

David Brooks, “How Democracies Fail” –*The New York Times*,
January 11, 2018

Everybody agrees society is in a bad way, but what exactly is the main cause of the badness? Some people emphasize economic issues: The simultaneous concentration of wealth at the top and the stagnation in the middle has delegitimized the system. People like me emphasize cultural issues. If you have 60 years of radical individualism and ruthless meritocracy, you’re going to end up with a society that is atomized, distrustful and divided.

But some emphasize the intellectual. The people who designed our liberal democratic system made fundamental errors, which are now coming home to roost. Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen falls into this camp. His new book, “[Why Liberalism Failed](#),” is a challenge to those of us who want to revive the liberal democratic order. It will attract a cult following among those who are losing faith in the whole project.

Deneen argues that liberal democracy has betrayed its promises. It was supposed to foster equality, but it has led to great inequality and a new aristocracy. It was supposed to give average people control over government, but average people feel alienated from government. It was supposed to foster liberty, but it creates a degraded popular culture in which consumers become slave to their appetites.

Many young people feel trapped in a system they have no faith in. Deneen quotes one of his students: “Because we view humanity — and thus its institutions — as corrupt and selfish, the only person we can rely upon is our self. The only way we can avoid failure, being let down, and ultimately succumbing to the chaotic world around us, therefore, is to have the means (financial security) to rely only upon ourselves.”

The problem, Deneen argues, started at the beginning. Greek and medieval philosophies valued liberty, but they understood that

before a person could help govern society, he had to be able to govern himself. People had to be habituated in virtue by institutions they didn't choose — family, religion, community, social norms.

But under the influence of Machiavelli and Locke, the men who founded our system made two fateful errors. First, they came to reject the classical and religious idea that people are political and relational creatures. Instead, they placed the autonomous, choosing individual at the center of their view of human nature.

Furthermore, they decided you couldn't base a system of government on something as unreliable as virtue. But you could base it on something low and steady like selfishness. You could pit interest against interest and create a stable machine. You didn't have to worry about creating noble citizens; you could get by with rationally self-interested ones.

When communism and fascism failed in the 20th century, this version of liberalism seemed triumphant. But it was a Pyrrhic victory, Deneen argues.

Liberalism claims to be neutral but it's really anti-culture. It detaches people from nature, community, tradition and place. It detaches people from time. "Gratitude to the past and obligations to the future are replaced by a nearly universal pursuit of immediate gratification."

Once family and local community erode and social norms dissolve, individuals are left naked and unprotected. They seek solace in the state. They toggle between impersonal systems: globalized capitalism and the distant state. As the social order decays, people grasp for the security of authoritarianism. "A signal feature of modern totalitarianism was that it arose and came to power through the discontents of people's isolation and loneliness," he observes. He urges people to dedicate themselves

instead to local community — a sort of Wendell Berry agrarianism.

Deneen's book is valuable because it focuses on today's central issue. The important debates now are not about policy. They are about the basic values and structures of our social order. Nonetheless, he is wrong. Liberal democracy has had a pretty good run for 300 years. If the problem were really in the roots, wouldn't it have shown up before now?

The difficulties stem not from anything inherent in liberalism but from the fact that we have neglected the moral order and the vision of human dignity embedded within liberalism itself. As anybody who's read John Stuart Mill, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Vaclav Havel, Michael Novak and Meir Soloveichik knows, liberal democracy contains a rich and soul-filling version of human flourishing and solidarity, which Deneen airbrushes from history.

Every time Deneen writes about virtue it tastes like castor oil — self-denial and joylessness. But the liberal democratic moral order stands for the idea that souls are formed in freedom and not in servility, in expansiveness, not in stagnation. It stands for the idea that our covenantal institutions — like family, faith, tradition and community — orient us toward higher loves and common dreams that we then pursue in the great gymnasium of liberty.

Yes, liberalism sometimes sits in tension with faith, tradition, family and community, which Deneen rightly cherishes. But liberalism is not their murderer. Right now, there are community healers in towns and cities concretely living out the liberal democratic vision of the good life — deeply embedded in their communities, surrendered to their ideals, reaching out to other communities, growing in their freedom.

We don't have to settle for smallness.

