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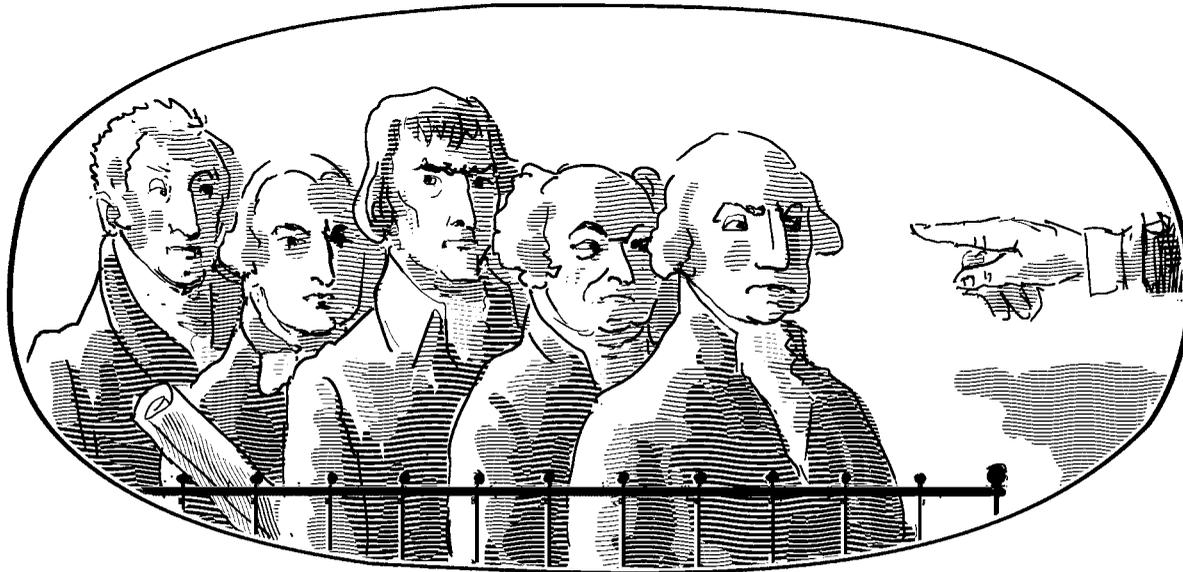
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Book Review by Dennis Hale and Marc Landy

BLAME THE FATHERS

Why Liberalism Failed, by Patrick J. Deneen.
Yale University Press, 248 pages, \$30



In the Dock

PATRICK DENEEN'S CRI DE COEUR ON liberalism's failure has received favorable comments left and right, from Cornel West to Wilfred McClay. The proximate cause for this reception is that American politics threatens to come unglued—indeed, the constitutional order itself is said to be unravelling. The evidence for this despairing assessment is partly the election of Donald Trump and partly the long-term failure of the political class in Washington.

Deneen, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, has taken on the enormous challenge of explaining why, centuries after its founding, the regime of classical liberalism appears to have gone into the ditch. He sees evidence of liberalism's failure everywhere: incompetent government, a sordid culture, empty churches, failed schools, increasing anxiety caused by "titanic" levels of inequality, and a soulless quest by so many for the gratification of merely material desires. But liberalism has not failed in the conventional sense: the case is rather the opposite. Deneen argues that liberalism is actually *fulfilled* by the ruin we see around us, because ruin is the inevitable outcome of the regime its founders devised. "Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded."

"Liberalism" in this context means the classical liberalism of John Locke, et al., the tradition that produced the modern liberal state, and in particular the American Constitution. The framers appear in this discussion as mere disciples of Locke, and what Deneen says about one usually applies to the other, and none of it is good. Classical liberalism is contrasted, unfavorably, with the philosophical attachments of the ancients. The ancient understanding of liberty, Deneen argues, involved "discipline and training in self-limitation of desires" as well as certain social and political arrangements that would foster the virtues required for self-rule.

But liberalism changed all that, rejecting the ancient view in favor of a new "anthropology" because the older views had come to be seen as a source of conflict, and as "obstacles to individual liberty." Liberal thinkers sought to "disassemble" existing "irrational religious and social norms" in the interest of "stability and prosperity." This would be an obvious point in the argument to take up the Protestant Reformation, but Deneen never mentions it in his book, leaving us to wonder why those norms suddenly became an obstacle to "stability." The liberal project is thus presented as a work of sheer "disassembly," not as an attempt to solve a new and difficult problem.

