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Book Reviews

Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018. Hardcover, 225 pp., \$30.00.

Reviewed by Allen Mendenhall

Only the bold would title a book *Why Liberalism Failed*. Patrick Deneen, the David A. Potenziani Memorial Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, has done just that, proposing that such failure has actually occurred and setting the unreasonable expectation that he can explain it. His operative premise is that liberalism so called created the conditions for its inevitable demise—that it is a self-consuming, self-defeating ideology only around 500 years old. “Liberalism has failed,” he declares triumphantly, “not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded.”

Deneen doesn't define the term *liberalism*, which isn't in his index even though it's littered throughout the book. I have it on reliable authority that one of the peer reviewers of the pre-published manuscript recommended publication to the editors at Yale University Press, provided that Deneen cogently defined *liberalism* and then cleaned up his sloppy references to it. Deneen ignored this advice, leaving the manuscript as is. His genealogy of liberalism is all the more problematic in light of this refusal to clarify.

Deneen presents a seeming paradox, namely that liberalism, under the banner of liberty and emancipation, produced their opposite: a vast, progressive, and coercive administrative state under which individuals have grown alienated, amoral, dependent, conditioned, and servile. “[T]he political project of liberalism,” he claims, “is shaping us into the creatures of its prehistorical fantasy, which in fact required the combined massive apparatus of the modern state, economy, education system, and science and technology to make us into: increasingly separate, autonomous, nonrelational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone.”

One hears in this line echoes of Sartre, and indeed existentialism recommends a certain kind of individualism: the freedom of the rational agent, having been thrust into existence through no choice or fault of his own,

to will his own meaning in an absurd and chaotic world. But existentialism is a different species of individualism from that which motivated Hobbes, Locke, and Mill: chief targets of Deneen's ire. It's true that Mill disliked dogmatic conformity to custom, but that is a customary – one might even say *conservative* – position to take. One must preserve, or *conserve*, after all, a critical mode for undertaking difficult questions without assuming to have already ascertained all suitable solutions. Every age must rework its approaches to perennial problems. There's plenty of Mill to dislike from a Christian perspective, but his unlikable conclusions do not necessarily follow from his method of inquiry or openness to examining afresh the puzzles and issues with which our ancestors struggled.

The classical liberalism or libertarianism to which Christian individualists adhere promotes peace, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, community, stewardship, ingenuity, prosperity, dignity, knowledge, understanding, humility, virtuousness, creativity, justice, ingenuity, and more, taking as its starting point the dignity of every human person before both God and humanity. This individualism prospers in fundamentally conservative cultures and does not square with Deneen's caricature of a caricature of a caricature of "liberal" individualism. This *conservative* individualism, a creature of classical liberalism, advocates liberty in order to free human beings to achieve their fullest potential, cultivate widespread ethics and morality, and improve lives and institutions through economic growth and development. And who can deny that the market economy with which it is bound up has, throughout the globe, given rise to improved living conditions, technological and medical advances, scientific discovery, intellectual curiosity, and industrial innovation?

Deneen wishes to rewind the clock, to recover the virtuous "self-governance" of the ancients that, he believes, was predicated on "the common good." He sees in antiquity a social rootedness that aligns with Christianity as exemplified in the modern world by Amish communities. His celebration of the traditional liberal arts adopts, he says, "a classical or Christian understanding of liberty" that emphasizes situated norms and localities, embedded cultures, and institutional continuities. This, however, is a curious take on antiquity, one that flies in the face of the *anti-Christian* features of classical and ancient thought extolled by Friedrich Nietzsche, Ayn Rand, and Julius Evola, who valued the *pagan* elements of "the ancient commendation of virtue" and disparaged the modern world as being *too Christian*.

Deneen is not interested in liberalisms, i.e., the multiplicity of concepts that fly under the banner of liberalism. He prefers casually to lump together varieties of generic ills (everything from industrialized agriculture to the infatuation with STEM, diversity, multiculturalism, materialism, and sexual autonomy) as products of the one common enemy of everything good

that the classical and medieval periods had to offer. He then gives that enemy a name: liberalism. He would plunge us back, if not into antiquity, then into medieval tribalism, into periods in which the accused were tried by ordeal or combat, when blood oaths and kinship rather than trust, goodwill, or economic exchange determined one's loyalties and allegiances.

