

JACOBIN

Why Anticapitalist Conservatism Fails

Lyle Jeremy Rubin

July 3, 2018

Critiques of capitalism from the Right aren't always completely wrong. But they can't help pulling back far short of liberation.

At a time when prestige media outlets market the likes of Ben Shapiro, Bret Stephens, and Jordan Peterson as serious intellectuals, it can be refreshing to spend time with right-leaning thinkers who are at least minimally capable of wrestling with the challenges of our day. These needles in a haystack do exist.

The Niskanen Center publishes rigorous center-right libertarian opinion. For capitalist apologetics of the most grounded and candid sort, there's the *Financial Times*. The flagship publication of Catholic conservatism, *First Things*, is often worth a read. Even Patrick Buchanan's the *American Conservative*, for all its racist and misogynistic baggage, occasionally provides a forum for less bigoted and more thoughtful opinion on the Right.

The Notre Dame political theorist Patrick J. Deneen has been a ubiquitous presence at both *First Things* and the *American Conservative*, and his latest book, [Why Liberalism Failed](#), has earned him plaudits from even some on the Left. The backcover of the hardback edition features the glowing praise of the radical historian Jackson Lears ("bracing antidote") and leftist icon Cornel West ("courageous and timely"). Others have been less impressed. Jan-Werner Mueller, a distinguished professor of politics at Princeton, panned the polemic as a collection of "opportunistically recycled anti-liberal clichés." *New York Times* book critic Jennifer Szalai, in an otherwise scathing review, called it "a deeply exasperating volume that nevertheless articulates something important in this age of disillusionment."

It turns out they are all right. *Why Liberalism Failed* is a bold, seasonable, and at times, welcome estimation of the liberal status quo — yet one that nonetheless suffers from the significant blind spots and prejudices of its author. The welcome sections include unabashed assaults on capitalism, which help explain the book's enthusiastic reception from the likes of Lears and West. Reflections on how political orthodoxies are inclined to collapse into conformities are also worth considering (although they underestimate the extent to which Christian traditionalism ends up in the same trap).

But the most valuable are those parts of the book that go most astray. The broadside, after all, isn't just speaking for itself. As the bibliography makes clear, Deneen is speaking on behalf of a conservative tendency that includes such traditionalist totems as the literary critic Russell Kirk or the sociologist Robert Nisbet, and one that frequently surfaces during moments of world-historical crisis. Appreciating how and why this tendency falls short not only prepares the Left for a possible anticapitalist challenge from the right, but also underscores why leftists are better positioned to answer the problems confronting humanity.

A Victim of Its Own Success

Deneen argues that liberalism's breakdown can be explained not by its failure but by its success. As modernity's presiding ideology has become fully realized, he writes, its contradictions have become more apparent. Liberal commitments to fairness, pluralism, and autonomy have yielded a world of vast inequity, conformity, and coercion — and these injustices have been the product of the very worldview designed to overcome them.

“To call for the cures of liberalism's ills by applying more liberal measures,” Deneen writes, “is tantamount to throwing gas on a raging fire.” Such an approach “will only deepen our political, social, economic, and moral crisis.”

The root cause of this distressing denouement is a “false anthropology.” According to Deneen, liberalism rejects the idea that humans are fundamentally relational creatures. Instead of seeing us as social and political animals, the liberal view interprets humans as a melee of grasping individuals. It scorns the classical or Christian notion of liberty, which prizes self-governance, self-restraint, self-limitation, and freedom from sinful instincts like greed or lust. In its place, liberalism embraces a liberty that seeks to wipe away external constraints like the customs of family and community.

In Deneen's telling, both the modern right and left are comprised of conservative liberals and progressive liberals. The former remains loyal to the proto-liberal revolution of English philosophers like Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, where human nature is fixed but non-human nature is malleable and liable to conquest. The latter endorses the more ardent liberal revolutions of everyone from Jean Jacques-Rousseau to John Stuart Mill to Karl Marx, where human and non-human natures are meant to be molded and conquered.

Both camps, given their shared interest in some level of individual freedom, refuse to accept premodern assumptions about natural limitations to human autonomy. This refusal guarantees an ever-increasing politics of market competition and expressive individualism, both of which become increasingly bolstered by the state:

Ironically, the more completely the sphere of autonomy is secured, the more comprehensive the state must become. Liberty, so defined, requires liberation from all forms of associations and

relationships, from family to church, from schools to village and community, that exerted control over behavior through informal and habituated expectations and norms.