DENEEN MAINTAINS THAT LIBERALISM chose to rest politics solely on what is "low" rather than "high," rejecting as "paternalistic and ineffectual" the classical and Christian understanding of virtue. Following Machiavelli's lead, classical liberalism grounded liberty and political security not on virtue but on conflict, harnessing "human selfishness and the desire for material goods" rather than seeking to "moderate or limit those desires." Further, the architects of liberalism rejected both the ancient and the Christian understanding of the "norms and social structures" that once supported all institutions from the family to the government itself. These norms were declared to be "arbitrary" and "unproductive," and would have to be replaced by "conflict" and "interests" as the regulators of human action. Finally, Francis Bacon is brought into the discussion to declare war on "the human subjection to the dominion and limits of nature."

Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Descartes—these thinkers laid the foundation for classical liberalism, with its "revolutionary reconception of politics, society, science, and nature." Over time, this tradition redefined liberty as "liberation...from established authority" and from "arbitrary" cultures and traditions. Human power would now focus on "dominating" nature, "advancing scientific discovery and

economic prosperity.” Deneen describes this as liberalism’s “wager”—that a new understanding of liberty would emerge from the “destruction” of old philosophic and religious traditions. Liberalism triumphed; the wager worked. Classical liberalism gave birth to the American republic and in the 20th century triumphed over the competing ideologies of fascism and Communism.

But this triumph has hidden the grim truth that “the greatest current threat to liberalism lies not outside and beyond liberalism but within it,” from its “fundamental nature” and its alleged “strengths”—especially its “belief in progress and continual improvement.” Yet liberalism continues to insist that, whatever is wrong, the solution can still be found within liberalism itself. Liberalism is in denial.

TO MANY READERS, MUCH OF WHAT DENEEN has to say about classical liberalism and the founding will sound familiar—because these same charges were levelled a century ago by such leading Progressives as Herbert Croly, Edward Bellamy, and John Dewey, and have been restated over and over by their modern descendants. Indeed, parts of *Why Liberalism Failed* read like the Port Huron Statement.

Like the Progressives, Deneen places the “corrosive social and civic effects of self-interest”—which are a direct result of liberalism’s substitution of self-interest for virtue—at the center of his indictment. Because Americans are driven primarily by “private and largely material concerns” they live out their lives in a constitutional regime “animated” by two foundational liberal beliefs. The first is “anthropological individualism” with its corollary, “choice.” We proceed under the assumption that politics can be based on the “unfettered and autonomous choice of individuals” and that “legitimacy is conferred by consent.” The second belief is alienation from, and even war against, nature. Though both Hobbes and Locke (borrowing Aristotle’s method but not his conclusions) assert that humans have a “nature” with which the political order must comport, classical liberalism increasingly came to see nature as something to be overcome, even “tortured” for her “secrets.”

We have, Deneen contends, been “warring” against nature ever since. From Locke to free enterprise is but one small step, and it is free enterprise that has perfected the “human use, conquest, and mastery of the natural world.” But we master the world only to slake the thirst for “instant gratification” inspired by liberalism’s founders, whose philosophy promotes a “nearly universal pursuit of immediate gratification” along with “hedonic titilla-

tion, visceral crudeness, and distraction, all oriented toward promoting consumption, appetite, and detachment.”

HERE IS REVEALED THE SOURCE OF such discontents and vices as loneliness, addiction, broken families, pornography, sexual violence, materialism, and corrosive individualism. Liberalism has created a world of selfish strivers, unhinged from community and even family, angry at the trap they find themselves in but clueless as to who or what has trapped them. In their despair, just as Alexis de Tocqueville predicted, they turn to the state, “which establishes depersonalized procedures and mechanisms for the wants and needs” of those left behind by the market. Or they turn to the market for the gratification of endless “needs” inspired by the market itself. “[T]he true relation between the state and the market” is that “they grow constantly and necessarily together. Statism enables individualism, individualism demands statism.” In the process, liberalism breaks down particular cultures, and replaces them with a “liberal anticulture” so that the only forms of “shared cultural ‘liturgy’ that remain are celebrations of the liberal state and the liberal market.” Even the modern university has become corrupted, turning the liberal arts into “instruments of personal liberation,” destroying any sense of the past, and undermining the legitimacy of the humanities.

The book concludes with observations about the kinds of “countercultures” that might replace liberal anticulture after the liberal order’s demise. Yet Deneen warns against committing the original sin of theorizing. “[T]he impulse to devise a new and better theory in the wake of liberalism’s simultaneous triumph and demise is a temptation that must be resisted.” He recommends rather that people of goodwill withdraw into “communities of practice” which will act as “lighthouses and field hospitals” for the growing ranks of liberalism’s victims. We will look for “practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures...grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life.”

