

*The Wall Street Journal* – January 13, 2018

---

## WHY LIBERALISM FAILED

---

By Patrick J. Deneen - *Yale*, 225 pages, \$30  
*Reviewed By Tod Lindberg*

First, a point about the title of Patrick J. Deneen’s “Why Liberalism Failed”: While the failure he alleges does indeed encompass the progressive element in American politics, Mr. Deneen’s target is much bigger. The “liberalism” that has failed, in his telling, is the very project of modernity itself, whose origins date to the 16th and 17th centuries and whose signal political achievement, arriving in the 18th century, was the founding of the United States. Yes, *that* “failure”—and *that* liberalism.

Liberalism went wrong from the beginning, in Mr. Deneen’s view. Its fundamental innovation was to define politics around the liberty of the individual, the protection of whose rights is the purpose of government. Thomas Hobbes reasoned about a “state of nature” in which human beings stand weak and afraid, their lives “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” They band together to create an all-powerful state—“Leviathan,” as he called it—to provide relief from this condition and from the fear of violent death that goes with it. But the human quest to use politics to improve on natural conditions only begins here. Building as well on Machiavelli and Francis Bacon, liberalism seeks not an accommodation with nature and human convention but mastery over nature and liberation from convention. By way of John Locke, who saw human beings as naturally reasonable and tolerant and saw politics as a way of securing their individual liberty, it’s a short step to the American Founders and the Bill of Rights.

Modern-day American progressives and conservatives are thus two sides of the same coin: Politically, they are both concerned with the protection of

rights, the difference being the kind of rights they emphasize. For conservatives, it's property rights: the idea that one is entitled to the fruits of one's labor. For progressives, it's rights of self-actualization: the idea that as an individual you are free to "follow your bliss," in Joseph Campbell's famous phrase.

The "liberty" that makes up our modern liberalism, in Mr. Deneen's telling, is a bastardization of a far superior conception of liberty with roots in the ancient world: In classical philosophy, liberty was the overcoming of passions that, unchecked, render humans slaves to the worst in their nature. True freedom wasn't license to do as one wishes but the cultivation of the best possibilities of the human condition.

At a relatively high level—say, the sort of person Aristotle was addressing in his "Nicomachean Ethics"—the cultivation of virtue could produce a true gentleman and refine the impulses of a potential tyrant. For ordinary human beings, the "culture" into which they were born—their ties to a particular place with local habits, customs and standards of conduct—fulfilled a similar function, instructing them collectively in how they should live.

In short, the older view of liberty included a vision of how to live a good life that modern liberalism has decided human beings can do without. Mr. Deneen thinks that this shift has been a disaster, both for the human beings forced to hew to liberalism's rudderless individualist ethos and for civilization.

But, one may say, hasn't liberalism in the classical sense been rather successful? Hasn't it managed to improve living conditions for, well, billions of people—to give them unprecedented say in their government and control over their lives? In fact, hasn't it achieved a certain global dominance? Mr. Deneen doesn't dispute this. Rather he argues that, as

liberalism succeeds and becomes more fully itself, it “generates endemic pathologies more rapidly and pervasively than it is able to produce Band-Aids and veils to cover them.”

He sees evidence of liberalism’s failure in the 2008 financial crisis; the new extremes in economic inequality; the reckoning due human beings from climate change; and the collapse of public confidence in self-government. All result, he says, from the rampant unchaining of human appetite as a matter of individual right. Liberalism fails, Mr. Deneen says, because “at the end of the path of liberation lies enslavement. Such liberation from all obstacles is finally illusory, for two simple reasons: human appetite is insatiable and the world is limited.”

Mr. Deneen has written a serious book offering a radical critique of modernity, and he has taken the trouble to do so both concisely and engagingly. His insights as well as his crotchets in pursuit of his argument are often arresting. He writes compellingly on the growth of government in tandem with the spread of liberal market principles, for example, noting that a supposed preference for “limited government” has been no match for the demand for expanding government enforcement of individual rights. And how much more cranky could one be than to challenge Great Books programs on campus on the grounds that “many of these books were the source of the very forces displacing the study of old books”?

Mr. Deneen makes a point of saying that he doesn’t want to try to go back to pre-liberal times, in which hierarchical authority imposed absolute limits on human possibility—the dark side of “culture” shaping people’s pursuit of a “good life.” He argues instead for a practical effort to recultivate, within liberal society, the local sense of community and culture, household and family, that once shaped human fulfillment and that liberalism has disrupted. That sounds like a desirable choice for many people, but it is indeed a choice: a voluntary arrangement—in short, a liberal arrangement.

It's also noteworthy that Mr. Deneen does not have to propose sailing off to some undiscovered country to pursue his vision. That's because his community would readily find the security and freedom it requires within liberalism's horizon.

*—Mr. Lindberg is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and the author, most recently, of “The Heroic Heart: Greatness Ancient and Modern.”*