopia that is always just over the horizon.) But the progressive Left, classical liberals, and Marxists all reject the idea of the many and the few together cooperating to advance the common good. Instead, the elite is to deliver progress, supposedly good things, to the masses, regardless of whether the masses think they are receiving good things.

So far, so good. Then, in rambling fashion, Deneen tells us how we should instead be governed—by a mixed constitution, by which he means a governing form designed to alleviate the conflict between the elites and the masses, which at the same time rejects liberalism. We get Aristotle and Plato, we get Edmund Burke, we get Thomas Aquinas, Benjamin Disraeli, and Alexis de Tocqueville. We get discussion of whether a mixed constitution should seek blending of high and low, to create something new, or instead counterpoise a separate high and low. It's somewhat interesting, though not really new, and often the reader wonders where we are going, or whether we've stumbled onto an undergraduate seminar led by a slightly inebriated professor. Thus, Deneen cites Polybius for his famous analysis of the Roman mixed constitution, and claims that Polybius said that the "benefits of kingship were manifested in the unitary rule of the emperor," while being restrained by the political power of the common citizens. But Polybius died in the second century B.C.; he never saw a Roman emperor. He was talking about the Republic, where the monarchical element was the consuls; the Empire was not a mixed government. Moreover, the common citizens had very little direct political power in the Roman system; their interests were instead represented by the tribunes of the plebs, whose primary power was veto. The reader wonders if the professor should have passed on hitting the bar before class, and what else is a little off in this analysis.

Despite the reader's uneasy feeling, however, we are, indeed, going somewhere. The point is to offer an alternative, which we reach after 150 pages—in the last third of the book, headed "What Is To Be Done?," with credit for the phrase given neither to Lenin nor to Nikolay Chernyshevsky. What is to be done is to call for "aristopopulism," which Deneen not-very-crisply defines essentially as a system in which the elite

and the many each improve the other while both seeking to advance the common good. Neither the elite nor the masses have all the answers; the former, ideally, have a higher level of competency and focus, while the latter are often a repository of common sense. Together, it is feasible to reach a political balance between high and low that will create a good society.

I suppose that's a possible future, even if one without historical precedents (Deneen offers none, nor could he, though probably the American Founding comes closest), but what we don't get is any insight into how this new thing is going to be created. We instead get eighty pages of aspirational bromides. "The creation of a new elite is essential," and its first act must be to replace the existing elite. No doubt it is, and it must be, but no mechanism is offered to make either happen. Over and over we hear this or that "should" happen, "must" happen, "needs to" happen, but not any way for it to manifest. I will spare the reader a detailing of the obvious—that the Regime will never permit any erosion of its power, and will terrorize or kill anyone who rises up to actually threaten its power. The rule of law is long gone, the rule of iron is here, and it seems likely to me that whatever is next, after a crisis that destroys our fragile Regime, will involve the rule of lead, with perhaps after that a new society. Deneen, either afraid or obtuse, adverts to none of this.

This is bad enough, mostly because the reader has the sneaking suspicion that Deneen's real, but unstated, prescription is "vote harder," but worse is his repeated insistence on weakening what he says by constantly complying with the demands of his, and our, enemies about how we are allowed to think and talk. He calls for an aristocracy but adopts a defensive crouch about aristocracy, because that's what the Left demands. Similarly, it means much more than one might think that Deneen meekly uses "she" and "her" as generic pronouns. It betrays either cowardice or internalization of Left semiotics. He even translates the medieval maxim *Cuius regio, eius religio* as "Whose realm, their religion."

But these reflexive obeisances to the Left are small beans compared to the way he heaps ashes on his head, and your head, about so-called racism, by which he does not mean the ubiquitous anti-white hatred, with concrete and often fatal effects, today aggressively demanded by our elites, but instead non-specific thought crimes supposedly directed at non-white people by white people. Under no circumstances, we are

told, can aristopopulism do anything but make ending this supposed racism and its imaginary consequences a primary goal. This obeisance to the Left leads Deneen to write bizarre passages, in which he contorts himself into a pretzel. For example, we are told that black lack of present-day success in America is due not to the Left destruction of the black family and community since the 1960s, nor to any inherent racial differences, nor even to long-past housing discrimination or Jim Crow. Rather, it is due to black slave families being separated more than 150 years ago, which is somehow the fault of today's white people, and means black people must be eternally elevated by any aristopopulist system to expiate this long ago sin.