Books that attempt to explain everything have predictable weaknesses: overly simple explanations; incomplete or misleading summaries of other peoples’ ideas; wishful thinking. Such books also have predictable attractions. The very attempt to explain everything gives hope that everything might actually be explainable. But a book such as this must be judged by standards that honor its ambition, and this book falls short in three important ways. 1) It does not understand John Locke or classical liberalism generally, and therefore it does not

understand the framers. Among other problems, it does not understand how the framers differed from Locke. 2) Focused as he is on liberalism, Deneen does not recognize that phenomena such as individualism and materialism predate liberalism, and we have Tocqueville’s explanation for why: these are the consequences of the democratic revolution, which is far older than classical liberalism. 3) Deneen conflates classical liberalism with modern progressivism—a mistake that prevents him from seeing the obvious: progressives have always considered classical liberalism, and especially the framers, as their prime targets.

When criticizing the modern university, for example, Deneen begins by blaming capitalism and globalism. The campus, he says, exists to “separate the winners from the losers.” But he then veers off into a critique of the thoroughly *illiberal* identity politics being imposed nearly everywhere. How can Deneen look at the modern university and see the handiwork of John Locke—who is just one of the many dead white males that advanced liberal thinkers have been teaching us to hate for most of the past century, and who have been expelled from the curriculum nearly everywhere?

DENEEN READS LOCKE, SIMPLY, AS A founder of the regime of self-interest, promoting individualism, materialism, irreverence, and a lack of concern for virtue or excellence. Later these same sins will appear as the sins of the framers. Is this accurate? Deneen is surely right that the *Second Treatise* marks a radical break with the past. What he does not see, however, is *why* Locke believed such a break was necessary—insisting that Locke’s singular motive was the substitution of self-interest for classical and Christian virtues. Let us suggest a few more plausible explanations.

There is first of all the reality of the Reformation. Any intelligent reader in Locke’s lifetime would understand the meaning of the century’s religious wars: a unified understanding of Christianity was no longer available as the foundation for a regime, especially not in Britain. But because Deneen does not acknowledge the Reformation, even while he is mourning the lost power of the Christian faith, he does not see what Locke saw. The Commonwealth cannot be grounded in faith, even though Locke’s remedy—toleration—is troubling. The Puritan minister Nathaniel Ward preached that anyone who would tolerate a false religion must have no faith in his own, and many Christians in Europe and in North America agreed. Unlike the protection of “life, liberty, and estate,” religious toleration is counterintuitive.

It is also in many ways deeply unsatisfactory to the soul, and there is no doubt that



it could undermine the authority of religion. Liberalism itself might be unsatisfactory for that reason, but there is no peaceful solution to sectarian conflict that does not rest on some variety of tolerance. Resting the commonwealth on a foundation *other* than religion was therefore one among many *necessities* that, taken together, constitute the problem of modern politics. But Deneen pays no attention to the problem of modern politics, and therefore cannot appreciate how Locke and the founding generation wrestled with it.

THE OTHER REALITY IS THE LOST AUTHORITY of the monarchy and aristocracy. Locke's task is to reimagine the political association *without* its most familiar English elements, in order to reconstruct it. There's a reason, after all, why Locke never put his name to the *Second Treatise*, even after the Glorious Revolution. The work is deeply subversive, and not only of the monarchy: in Locke's imagined commonwealth there are also no churches, priests, or aristocrats. What would replace these now depleted authorities would be reason and popular consent. His fanciful story about the state of nature is illustrative rather than literal, giving the reader a way to see government as a thing to which a reasonable citizen should consent.

Deneen emphasizes that the liberal state rests on the two foundations of individualism and materialism, and that this marks a profound break with the past. He blames Locke, but the situation is far more complicated, as we learn from Tocqueville. *Individualism* is a "recent expression arising from a new idea," writes the Frenchman, and becomes, at its extreme, a form of social atomism that turns liberty into license. Tocqueville is intent on warning modern democrats to pay attention to this danger. But the idea itself "is of democratic origin, and it threatens to develop as conditions become equal." That is, it is not a product of modern philosophy but of modern democracy. The democratic social revolution also predates Locke, having advanced continually (Tocqueville claims) for seven centuries. Its origins lie in the gradual transformation of land tenures from feudal to commercial. The sale of noble lands makes possible the transformation of peasants into freeholders, the beginning of a profoundly important social revolution.

There's another essential source of individualism, and that is the *Christian* doctrine of equality. Again, we have Tocqueville's wisdom to draw on: "Christianity, which has rendered all men equal before God, will not be loath to see all citizens equal before the

law." Individualism and equality grow together. What about materialism? This too is democratic. There is an undercurrent of anxious materialism in any democratic society, Tocqueville argues, and he hoped Americans would learn to confront this problem. Like individualism, materialism is also much older than liberalism, and can be found in places, such as China, where Locke's name is barely known.