Liberalism thus culminates in two ontological points: the liberated individual and the controlling state.

Why Liberalism Failed advances its argument about “the liberated individual and the controlling state” by way of six ancillary propositions, each of which are common to appraisals of its kind.

First there is the sweeping story of the momentous “wrong turn,” usually dated to the dawn of modernity in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Second there is a more immediate tale of decline, often involving an exacerbated version of the same dangerous motion. (For ideological brethren like Nisbet this was the New Deal of the 1930s; for Deneen it is the ongoing sexual revolution since the 1960s.)

Third there is the yarn about the triumph of statism over localism. Fourth there is the treatment of the liberal center and radical left as a singularly oppressive unit. Fifth there is the appeal to nature to validate historically contingent beliefs or conduct that are otherwise left unjustified.

And finally, there is the assurance that the author is in no way calling for the reversal of basic modern achievements — slavery, exclusive male suffrage, or feudalism shall safely remain regrets of the past. The fact that the sixth assertion vitiates the five that preceded it speaks to the fragility on which the entire anti-modern position rests.

Abandoning the Public Good?

Deneen opens by charging philosophers like Machiavelli, Descartes, and Hobbes with laying the foundation for a liberalism “whose central aim was to disassemble what they concluded were irrational religious and social norms in the pursuit of civil peace that might in turn foster stability and prosperity, and eventually individual liberty of conscience and action.” It was this shift from Christian self-rule to secular iconoclasm that anticipated the contemporary abandonment of the public good.

But despite occasional nods to the contrary, Deneen underplays the continuities between pre-liberal and liberal commitments to social responsibility. As Andreas Kalvyas and Ira Katznelson have argued, early modern thinkers were concerned with salvaging the deeper ideals of classical republicanism in an emergent age of globally integrated markets and mass politics.

Adam Smith, for example, desired a commercial republic undergirded by enlightened self-interest, while acknowledging that “no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.” He turned to public education as a means of ameliorating specialized labor’s degrading effects and instilling martial virtues like sacrifice, just as he endorsed progressive taxation and financial regulations to curtail inequalities that corroded the commonweal. One of his most enthusiastic readers, Thomas Paine, went on to compose the first social-democratic blueprint in an attempt to help rebuild the polis.

Deneen’s simplistic story omits such complexities. He ends up manufacturing capitalist bad guys like Smith and anti-capitalist heroes like Edmund Burke — even though, as the political theorist Corey Robin has shown, it was the liberal economist who harbored a more substantive critique of capitalist value theory than the anti-liberal Burke, the latter of whom was something of a booster.

Deneen is also forced to downplay prehistories that complicate his narrative of an elemental break between premodern civic duty and modern market atomism. Dotan Leshem makes clear in *The Origins of Neoliberalism*, for instance, that Christian apologetics had a tendency to see God's will in free choice and insatiable desire, and to welcome a political sovereign intent on generating economic surplus as an earthly embodiment of God's boundless growth.

If the argument's long history doesn't quite work, neither does its short one. Deneen wants to make the case that as liberalism spurns traditional norms, individuals become progressively unruly while the state grows ever more overbearing. Society becomes marred by crime, mass incarceration, corruption, social distrust, rapaciousness, inequality, illness, and authoritarian governance. Cultural liberalism and moral laxness, that is, travel in tow.

He links cheating scandals in schools to a loss in "norms of modesty, comportment, and academic honesty," then links those, in turn, to increased surveillance of children. He contends that the move away from marriage and toward abortion on demand has gone hand in hand with the view of kids as a "limitation upon individual freedom," which have fostered a "drive for quick profits" and the "short-term exploitation of the earth's bounty."

These judgments might seem plausible given the events of the past forty years, when culturally liberal transformations have occurred alongside the dysfunctions Deneen identifies. But it is difficult to pinpoint causation since that same period witnessed a thoroughgoing attack on the welfare state and its replacement by a neoliberal order that redistributed wealth and power upwards.

Why doesn't this sea change deserve the brunt of the blame? And why haven't more social democracies around the world — specifically in Scandinavia, where similar cultural change has accompanied impressive outcomes — descended into the morass Deneen describes? Even right-wing think tanks like Freedom House, the Heritage Foundation, and the Cato Institute have been forced to acknowledge these countries' superiority on most relevant metrics, including overall freedom.