It isn't correct that liberalism "requires liberation from all forms of associations and relationships, from family to church, from schools to village and community." On the contrary, liberalism frees people from the tyrannical and institutionalized coercion that prevents them from enjoying local associations and relationships, including those in families, churches, schools, and communities. Liberalism properly understood empowers people to group themselves and define their experience by their own customs and mores. Thanks to liberalism, Deneen himself enjoys the freedom to critique the rapidly growing government that increasingly attempts to impose on him standards and rules at odds with his own.

Extending the individualism that characterized classical liberalism to 20th century progressivism and modern identity politics, as Deneen does, is misguided. Modern identity politics is about *collectivism* in the name of self-definition, self-awareness, and self-constitution, about choosing which *communities* (Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, the Democratic Socialists of America, neo-Nazis, etc.) embrace the physical (e.g. ethnic or racial), ideological (e.g. pan-nationalist, Marxist, ecosocialist, feminist, anarcho-syndicalist, white supremacist), or normative characteristics (e.g. social justice or egalitarianism) around which one forms *group* associations.

The truth is that individualism thrives in moral, virtuous communities, and that the common good and group associations flourish in societies that acknowledge and understand the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. Of the interdependence and mutually strengthening nature of freedom and order, of the individual and society, Frank Meyer proclaimed that "truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon brings about conditions that pave the way for surrender to tyranny."¹ To those who insist that individualism is antithetical to religious belief, which is itself indispensable to conservatism and the common good, M. Stanton Evans stated, "affirmation of a transcendent order is not only compatible with individual autonomy, but the condition of it; [...] a skeptical view of man's

¹ Frank Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," in *What is Conservatism?* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2015), p. 12.

nature [i.e., as inherently flawed and prone to sin] not only permits political liberty but demands it.”²

In a free society, entrepreneurs and producers are looking *to others*, to *communities*, to determine basic needs to satisfy. The rational self-interest motivating creativity and inventiveness is fundamentally about serving others more efficiently and effectively, about generating personal rewards, yes—but personal rewards for making life better and easier for others. The Adam Smith of *The Wealth of Nations* is the same Adam Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Human beings are wired both to look out for themselves, protecting their homes and loved ones, and to feel for, and empathize with, others. Beneficence and generosity are principal aspects of the liberal individualism that Deneen maligns.

The “second wave” of liberalism, in Deneen’s paradigm, is Progressivism. Yet modern progressivism and the Democratic Party have almost nothing to do with classical liberalism. Curiously and, I daresay, lazily, Deneen wishes to connect them. He cannot draw a clearly connecting line between them, however, because there isn’t one. The alleged connection is the supposed ambition “to liberate individuals from any arbitrary and unchosen relationships and remake the world into one in which those especially disposed to expressive individualism would thrive.” Should we take this assertion to mean that Deneen would prefer our relations and interactions to be arbitrarily coerced by a central power in a closed society where subordinated individuals habitually follow the unquestioned commands of established superiors?

F. A. Hayek once stated that, “[u]ntil the rise of socialism,” the opposite of conservatism was liberalism but that, in the United States, “the defender of the American tradition was a liberal in the European sense.”³ Is Deneen so immersed in American culture that he cannot recognize this basic distinction? Deneen prizes the common, collective good as manifest in local communities, blaming rational self-interest for the allegedly universalizing tendency of liberalism to stamp out venerable customs and cultural norms. But he seems befuddled by the American taxonomy into which liberalism has fallen and would do well to revisit the works of Ludwig von Mises, who explained, “In the United States ‘liberal’ means today a set of ideas and political postulates that in every regard are the opposite of all that liberalism

² M. Stanton Evans, “A Conservative Case for Freedom,” in *What is Conservatism?* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2015), p. 86.

