

Interpretation

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Many and mixed reviews have made Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* both famous and infamous. Aptly described in the preface to the paperback edition as "impeccably timed," the book is not just a diagnosis of modern liberalism: it is a *post mortem*—or nearly so, predicting the imminent death of the patient. Deneen sets out to prove the eponymous claim that liberalism has "failed" (not "failing") because it has been "true to itself" and has brought about its own demise (3). To argue his case, he enlists an impressive range of authors who have identified the consequences of liberal ideas. Yet, despite numerous references to Wendell Berry, Robert Putnam, and E. F. Schumacher (and emulation of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*), *Why Liberalism Failed* does not measure up to its predecessors in social criticism. At its best, it offers a list of social woes on which everyone can find something to hate—which is likely why readers of such varied political and religious views have found it worth reading. But in failing to make a compelling critique of liberalism or to offer a coherent alternative, it serves as a cautionary tale to those wishing to excel as both scholars and "counter-anticulture" warriors.

To substantiate the paradoxical claim that liberalism has failed "because it has succeeded" (3), Deneen proposes to examine the "pathologies" that liberalism has generated and that reveal its inner "self-contradictions." Liberalism's successes, Deneen asserts, manifest its failure because "its successes can be measured by its achievement of the opposite of what we have believed it would achieve" (3–4). Foremost among liberalism's "pathologies" is the

redefinition of liberty in accordance with individualism, voluntarism, and the “human separation from and opposition to nature” (31). This account is plausible, though Deneen might have distinguished liberalism from modernity more broadly understood. (The conquest of nature is a distinctively modern project, but liberalism may not be this project’s only—or ultimate—manifestation.) In any case, he describes how the modern revolt against nature allowed liberalism to supplant the ancient conception of liberty, which he defines as “the learned capacity of human beings to conquer the slavish pursuit of base and hedonistic desires” (37). In place of culture, which assists human beings in acquiring this capacity for self-mastery, liberalism emphasizes the godlike power of the state to secure human rights—a power that Deneen illustrates with the “Life of Julia” ads that the Barack Obama presidential campaign ran in 2012.

In subsequent chapters, Deneen elaborates on how liberalism sets the state and the individual against nature and culture. In Burkean fashion he calls liberalism “a pervasive and encompassing *anticulture*” that opposes “generational customs, practices, and rituals that are grounded in local and particular settings” (64). A posited communion between nature and convention is the basis of Deneen’s argument, and that communion (as well as the chapter in which its fullest presentation occurs, “Liberalism as Anticulture”) is the most critical for understanding *Why Liberalism Failed*. Liberalism, he writes, does violence to custom—that is, human willful creation—by separating it from nature. It separates the conventional from the natural and then judges the first according to a theoretically contrived natural man, “a cultureless creature, existing in a ‘state of nature’ noteworthy for the absence of any artifice created by humans” (67). Deneen thus accuses liberal thinkers of having been the first to introduce a divide between convention and nature, *nomos* and *phusis*. He explicitly and emphatically asserts that “while today we speak of differences of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture,’ even the possibility of a divide between these two would have been incomprehensible to preliberal humanity” (68). Deneen further asserts that ancient philosophy and classical Christian theology “alike” understood that nature and custom are continuous in the same way that human nature and the natural world are continuous (35, 68). That is, custom is grounded in nature through place and one’s local community. Deneen’s expansion on this point is worth quoting at length:

“Culture” is a word with deep connections to natural forms and processes, most obviously in words such as ‘agriculture’ or ‘cultivate.’ Just as the potential of a plant or animal isn’t possible without cultivation, so it was readily understood that the human creature’s best potential

simply could not be realized without good culture. This was so evident to ancient thinkers that the first several chapters of Plato's *Republic* are devoted not to a discussion of political forms but to the kinds of stories that are appropriate for children. . . . Far from being understood as opposites of human nature, customs and manners were understood to be derived from, governed by, and necessary to the realization of human nature. (68–69)

This claim about the ancient understanding of culture and custom's relationship to nature is well worth examining.