MODERN LIBERALISM, TO BE SURE, does not solve the problems of materialism and individualism, but it provides a way to channel these energies in a positive direction—away from political conflict, and toward the creation of abundance, just as Tocqueville hoped. Material abundance is not an unmixed blessing, to be sure; but it's worth remembering that it *is* a blessing. To mention just one example, modern liberal regimes have put an end to famine, which exists now only in places from which liberalism has been expelled (Venezuela) or where it never existed (Yemen).

Parts of *Why Liberalism Failed* read like the Port Huron Statement.

Assuming, as he does, that the framers were simply applying Locke to the new world, Deneen misses the ways in which they *did* pay attention to, rather than ignore, the question of civic virtue. They worried publicly about virtue and vice, especially the vice of acquisitiveness. James Madison complained about "fripperies," and John Adams praised sumptuary laws. What would people want when they could have more than their ancestors could ever have dreamed? This is a problem for which the founding generation did not have a ready solution, any more than we do. They did not leave us an essay in *The Federalist* on the subject of virtue, but they did have ideas: public education; the encouragement of religion; setting salutary examples.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, in addition to prohibiting slavery in the territory bounded by the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, stated: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall *forever* be encouraged" (emphasis added). To that end the Ordinance mandated the establishment of public schools

and set aside land for that purpose. Eight of the existing states did the same. Pennsylvania's Constitution required that "laws for the encouragement of virtue, and prevention of vice and immorality, shall be made and constantly kept in force." The decision in favor of federalism meant that the states, not the federal government, would exercise those police powers central to the promotion of "public morality," sometimes in ways that interfered with a free market (price regulations, for example). Family law, education, the prevention of vice, regulating trades, Sabbath and sumptuary laws, licensing, marriage and divorce, the elaborate framework of the civil and criminal law, the jury system—these were responsibilities that could only be done safely, and properly, by the states.

WHAT NATIONAL LEADERS COULD do—what they *must* do—is keep the question of virtue alive, and work to preserve the free space in which citizens will be able to act on their own. In his First Inaugural Address, George Washington reminded the nation that "there is no truth more thoroughly established" than the "indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity."

What a liberal constitution *cannot* do, however, is satisfy the heart's deepest longings for redemption, salvation, communion, and perfection. Constitutionalism deflects these longings away from the political order, while not inhibiting their satisfaction in the private. Deneen doesn't see this, even though it is right in front of him. He praises the Amish as an example of a virtuous intentional community, without noticing an obvious fact: the Amish—who had to flee persecution in Europe—could flourish only under the protection of a liberal constitution. The genius of liberalism is that where it does not provide answers, it creates the space in which citizens can come up with answers of their own. This is why it's called *self-government*, after all—the citizens will govern their *selves* first, and then govern their community.

But the greatest weakness of Deneen's criticism of the American Founding is his indifference to the *problems* the framers confronted, and the *necessities* that flow from those problems. These are the problems of modernity, and they are with us still. The nation was huge and could not be made small, but was clearly destined to grow bigger, a source of concern to Federalist and Anti-Federalist alike. Alexander Hamilton confessed that he was "much

discouraged by the amazing extent of country” and many others shared this fear. But greater size could not be avoided, because Americans (and Europeans who hoped to become Americans) were crazy for owning land and would continue to push westward. But national security also required a large nation. Then, as now, the world was a dangerous place, although Deneen writes as if he doesn’t know this either. The founders did know it, which is why they accepted the challenge of the large republic and pushed for a national government energetic and strong enough to protect national security.

DENEEN ALSO MISSES HOW THE FRAMERS depart from, or simply transcend Locke, relying on English common law principles, older ideas about “mixed regimes,” and a century and a half of experience in self-government. This is most evident in their appreciation for liberal government’s *complexity*. What is often criticized as their “mechanical” understanding (the “machine that would go of itself,” a phrase they did not use) is the product of serious reflection on human nature in general, and on the nature of *Americans* in particular.

To take just one example, there is the problem of ambition. Locke was no stranger to it, but in his world the ambitious were the few. Experience had taught Americans that it is not only the few who need watching, however, but also the many. This is why the Constitution is not democratic. Neither the many nor the few can be allowed to have whatever they wish. Instead, they will have to accept restraints imposed by law and by the limitations on the government. But these are not *mechanical* restraints. The Constitution encourages a discipline meant to become habitual: no one’s ambitions can be completely satisfied but should take second place to upholding the *forms* of constitutional government, which are designed to put an end to the destructive contest among the ambitious that had brought down so many republics in the past.