³ F. A. Hayek, “Why I Am Not a Conservative,” *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition, Vol 17, The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek* (Routledge, 2013), p. 519.

meant to the preceding generations. The American self-styled liberal aims at government omnipotence, is a resolute foe of free enterprise, and advocates all-round planning by authorities, i.e., socialism.”⁴

A comparison of Deneen’s speculative political theory and its abstract narrative of decline with Larry Siedentop’s deeply historical, ideologically neutral *Inventing the Individual* (Belknap / Harvard, 2014) reveals critical flaws in Deneen’s argument, starting with the proposition that the individualism key to liberalism is merely 500 years old. Siedentop undercuts the common portrayal of a medieval Europe gripped by poverty and superstition, monarchy and tyranny, widespread corruption and early death from which the Renaissance and, later, the Enlightenment allegedly rescued us. Siedentop sees, instead, the rise of Christianity – long before medievalism – as the cause of the rise of liberal individualism, which, in fact, has roots in the teachings of St. Paul and Jesus Christ. Whereas Deneen theorizes individualism as recent and anti-Christian, Siedentop traces its actual history as distinctly Christian, mapping its concrete features over time as it proliferated and supplanted ancient pagan cultures and customs that lacked a structural understanding of the dignity and primacy of the human person.

Siedentop attributes liberal individualism to Christianity; Deneen treats liberal individualism as inimical to Christianity. Both men cannot correct, at least not fully.

Walking back some of his grand claims, Deneen acknowledges in his final pages that liberalism, in certain manifestations, has in fact been around longer than 500 years and that it has much in common with Christianity:

While liberalism pretended to be a wholly new edifice that rejected the political architecture of all previous ages, it naturally drew upon long developments from antiquity to the late Middle Ages. A significant part of its appeal was not that it was something wholly new but that it drew upon deep reservoirs of belief and commitment. Ancient political philosophy was especially devoted to the question of how best to avoid the rise of tyranny, and how best to achieve the conditions of political liberty and self-governance. The basic terms that inform our political tradition – liberty, equality, dignity, justice, constitutionalism – are of ancient pedigree. The advent of Christianity, and its development in the now largely neglected political philosophy of the Middle Ages, emphasized the dignity of the individual, the concept of the person, the existence of rights and

⁴ Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition* (1927) (The Foundation for Economic Education and Cobden Press, 2002) (Ralph Raico, trans.), pgs. xvi-xvii.

corresponding duties, the paramount importance of civil society and a multiplicity of associations, and the concept of limited government as the best means of forestalling the inevitable human temptation toward tyranny. Liberalism's most basic appeal was not its rejection of the past but its reliance upon basic concepts that were foundational to the Western political identity.

Forgive me for being confused, but I thought Deneen had set out to criticize liberalism and chart its failure, not to exalt or defend it, and certainly not to tie it to an ancient lineage associated with Christianity. This passage represents the discombobulation at the heart of Deneen's book. Liberalism is not to blame for the massive administrative state and its networks of agents and functionaries that coerce local communities. Deneen is part of the problem he describes, championing ways of thinking and organizing human behavior that undercut his hope for the reawakening of traditional values and familial or neighborly bonds on local levels.

Deneen airs his opinions with such maddening certitude that he comes across as haughty and tendentious, as a zealously anti-libertarian *manqué* with an axe to grind. He lacks the delicacy and charity with which reasonable scholars of good faith approach their ideological opponents. He does not entertain the position of those who, like me, believe that liberal individualism is a necessary condition for the flourishing of local communities, the cultivation of virtue and responsibility, the forming of mediating institutions and bottom-up political associations, and the decentralization and diffusion of government power. He just can't grasp the possibility that liberal individualism creates a vehicle for the preservation of custom and heritage, the family unit, and social bonds on local levels.

"Statism enables individualism, individualism demands statism," Deneen insists with little proof beyond his own ahistorical speculative theories – ironically given his call for "smaller, local forms of resistance: practices *more than theories*." Here's an alternative proposition: liberal individualism and the community bonds it generates are best protected in a Christian society that is solemnly mindful of the fallibility of the human mind, the sinful tendencies of the human flesh, and the inevitable imperfection of human institutions.

Reading *Why Liberalism Failed*, one might come away questioning not whether Deneen is right, but whether he's even sufficiently well-read in the history of liberalism to pass judgment on this wide-ranging, centuries-old school of philosophy that grew out of Christianity. What an unfortunate impression to impart for someone who writes with such flair about such important trends and figures. The reality, I think, is that Deneen is erudite and learned. His tendentious depiction of liberalism is thus disappointing for not

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putting his erudition and learning properly on display, for promoting an idiosyncratic take on liberalism that could ultimately undermine the classical and Christian commitment to liberty that he wishes to reinvigorate.

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