It is remarkable to say that the first few books of Plato's *Republic*—there are no “chapters” in the manuscripts that have come down to us—concern what kinds of stories are appropriate for children. The first two books are “devoted” to a dialectical examination of justice, and the discussions therein that concern law and nature do not support Deneen's trademark claim about nature and convention. In particular, Deneen avoids mentioning Thrasy-machus's conventionalist attack on justice in book 1, or the distinctions that Glaucon and Adeimantus draw in book 2 between what is best by nature and what is best by convention (were these three Platonic interlocutors liberals?). From Deneen's brief interpretation, the reader would not know that Socrates's response to the latter two speakers—which takes up the balance of the *Republic*—begins with the *expulsion* of all existing stories about the gods and heroes, and culminates in the presentation of *all* “cultures” or customary ways of life as the equivalent of life in a cave.

Socrates goes on to characterize the philosopher as someone whose desire to know what is by nature requires separation from the homebred and prescriptive, and this characterization is not particular to Plato's Socrates. Aristotle likewise argues in the *Politics* that while custom is necessary to assist nature, no particular custom arises from nature (1254b4–1255a3). The habitual and the natural, in short, are simply not one and the same; custom, *nomos*—as in the case of the barbarians' enslavement of their women (1252b5–9)—often warps and runs contrary to nature. To be sure, Burke claimed that human custom and law spring genetically from nature and place.¹ Yet Aristotle and Aquinas thought of human convention as something distinct from and often in tension with nature and reason (*Politics* 1269a4–27; see also *Metaphysics* 1074b1–14, Aquinas *ad loc.* and *ST* I-II, q. 97 art. 2 ad 1). According to them, nature is a standard by which conventions are to be judged. Deneen obscures

¹ See “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs”; contrast with G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, “The Empire of the Insect.”

this by arguing that “Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* are alike efforts to delineate the limits that nature—natural law—places upon human beings” (35). For neither of these works is intended primarily to delineate natural law. Aristotle discusses natural justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with no mention of natural law, and Aquinas’s presentation of natural law forms but a small part of the *Summa theologiae*, the rest of which is certainly not accurately characterized as an attempt “to delineate the limits that nature...places upon human beings.” At the very least, the relationship between law and nature is much more problematic for classical pagan and Christian authors than Deneen admits. Without knowing what particular passages he has in mind (Deneen offers no direct citations of Plato, Aristotle, or Aquinas), the reader unfortunately has no way of giving Deneen’s claims a more serious hearing.

Deneen’s easy confluence, bordering on equation, of nature and custom or law continues in chapters 4–5, which address how the liberal, modern use of technology and education degrades humanity. He there makes a case for genuine liberal education, noting at the same time the gradual redefinition of such an education from “an education in self-government” to an education in “autonomy and the absence of constraint” (111). A truly liberal education, he argues, emphasizes “deep engagement with the fruits of long cultural inheritance, particularly the great texts of antiquity and the long Christian tradition” (110) as a means to learning “the limits and constraints that nature and culture rightfully exert” (130). Learning such limits would certainly seem to be worthwhile, but Deneen discounts the value of engaging the genuine, profound, and numerous *disagreements* between thinkers on the question of nature and the best human life. He may even be said to suggest that what justifies the reading of books in the Western canon is their usefulness for a broader social agenda. He berates, for example, conservative academics for encouraging the study of the Great Books “without recognizing that many of these books were the source of the very forces displacing the study of old books” (120). It is unclear whether Deneen sees any value in studying what he considers the more nefarious books of the West—presumably, the modern books—except for the purpose of deriding them. In this way, his vision of liberal education strikes one as remarkably partisan.