Inside and Outside the Liberal Consensus

This brings us to Deneen's third argumentative pillar: a hard distinction between "good" localism and "bad" statism. Deneen summarizes the sentiment in his first chapter's conclusion, where he leads the reader to believe that we must choose between "self-governance in local communities" and a "future in which extreme license coexists with extreme [statist] oppression."

But again, the success of social democracies — particularly Nordic nations, which have large public sectors — casts doubt on this dichotomy. The conservative skeptic might respond that these governments are operating on a small scale compared to the United States and that they might as well be considered experiments in localism. They might also raise demographic concerns, or maybe suggest that Scandinavians, along with the rest of the world's social democracies, free-ride off Pax Americana's stability, security, and prosperity.

There are plenty of reasons not to concede these points, one of them being that comparative assessments of welfare state versus neoliberal reforms *restricted to the United States* confirm social democratic intuitions. But adjudicating the larger debate is beyond the scope of this review. The point is simply that the debate itself points to the nebulousness of the localist mantra.

Perhaps Deneen is more practical than he appears. Maybe, in accordance with his warnings against dogma, he is just calling for a flexible subsidiarity. In other words, he simply wants to keep governance at the most local level possible. But if that is the case, the same can be said for a good many leftists.

As anyone who has spent any time on the Left can attest, the bulk of activists and organizers are suspicious of top-down mandates. They tend to genuinely believe in pluralism, and display pride in group chapters, community campaigns, or union locals. When they advocate large-scale state action, they do so because they don't believe their localism can overcome systemic injustices, many of which Deneen likewise says he opposes.

If the author of *Why Liberalism Failed* hopes to convince those of us on the Left that statism, tout court, is the problem, he must move beyond blanket dismissals and do the empirical work required, which means evaluating and comparing discrete policy outcomes. Otherwise, the complaint remains stranded on an island of mere tautology.

More rigor could have been deployed not only in the book's analysis of "progressive-liberal" statism, but in its examination of leftist thought in general (the fourth rhetorical motif). Like many conservative critics of anything to their left (and like many liberal or radical critics of anything to their right), Deneen has a bad habit of lumping together intellectuals and ideas that don't necessarily belong in the same basket.

Case in point: Deneen writes that "statism and individualism grow together while local institutions and respect for natural limits diminish." He goes on: "For all their differences, this ambition animated thinkers ranging from John Locke to John Dewey, from Francis Bacon to Francis Bellamy, from Adam Smith to Richard Rorty." Surely these figures share basic convictions about progress and justice when it comes to overturning this or that age-old oppression, but if the author's concessions to liberalism in the conclusion are to be taken at face value, then Deneen deserves to be placed in the same company.

The problem for the Notre Dame professor is that he wants to be positioned inside and outside this liberal consensus at the same time, and the only way he can pull off the magic trick is by convincing himself and everyone else that his opposition to illiberal injustices is somehow not liberal and that liberalism is somehow a more inegalitarian and authoritarian monolith than it actually is.

The latter impulse requires playing fast and loose with the thinking of classical liberals, Marxists, Progressives, New Deal liberals, neoliberals, and other left-of-right tendencies, as if they were all of the same unappealing piece. It is one thing, for example, to attack J.S. Mill as a doctrinaire proponent of replacing tradition and custom with economic management. It is quite another to then treat Mill as the embodiment of all liberalism and leftism, especially since so much of the left communitarian or socialist critique of Millian liberalism overlaps with the anticapitalist conservative one. (Mill's late-phase socialist interest in worker-owned and managed firms also suggests a more democratic sensibility than Deneen lets on.)

The list goes on. When writing about how "progressive-liberals" repudiate limits and restraints, he forgets about environmentalists and eco-socialists. When writing about how they lack any notion of self-control or discipline, he forgets about the temperance movement, neoliberal advocates of "grit," or any leftist who has ever dared to join a leftist party. When writing about

how they fetishize a politics of total autonomy or independence, he forgets about the vast feminist literature on interdependence, to say nothing of the religious left.

And his entire brief against an unyielding liberal individualism seems to have forgotten that Smith, one of the founders not just of modern economics but also of modern sociology, wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and the influential Progressive Era psychologist George Herbert Mead wrote the classic essay, “The Social Self” (1913).