The craziness of this beggars belief, and the approach Deneen demands, if implemented, would instantly cripple both the effectiveness and legitimacy of aristopopulism. In fact, contra Deneen, any new system after the end of our current Regime, if it desires the loyalty of the common people, should reject all claims that anything but minor interpersonal racism exists (and that directed mostly at white people), declare that regardless, the phenomenon is utterly unimportant, and reject any responsibility for altering differential racial outcomes, while removing all prohibitions on free association. No surprise, nothing like this obvious and crucial program emerges from Deneen's pages.

Deneen seems completely to fail to understand, or more likely, not being dumb, he knows he cannot be seen to understand, that the supposed racism of whites is the keystone of the Left project in America, because endless wailing about it has proven crucial to achieving both of their two core aims. It is a never-ending trump card with which to demand more supposed emancipation, but the chief form of that emancipation is the transfer of wealth from productive whites to unproductive non-whites (and parasitic white email-class elites), which also serves the goal of forced egalitarianism, as the engines of productivity are silenced, as airplanes fall from the sky and the electricity fails. The only way to deal with this farce is to reject it without any discussion whatsoever. But Deneen does the opposite.

On a philosophical level, Deneen's contortions about race relations are merely part of a larger defect with Deneen's aristopopulism. He does not address that a society that is too heterogenous, or too diverse, in the cant of the Left, can never find the common good, because the people

lack adequate common interests. For example, Deneen assumes without analysis that working class blacks have interests identical to working class whites, and that the only reason the two groups don't cooperate is a divide-and-conquer strategy used by "mostly native, mostly white overclass elites." Well, maybe. But also maybe, especially after years of hatred being whipped up against whites, blacks and whites don't have enough in common anymore for there to be a common good between them, other than at the highest level of generality, at which point the common good becomes essentially meaningless. The same is true of many other divides in America, which suggests breaking up America is the way to go. You won't find the slightest hint of that in this book, though.

Deneen obviously senses the problem that heterogeneity is fatal to the common good, but he does not want to address it directly, because he might be Doing a Racism. Yet he has to offer a solution to the Regime's tyranny. So he repeatedly refers to an "increasingly multiracial, multi-ethnic working class" supposedly opposed to our elites, and therefore to the Regime, from which a challenge to the Regime will spring. This working class will create a new elite:

What is first needed is a "mixing" that shatters the blindered consensus of the elite, a mixing that must begin with the raw assertion of political power by a new generation of political actors inspired by an ethos of common-good conservatism. In order to achieve this end, control and effective application of political power will have to be directed especially at changing or at least circumventing current cultural as well as economic institutions from which progressive parties exercise their considerable power. Otherwise, those institutions will be utilized to circumvent and obstruct the only avenue to redress available to the "many": demotic power. The aim should not be to achieve "balance" or a form of "democratic pluralism" that imagines a successful regime comprised of checks and balances, but rather, the creation of a new elite that is aligned with the values and needs of ordinary working people.

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What is needed is the application of Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends—the use of powerful political resistance by the

populace against the natural advantages of the elite to create a mixed constitution . . . in which genuine common good is the result.

We can leave aside that Deneen's class analysis is simplistic in the extreme—he equates the “many” with the “working class,” whereas the many are in fact comprised of several very distinct classes with divergent interests, including the underclass and the middle class. There is no unified non-elite class, which makes it impossible for their “demotic power” to be “asserted.” This is basic elite theory, about which Deneen seems to know nothing. Moreover, Deneen keeps blurring his calls for a new elite with, among other softenings, positing a cooperative relationship, rather than a paternalistic relationship, between the many and few. Deneen ignores that the common people never directly balance the elites. Instead, ideally, they act as a damper on elite action, with their customary rights preventing any type of rapid change. They do not and will not get together with the elites to improve each other, in some kind of healing circle where everyone hugs it out. The elites rule, always and everywhere, and ideally they keep the good of the masses in mind, either out of self-interest or as a moral duty. Regardless of whether the many are multiracial and multiethnic, or completely homogenous, this is the way it has always been, and always will be.