Deneen concludes the main body of his argument with two chapters devoted to the rise of liberal “elites” and the degradation of citizenship. Against these, he advocates “a kind of lived ‘Burkeanism’: the way of life of much of humanity” (143), which is organized “for the benefit of the

ordinary—the majority who benefit from societal norms that the strong and the ordinary alike are expected to follow” (148). This society appears to be very different from the *Republic*’s third city in speech, in which only the guardians (a select few) receive the rigorous education in virtue described therein. One is tempted to say that Deneen’s critique of “elites” is close to that of T. S. Eliot’s in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, just as his treatment of culture (both here and elsewhere) somewhat resembles Josef Pieper’s in *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. But, strangely, neither of these authors makes an appearance in this book, which speaks so often of “elites” and “culture.” More’s the pity, since they could be expected to have enriched and given heft to Deneen’s account. Instead, he offers a contrast between his “lived Burkeanism” and what he calls “liberalocracy.” Liberal democracy, he claims, governs through deception by putting into effect Plato’s noble lie: it convinces citizens to believe in fundamental equality while creating privileged “liberalocrats” (152). A more desirable “illiberal democracy,” Deneen states, encourages self-governance at the local level (176).

In suggesting a union between the local and the illiberal, Deneen claims to echo Alexis de Tocqueville’s thoughts on democracy. He points the reader to Tocqueville’s account of the “illiberal democracy” in New England that originated with the Puritans and—Deneen argues—manifested itself especially in the practice of self-rule at the local level: “[Tocqueville] stressed that it was the nearness and immediacy of the township that made its citizens more likely to care and take an active interest not only in their own fates but in the shared fates of their fellow citizens” (175–76). Deneen thus interprets Tocqueville’s description of local institutions as an encomium for localism. Yet while Tocqueville calls these institutions “the strength of a free people” and the “elementary schools” of liberty (*Democracy in America*, 1.1.5, “On the System of Local Government in America”), his account does not imply support for anything like a localist project. He does not, for instance, present local institutions as a means of bringing about social change. On the contrary, Tocqueville is far from optimistic about the prospects of creating local independence through local institutions, *ex nihilo*. He does not offer an exhortation for the widespread creation of local communities, as Deneen later does in his conclusion. In fact, Tocqueville remains a (somewhat heavy-hearted, but firm) advocate of what he identifies as an emphatically *modern* democracy. Rather than praise local communities for being premodern or illiberal oases, Tocqueville—apparently adopting a version of Whig historiography—attempts to argue that American democracy grew out of the Puritans’ local New England towns. In trying to make this argument, though, he suggests,

or perhaps inadvertently reveals, that American democracy departed quite decisively from its Puritan foundations to enshrine a liberal understanding of individual rights.² The New England townsman cares about his own freedom, Tocqueville says, and *this* (not virtue, or duty) is why he serves his local community—“because union with his fellow men seems useful to him” (1.1.5, “Town Life”). To be sure, the townsman jealously protects his community from the illiberal administrative centralization that beset European nations in the wake of the Enlightenment. But he is just as jealous a guardian of his own individual domain against the town, making sure that “in everything that regards himself alone, he remains master.” This surely is not the classical republican understanding of the good citizen. While Deneen suggests that local institutions and cultures are *the* means to fight liberalism, Tocqueville never presents the local as inherently illiberal—and certainly not the local as it exists within a modern, liberal regime. He never presents the local as self-sufficient, either. He notes that local governments must integrate with national ideas and habits in order to protect themselves from “the encroachments of power” and from other, stronger governments (1.1.5, “On the System of Local Government in America”). Further, one of the free associations for which he praises America is the *national* temperance movement (2.2.5). For all of these reasons, the claim that Tocqueville is a champion of illiberal localism remains dubious.

Why Liberalism Failed concludes with an invitation to look for a humane alternative to liberalism. The reflection that Deneen proposes toward this end involves three steps, the first of which—surprisingly—entails acknowledging “the achievements of liberalism” and recognizing that there can be no return to an idyllic past (182, 184). The second step requires that we “outgrow the age of ideology” and “focus on developing practices that foster new forms of culture, household economy, and polis life” (183). Finally, in contrast with the second step’s practical tenor, Deneen calls for “a better theory of politics and society,” one that eschews “liberalism’s ideological dimensions yet [is] cognizant of its achievements and the rightful demands it makes—particularly