This is the essence of “checks and balances,” linking the “interest of the man” with the “constitutional rights of the place,” as *The Federalist* puts it. It is a rule of psychology, not physics. Checks and balances rely on a certain understanding of how “honorable ambition” can be harnessed for the public good. To achieve anything memorable an official will need to defend his own place while looking for opportunities to work with others. The ambitious are invited to participate in a complex dance, whose outcome is not predictable, and which sometimes comes to naught. But all successful American states-

men learn this lesson. Ronald Reagan and Tip O’Neill golfed together for reasons more important than the pleasure each took in the other’s company.

DENEEN USES A CURIOUS PHRASE, “Advanced liberalism,” to describe one of the causes of our contemporary crisis. “Advanced liberalism,” for example, is responsible for the decline of the university, the erosion of the family, the rise of an overbearing administrative state, the contempt for religion, and the degradation of the popular culture. But it is clear from the context that what he really is talking about is not classical liberalism—neither Locke nor the founders—but Progressivism and the project of the modern Left.

Deneen, a student of Tocqueville, recognizes that Americans’ love of equality draws them toward centralization, a development encouraged by their unrestrained individualism. This is another consequence of democratization, and it is a tendency that the Constitution inhibits, by limiting what the federal government may do—whether “the people” want it or not. This is, of course, one of the reasons for the rise of Progressivism, which saw “limited government” as an outmoded 18th-century conceit.

Of course, it’s a long and winding road from Herbert Croly to safe spaces and political correctness, and it’s easy to imagine Croly spinning in his grave at the prospect of gender-neutral pronouns. But there is a clear link between the early American Progressives, the New Left radicals of the 1960s, and their contemporary descendants. That link is the hostility they all show to constitutionalism, because constitutionalism stands in the way of progress and liberation.

Thus, by using the term “advanced liberalism” Deneen conflates those who defend constitutionalism with those who hate it. The first American Progressives constructed a now familiar critique. The constitutional order was not “democratic” enough. It threw too many obstacles in the way of achieving the common good. It was an 18th-century government for a 20th-century world. As Teddy Roosevelt famously observed, mere “parchment barriers” should never be allowed to stand in the way of progress. The constitutional order must be overthrown. America must be transformed.

And America *has* been transformed. Much of that transformation is responsible for the degradation of democratic life that Deneen so rightly mourns. The culture has become sordid, family life is in disarray, whole swaths of the country lie in economic and social ruins, state and municipal governments are facing bankruptcy, the schools are a disgrace, and the university has lost its way. We have failed

in many ways to meet Benjamin Franklin’s challenge: we have not kept the republic. We have forgotten many things that should have been remembered, while wasting our time on the frivolous.

DENEEN IS RIGHT TO CASTIGATE THESE serious failings. But who told us to legalize pornography or normalize single-parent families and teenage pregnancy? The understanding of liberty as a release from responsibility—for one’s neighbors, country, family, and self—is the very dread that moved Tocqueville to write *Democracy in America*. Yet this was not the framers’ understanding of liberty, which is one reason why Tocqueville believed it was providential that they had managed to hang on as long as they did.

To adapt constitutionally liberal solutions to our current problems would require us to do something like what the framers did. They also faced problems they were not certain they could solve, and necessities that they could not ignore. We would first of all have to think seriously about the *modern* problem of civic virtue. What does it entail now? How can it be promoted? What strategies are likely to work? What guidance can we take from the framers in this effort? Granted, James Madison has no solution to the opioid epidemic. But what Madison and his generation had to say about virtue and civic education is worth knowing, if only to remind ourselves how difficult the problem of virtue is in a free republic. What is even more critical is to understand their defense of constitutionalism, a subject as foreign to many Americans as the dietary habits of Samoa. And for this, too, we can thank “advanced liberalism.” Howard Zinn’s absurd textbook—*A Peoples’ History of the United States*—has sold over 2 million copies and constitutes everything that many young Americans know about their country’s history.

Deneen has it backwards. Liberalism hasn’t failed; it is being destroyed. Its defenders must demonstrate, all over again, why a government limited with regard to both ends and means is not only necessary to prevent despotism but is the only practical framework for addressing modernity’s ills. It remains, just as Abraham Lincoln said, “the last best hope of earth.”

Dennis Hale is the author of The Jury in America: Triumph and Decline (University Press of Kansas), and Marc Landy is the co-author (with Sidney M. Milkis) of American Government: Enduring Principles, Critical Choices (Cambridge University Press). They are both members of the Political Science Department at Boston College.

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