

# POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE CAROLINAS

## WHY LIBERALISM FAILED

***Patrick J. Deneen***

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 248 pages. ISBN: 9780300240023 (pbk.). Hardback/Paperback: \$30.00/18.00

Book Review by:

***Gregory J. Robson***

*Eudaimonia Institute at Wake Forest University, University of Arizona*

In his latest book, Patrick Deneen criticizes the reigning normative account of politics in theory and practice: liberalism. His central argument is that liberalism's successes, including its vast cultural diffusion and the material prosperity it has enabled, have led to profound cultural and other failures. For this reviewer, Deneen has not shown that liberalism (left or right) has failed, largely because of a hazy definition of the target of his critique and a lack of engagement with some key contemporary liberals. Among the book's positive aspects are Deneen's arguments for the need to reform certain social practices within broadly liberal societies.

Deneen attributes many failures to liberalism. Liberalism has enabled a pernicious economic materialism that upholds selfishness and greed as virtues. It has undermined culture and tradition by creating a consumerist monoculture. It has promoted a false view of education as valuable in launching careers but not in fostering civic engagement and moral virtue. It has spread a false understanding of liberty as freedom from external constraint rather than freedom to engage in virtuous self-restraint. And it has abjured tradition as the seat of virtue-based culture and the vehicle for its intergenerational transmission. In short, liberalism has entered our sociopolitical room as a Frankenstein-like monster (p. 11). Deneen exhorts us to call it what it is.

According to Deneen, liberalism arose out of Machiavelli's rejection of what he saw as Christendom's unrealistically high moral expectations; Hobbes's and others' denial of the value of custom and tradition in favor of abstract reasoning; and a new social goal

of controlling nature through science in order to better realize human desires (pp. 24–27). What Deneen calls liberalism (on which more soon) is an alternative to the political ideologies of fascism and communism (p. 5). In its “most basic and distinctive aspect,” says Deneen, liberalism “base[s] politics upon the idea of voluntarism—the unfettered and autonomous choice of individuals” (p. 31). Deneen also characterizes liberalism as a form of anti-culture. Liberalism calls for the conquest of nature and our traditional relation to it, renders citizens radically disconnected from the past and future, and promotes the problematic sense that where one lives is always open to question and change (pp. 65–66). With characteristic eloquence, Deneen observes:

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. (p. 3)

Whether Deneen achieves his hoped-for takedown of liberalism depends, of course, on what he takes liberalism to be. But we do not get a full and perspicuous characterization. What, exactly, is he critiquing? Deneen proceeds as if the target is liberalism as such; however, liberalisms form a large and diverse set. Diverse liberal theorists arguably do share a commitment to the twin notions that (a) freedom is normatively fundamental in a sociopolitical system, and (b) restrictions on freedom require moral justification (see Gaus, Courtland, and Schmitz, “Liberalism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, revised 2018). But after that, the field divides among, for instance, negative-, positive-, and republican-liberty liberals. Different liberal theories will thus be differentially susceptible to

Deneen’s many criticisms, leaving readers to wonder at various points whether, and if so exactly how, they are susceptible. In addition, Deneen contrasts liberalism with (a) communism and fascism rather than (b) conservatism and socialism. These are distinct distinctions. It would be helpful to know exactly why (a) is the right comparison class for Deneen’s theoretical critique of liberalism. For liberalism, conservatism, and socialism are “three enduring political theories and arguably the three most important of the past two hundred years” (Gaus, *Political Concepts and Political Theories*, Oxford: Westview Press, 2000, p. 47).

Deneen claims to target the liberalism of political philosophers. Yet Rawls and Nozick—who, with Hayek, are perhaps the ablest defenders of liberalism since Mill—go essentially undiscussed. By contrast, Hobbes, a major political theorist but a proto-liberal at most, receives substantial discussion. Deneen’s text also includes less discussion than one might expect of leading liberal theorists today, such as Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, who directly address Deneen’s concerns about the relationship between liberal political life and the cultivation of virtue (see, e.g., Rasmussen and Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2005, pp. 50–62 and *passim*).

Of course, a short book that spans eras and disciplines cannot include all that deserves to be included. But I would have liked to have seen more explicit and thorough engagement with, in particular, the central liberal view that it is either not moral or not feasible for governments to coerce people to become more virtuous.

Deneen discusses a fairly wide range of historical liberal theorists. I found the discussion of Tocqueville on the cultivation of democratic virtues particularly illuminating (e.g., pp. 173–77). Certain inadequacies again set back the account, however.