² Contrast John Winthrop’s sermon on sacred and corrupt liberty (cited by Tocqueville at 1.1.2) with Tocqueville’s own description of the townsman’s reasons for obeying local authority. In particular, the observation that the townsman upholds political union because of its utility for individual purposes diverges starkly from Winthrop’s claim that union partakes in a sacred duty. Contrast also Winthrop’s promotion of “a liberty for that only which is just and good” (1.1.2) with the liberal or permissive liberty that Tocqueville ascribes to the citizen who partakes in the New England town meeting of the 1830s: “He is free and owes an account only to God. Whence this maxim: the individual is the best as well as the only judge of his own interest, and society has the right to direct his actions only when it feels injured by his activities or when it requires his cooperation” (1.1.5, “Town Life”).

for justice and dignity” (183). These three steps illustrate Deneen’s conviction that being countercultural is insufficient when one inhabits a liberal anti-culture: what is needed in such an anticulture, he insists, is the creation of a “counter-anticulture” through “conscious effort, deliberation, reflectiveness, and consent” (192, 191). In short, Deneen’s work ends with an intentional echo of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, calling for illiberal “counter-anticulture” warriors to create new forms of community that can support a revitalized culture (cf. *After Virtue*, 263).

Attractive as such a proposal may be to those who are concerned about the serious problems that plague liberalism and late modernity, this manifesto of a conclusion is the least coherent section of Deneen’s book. The chapter suffers from a deep confusion about whether it is calling for “a better theory of politics and society” (183) or “not a better theory, but better practices” (197)—a confusion, it must be said, that plagues the entire book. It taints Deneen’s use of liberal and illiberal thinkers alike, making his references to their works (as noted above) either strawmen or weapons for his arsenal. Beginning with the premise that liberalism is a “pervasive invisible ideology” (179), Deneen interprets authors according to whether they are for or against this great enemy. Moreover, the threat of liberalism demands a response in action, not theory—but what guides this action? Deneen nowhere articulates a substantive notion of the good to guide his call to arms. He asserts that we must “rediscover old practices, and create new ones,” but he does not provide the grounds for discerning what practices (old or new) are good for human beings. He decries “trying to conceive a replacement ideology” (183) and he hopes that a better theory of politics and society will emerge from better practices. But without an understanding of the good, any attempt to set out a plan of action would seem to be foolhardy. Rather than address this need, Deneen concludes with an invitation to engage in an imaginative act of creation. Acknowledging that a self-conscious effort to create new cultures is contrary to the “organic” origins of culture that he presented earlier in the book, Deneen excuses this voluntarist—that is, liberal—solution by observing that “given the default choice-based philosophy that liberalism has bequeathed to us, what might someday become a nonvoluntarist cultural landscape must be born out of voluntarist intentions, plans, and actions” (192). Deneen demonizes those who claim that “identity itself is a matter of choice” (121), but—absent any indication of a sure way to deduce good culture from nature—one wonders whether this call to create “new” cultures (197) differs from the postmodern position that he criticizes. It may be that Deneen has in mind a solid foundation for his use of “nature,” “culture,” and “virtue,” but without having access

to this account, even the sympathetic reader of *Why Liberalism Failed* is left at the end of the book scratching his head.

G. K. Chesterton once pointed out that it is easy to agree with other critics about what's wrong with the world, but that too often "we do not ask what is right."³ Commendably, *Why Liberalism Failed* does not romanticize a past historical age or outline a radical "option" for completely abandoning modern society. Yet Deneen presumes that his easy (and mistaken) elision of "nature" and "culture" suffices to ground his *damnatio* of liberalism. This moves him to think that the question of liberalism is open and shut, so that his concluding discussion of what comes after liberalism reads more like a self-reassuring farewell to liberalism than a preview of the next step in a larger argument. To be sure, his critique speaks to widely felt frustrations with modern liberalism, and it is to his credit that he manages to touch a nerve felt by such a wide readership. Yet *Why Liberalism Failed* fails as a primer for understanding the problems in liberal democracy. It echoes others' complaints about what's wrong with liberalism without offering a serious account of what's right with illiberal culture, or which among its manifold examples is best.

³ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, "The Medical Mistake."