

[Review Article]

Review of Patrick J. Deneen,  
*Why Liberalism Failed*  
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The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the swift collapse of the Soviet Union shortly thereafter produced a euphoria in the Western liberal democracies. The Cold War, a contest not between states but between ideologies, ended with one ideology, statist collectivism, in seemingly full retreat. The self-styled “free world” had won.

Or, rather, its ideology—liberalism—had. Premised on the atomistic anthropology of the Rawlsian “unencumbered self,” liberalism ca. 1991, the year that the Kremlin was suddenly and humiliatingly reduced to a geopolitical footnote, appeared to straddle the globe like a conquering Colossus. Neo-Hegelians like American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama rejoiced, declaring the end of history and the triumph of the “last man”.

But as African novelist Chinua Achebe once observed, things fall apart. And few ideologies have proven more fragile in success than liberalism. Without the galvanizing presence of its ideological counterpart, liberalism quickly went to seed. The globalism that “Davos Man” elites—to borrow Samuel Huntington’s memorable phrase—foisted on their captive populations brought, not the long Eroica refrain of prosperity, peace, and freedom that liberalism had promised, but an anemic hurdy-gurdy tune of discontent, chaos, and perpetual war. Neo-liberalism exploited open borders as refugees from neo-liberal-funded conflicts in the global south came in waves to Europe and America. Terrorists attacked major population centers at will. Multiculturalism failed and assimilation proved impossible, thwarted by liberalism itself as anathema to individual autonomy. Tradition and morals went into sharp decline as manners coarsened and culture war battle lines hardened in place. What was supposed to be a permanent and buoyant transnationalism turned into a rejection of liberalism tout court as the author of the malaise. From Russia to the United States, the United Kingdom to

Africa, China to Poland, and Hungary to Brazil, people have roundly, and repeatedly, dispensed with liberalism.

Of course, this crumbling of liberalism is largely as predicted by many of its former foes. The fascists, for example, rightly intuited that a centrifugal ideology like liberalism was antithetical to their project of having everyone identify with a centralized state, while Marxist scholars—György Lukács and Frederic Jameson not least among them—have been detailing liberalism’s errors since the time of Marx himself.

Surprisingly, though, liberalism’s fiercest and most formidable critics, Roman Catholics, largely made their peace with liberalism after the Modernist takeover of the Church and the sweeping “reforms” ushered in by the Second Vatican Council in documents promulgated in 1965. During the reign of Pope John Paul II, especially, capitalism as an adjunct to liberalism and an incidental social eleemosynary program received the papal blessing, with thinkers such as Michael Novak, Fr. Robert Sirico, and Thomas Woods explaining the nuances of the free market in Christian terms to the faithful. Under Pope Francis, left-liberalism has also nosed its way into the Vatican’s tent, with Jorge Mario Bergoglio speaking of gun control and “climate change” at least as much as about articles of faith. The halcyon days of liberalism’s triumph turned out to be headier than even its most ardent expositors had hoped. Against all odds, the wave of liberalism crested on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica.

But the tide is beginning to turn. In a new book, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Notre Dame professor Patrick Deneen makes the Catholic case against liberalism. Deneen’s brief is simple: liberalism is a false ideology which distorts our understanding of the human person and leads to precisely the problems that we can see all around us today. Deneen’s book shows how thoroughly liberalism has overwhelmed our conception of the human person. It is, all in all, a damning indictment of liberalism as a pernicious and thoroughly rotten way to run either a government or a single human life.

Deneen does not seek to spare liberalism’s feelings in his face-melting critique. Liberalism is “anti-cultur[al],” “parasitic,” “unsustainable,” “statist,” and productive of a kakistocratic “liberalocracy” which oversees the decay of decent society while growing obscenely wealthy by feeding on the scraps. Throughout the book’s seven chapters, Deneen traces the march of liberalism through the West’s institutions, showing that, over time, liberalism has morphed from its Rousseauian beginnings to its inevitable Hobbesian

maturity.

My basic assumption [is] that the underpinnings of our inherited civilized order—norms learned in families, in communities, through religion and a supporting culture—[will] inevitably erode under the influence of the liberal social and political state. [...] I anticipate that liberalism [will] relentlessly continue replacing traditional cultural norms and practices with statist Band-Aids, even as a growing crisis of legitimacy [...] force[s] its proponents to impose liberal ideology upon an increasingly recalcitrant populace. Liberalism [will] thus simultaneously “prevail” and fail by becoming more nakedly itself. (xiii) [...] A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom. Its success can be measured by its achievement of the opposite of what we have believed it would achieve. (3)

Given passages like this, it is not surprising that *Why Liberalism Failed*—and some of the chapters which appeared in print earlier, most notably in the American religion and policy journal *First Things*—has created a firestorm. One of those rare books with which subsequent thinkers on its subject must thenceforth in some way contend, *Why Liberalism Failed* has been criticized from all quarters: from the left for failing to mouth the cultural Marxist platitudes about race, class, and gender that have taken the place of substantive radical politics in the West, and from the right for failing to worship at the altar of Adam Smith, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, and John Locke. But in all of this, Deneen’s work has actually grown stronger, serving to show the “false consciousness,” as the Lukacsian Marxists might have put it, of the whole sweep of post-“Enlightenment” ideological positions. If everyone is attacking Deneen’s little volume, it is proof that almost everyone is a liberal of some sort now. The “left” and the “right” are merely the port and starboard of the same lumbering ship. QED.

But for all its smashing success in showing that liberalism has failed by conquering, the problem with Deneen’s book is that it quails before delivering liberalism the *coup de grâce*. Deneen has liberalism on the ropes by the end of the last chapter, but the conclusion is anticlimactic and weak, and so we

never find out what Deneen thinks should happen after liberalism is finally made to give up the ghost. Even more frustrating, the three proposals that Deneen offers as ways out of liberalism's clutches would appear to undo all that Deneen has been at pains to point out, like Penelope unraveling each night the garment she spun during the day.

The most obviously self-defeating position Deneen takes is in denying medieval, pre-liberal European society as an alternative to the slow-moving liberal catastrophe. On page 185, for example, Deneen throws cold water in the face of the medieval arrangement, organic and wholesome, that others have advanced as uplifting alternatives to Liberalism Uber Alles, and in the book's opening epigram, from Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, Deneen lets the reader know that the middle ages, in his view, were just as hopeless as our own. We cannot go back, Deneen chides his reader. But this approach deprives us of the rich wisdom of the past—a rather ironic position for a book that diagnoses the present as an unqualified disaster.

Vaguely and unhelpfully, Deneen offers that we need a “better theory” (191) for finding a way forward apart from liberalism, but then contradicts himself by saying that what is needed is not, in fact, better theory, but better practices (197). And what will be the vessel for containing these many-colored beads? It seems difficult to arrive at a conclusion other than monarchy, the only form of government not tainted, either at the outset or over time, by liberalism's touch. But advocating for a return to the humane, non-liberal arrangement of God, king, and country is apparently farther than Deneen is prepared to go. This reluctance on the part of one of liberalism's most articulate critics serves as a kind of thermometer for measuring the hold that the fever of liberalism still has on Western societies. Even those like Deneen, who realize that liberalism is a dangerous addiction, can do no better than suggest that we start filing out of the opium den.

After that, though, whither? That is the question that liberalism still leaves us too afraid to ask.

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