Consider Locke's morally and socially rich state of nature, where the laws of nature always apply and social life is full of associations, norms, and institutions. This, we are told, is a "nonrelational" state in which, morally, "everything that can be willed by an individual can be done" (p. 48; see also p. 185 on "the architects of liberalism"). This is no true version of Locke, perhaps the founder of liberalism, much less the best available for productive dialectical engagement. Similarly, take the sample claim that liberals desire "ever-accelerating economic growth and pervasive consumption" (p. 40). Here, as usual, defenders of liberalism do not speak with one voice. As for "ever-accelerating economic growth," Deneen argues as if he were unaware that important liberals (e.g., Mill) claim that a nongrowth or stationary state might be desirable since it might mitigate materialism, inequality, and virtue-undermining competition. And regarding "pervasive consumption," every serious liberal theorist (e.g., Adam Smith) recognizes, commonsensically, that consumption can sometimes be bad for people and, indeed, too pervasive. Liberal theorists typically deny that even if S somehow fully satisfied S's actual preferences qua consumer, this would suffice for S to be *eudaimon*. People rightly care about more than consumption. Deneen also criticizes Hayek's support of a socioeconomic system that seems to yield deep inequality (p. 139). But here Deneen fails to consider Hayek's well-known call for "the assurance of a certain minimum income for everyone, or a sort of floor below which nobody need fall even when he is unable to provide for himself" (*Law, Legislation, and Liberty: The Political Order of a Free People* (vol. 3), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 55). Hayek did care more about understanding how a society can meet the needs of its worst-off members than how it can eliminate inequalities. A universal basic income, however, would presumably go a long way toward

reducing socioeconomic inequality.

Deneen hopes that a new, postliberal way of political thinking and life might emerge "out of the fostering of new and better selves, porously invested in the fate of other selves" via "the cultivation of cultures of community, care, self-sacrifice and small-scale democracy" (p. 20). This is an inspiring call for responsive local governance and deeply interdependent communities. Suppose, arguendo, then, that this desirable political state of affairs cannot realistically be achieved under liberalism. Even so, to know whether sociopolitical system A is worth retaining, reforming, or (as Deneen proposes) replacing, we need to know how A *compares* with feasible alternatives B, C, ... N. We also need to know *how* to compare them, a formidable epistemic challenge in its own right. Here the book at best offers vague, thinly sketched solutions to liberalism's alleged woes. Deneen argues that we should acknowledge liberalism's successes, move beyond political ideology, and develop "practices that foster new forms of culture, household economics, and polis life" (p. 183). However, if we are to achieve a "humane postliberal future," these are far from detailed ways to get from here to there (p. 184). In the absence of a well-worked-out alternative, we cannot be sure that some version of liberalism, warts and all, will not be the best available political system.

Deneen has not shown that liberalism has failed. He has shown, at most, why some versions of liberalism fall short. In this regard, the book seems to do little damage to the most important theories of the last 150 years: those which such a critique manifestly ought to target. We get a critique of theoretically unattractive versions of liberalism rather than the diverse and sophisticated arguments developed by liberals such as Mill, Hayek, Rawls, and Nozick.

A final worrisome feature of the book is that, while it is billed as a takedown of liberalism in

theory, it is focused far more on criticizing historical theories and identifying problems with liberal political societies in practice. These are fine aims to pursue, but not central if the point is to demolish liberalism in theory. At the least, the book has a somewhat awkward dialectical strategy: it shifts between theoretical and practical critique, which increases the risk of doing neither very effectively.

Despite its shortcomings, the book does have several positive aspects. As I see them, these include the arguments that some practical forms of liberalism (e.g., overly consumerist ones) ought to be reformed even if, despite Deneen's inclination, not fully replaced; the best kind of human freedom is not freedom to do as one pleases; education is about more than practical training; citizens must remain ever willing to critically reflect on how best to live together as a political community; and social practices within liberal regimes, however they relate to the political liberalism that contemporary theorists discuss, have degraded cultures by, for instance, undermining community. Again, though, many and maybe all of these claims are ones that liberals of various stripes have the theoretical resources to take on board.

In conclusion, Deneen has articulated many problems with what he calls liberalism. In so doing, he has issued a standing invitation to sophisticated liberals to respond.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. I thank Daniel Cummings for comments and the Eudaimonia Institute at Wake Forest University for supporting my research.