Yet it is Deneen’s caricature of Mead’s fellow Pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, that really spotlights this analytic corner-cutting. Dewey is an important interstitial figure between liberalism and socialism, and he identified with both labels throughout his lengthy career as a doyen of American reform. If he really added up to the cartoon villain Deneen depicts him as (Deneen accuses Dewey of attempting to “eliminate culture”), that might say something real about the essence of “progressive-liberalism.”

But while it is true Dewey flirted with state capitalism before and during the Great War, his postwar trajectory gives the lie to Deneen’s indictment. In his final decades, Dewey developed a social vision that oscillated between a decentralized guild socialism and an industrial democracy. It was a politics sensitive to bureaucratic imperiousness and ecological limits. Most of all, it was a politics informed by the same continuity of nature and culture Deneen recommends — not a political culture set on conquering nature, but one committed to negotiating with it as an equal partner.

If only Deneen were to take up his own offer.

Hanging On “Natural” Hierarchies

As much as Deneen disclaims an uncompromising naturalism that leaves no room for cultural modification, this very dogma seems to crop up whenever he stumbles on norms he cares to maintain. This is the fifth crutch of the book. Deneen is mainly invested in naturalizing gender roles and sexual conventions, much like his reviled neoliberals naturalize markets and classes. Although he sees the second naturalization as coldly arbitrary, he accepts the first as gospel.

As he laments, “Natural conditions — such as those inescapably linked to the biological facts of human sexuality — [have come] to be regarded as ‘socially constructed.’” In Deneen’s mind, it is postmodern or poststructuralist tyrants calling for gender-neutral bathrooms who are responsible for “raw assertion[s] of power over restraints and limits,” and not those who assume the unlimited right to designate the genders of already marginalized groups.

This deceptive reversal of the actual power relations at work resembles the way that capitalism’s champions insist that their preferred economic system is natural while cursing policies that seek to attack its iniquities as “coercive.” Neither the Milton Friedmans nor Patrick Deneens of the world ever get around to explaining why the rest of us should prefer their coercive institutions to our less coercive subversions, but they remain forever dumbfounded when we don’t.

This is a key point since Deneen, following Burke, says culture and tradition signal a “deeper form of consent” than liberalism, “and succeeding generations may alter it if their experience and practices lead to different conclusions.” Putting aside the question of why liberalism is not itself understood as just another variety of culture and tradition, *Why Liberalism Fails* never explains

why the gender and sexual standards under review also lie outside any claim to alterability. The book's conclusion, in fact, leaves plenty of room for such alterability in other contexts.

This even includes statist mutability. In a stunning about-face that makes up the sixth step in the book's argument, Deneen celebrates liberalism's "ideals of liberty, equality, and justice." Were it not for these ideals, "slavery, bondage, inequality, disregard for the contributions of women, and arbitrary forms of hierarchy and application of law" would have never been reversed.

Why all of these injustices required reversal— all of which were justified at the time as natural — while Deneen's preferred forms of hierarchy and application of law require our full support is a question he never asks.

The sad reality is that for all of Deneen's commendable egalitarian instincts, he can't bring himself to accept a world where some sexes or genders are afforded the same prospects and privileges as others.

Women capable of giving birth and mothering must always be defined and determined by those capacities, just as men must always be free to be defined and determined by much more. Queer people must continue to live in a society that refuses them so that their refusers continue to be afforded the right to keep refusing. Trans people must forever suffer or die from dysphoria so that those who deride them can forever know they're standing up for God or virtue.

These logics are all, mind you, analogous to the logic of Jim Crow (even if Deneen would loudly protest). It is not egalitarianism that is the problem but an untethered individualism, he would say. He would then expound upon the long history of the wrong turn, the short history of the sexual revolution, the superiority of localism over statism, the evils of *all* progressive-liberals, and the irrevocable nature of sex and gender. Once finished, and once we had forgotten the main point, he would surprisingly assure us he too is a liberal. And he would be more right than wrong.

Except he, like so many of the anticapitalist conservatives that came before him, still wouldn't be able to let go of a cruel hierarchy or two. And that would have nothing to do with his disdain for what he calls expressive individualism. He would have just proven himself, after all, quite the expressive individual.