To the extent that Deneen simply wants a new elite that will force a new society, he is certainly on firm ground. I'm all for that. The Left is evil. It must be destroyed. A new elite should cauterize anything that remains and then set up a mixed government, using the twelve pillars of Foundationalism as a guide. But instead of a call for this obvious solution to the need for regime change, we get weak tea. Rather than explaining how the new elite should confiscate the wealth of all members of the existing Regime, then, after trials and adequate direct punishments, lustrate and exile or rusticate all remaining important members of the Regime, we get calls for various modest technical/structural changes, such as massively increasing the number of members of the House of Representatives and having bureaucrats work outside Washington. These are old ideas, and last I checked, the Regime wasn't permitting them. Then Deneen suggests, big reveal, a national service requirement. Aside from that would be an obvious violation of the Thirteenth Amendment, which he ignores, that would simply grant massive power

to the Regime, which would have a new huge labor pool to direct to its ends. And Deneen's other specific political prescriptions are no better and no more realistic.

To be fair, Deneen does find his footing when it comes to the question of immigration. The problem is, it's a stupid footing, one which demonstrates beyond doubt that his aristopopulism is infected with Left doctrine. Immigrants are not the problem, you racist. They're wonderful, and certainly never create any problems for actual Americans, such as rape them and turn their country into a shithole. It's certainly not a matter of concern that the Regime is now offering illegal immigrants a path of a few weeks to citizenship if they'll join the military, in order to be used by the Regime to terrorize and kill actual Americans who try to assert their demotic power. Oh no. The only thing we need to do, maybe, is try a little harder to prevent illegal immigrants from being formally employed. That is, we should punish white people who hire immigrants, but hands off the immigrants themselves, unless we're giving them freebies and exalting them on a pedestal as our moral superiors. I wonder what Deneen would say if his aristopopulist elite's first act was, as it should be, to deport, using whatever level of force necessary, every illegal immigrant, along with every legal immigrant from the past fifty years who does not meet the new standards of American common good. He'd probably shriek in horror and wish the Left was back in charge.

In fact, we know for certain that he'd recoil from any actual action to restore America to what it could be. Heaven forbid we aim for the "destruction" of our current elite—"for, as we know from history, those who replace the elites simply become the new elites, and are often harsher and more brutal." This is both silly and incoherent. Deneen himself calls for a new aristocracy in the next sentence, to replace today's elites, thereby contradicting himself. But more importantly, it is not true there is any historical rule, or even trend, that a new elite is worse; quite the contrary, in fact, if the new elite is not Left (if it is Left, then mass murder is inevitable). Then, a few sentences later, we get "Today . . . it is safe to conclude that an ennobling of our elite will not come about from goodwill, but rather through the force of a threat from the [common people]." Which is it? Threats, which must mean the possibility of destruction? Or the Regime, against all odds, simply bending to political pressure from below? The reader gets whiplash trying to

figure out what is being suggested, and he gets the feeling the confusion is deliberate obfuscation.

Ultimately, *Regime Change* is just a grab-bag of concepts that could have been made into a coherent and punchy whole, but weren't. For example, Deneen could have offered a discussion of progress—whether some forms of progress are, or can be, good, even though the promise of supposed progress is often used by the Left in order to ignore the common good. But instead Deneen uses the word as a combination of ideological marker and swear word, not illuminating the reader in any way.

In a month or two, this book will be forgotten. That's too bad. Deneen could have been a contender. Instead, he pulled his punches, probably deathly afraid of being cast as too right-wing. After all, the Left's chief command to the catamite Right is to always police its rightward boundary, and Deneen's reaction to criticism of his book from the Right has, sadly, confirmed his drift towards that camp.

And, finally, reinforcing my complaints, Deneen concludes the book with a heaping helping of Scrutonism. "The day is late, but a lighted shelter can be discerned among the gloam. It is time to abandon the ruins we have made, seek refreshment, and then build anew." The day is indeed late; as my Twitter bio says, "The hour is late, and Moloch is within the gates." That calls for tearing up the floorboards and unlimbering what we find there, not seeking refreshment. We can refresh ourselves after the Regime is dead and gone, all its power permanently broken, the Left as forgotten as Mithraism, and its chief criminals duly punished while the former myrmidons of the Left have all adopted the new modes and orders promulgated by the new elite. That'll be the regime change we need. What's on offer here is—not.