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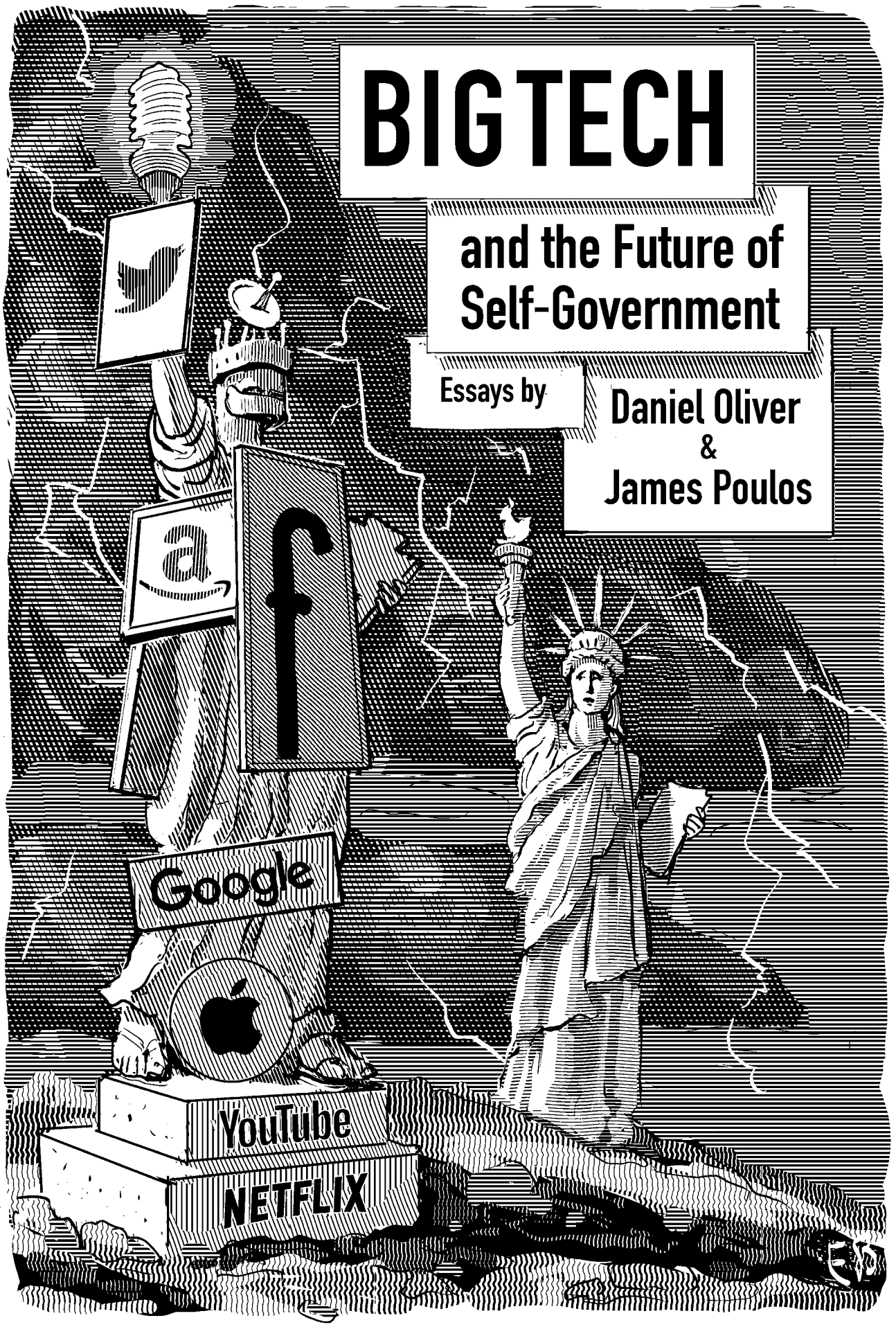

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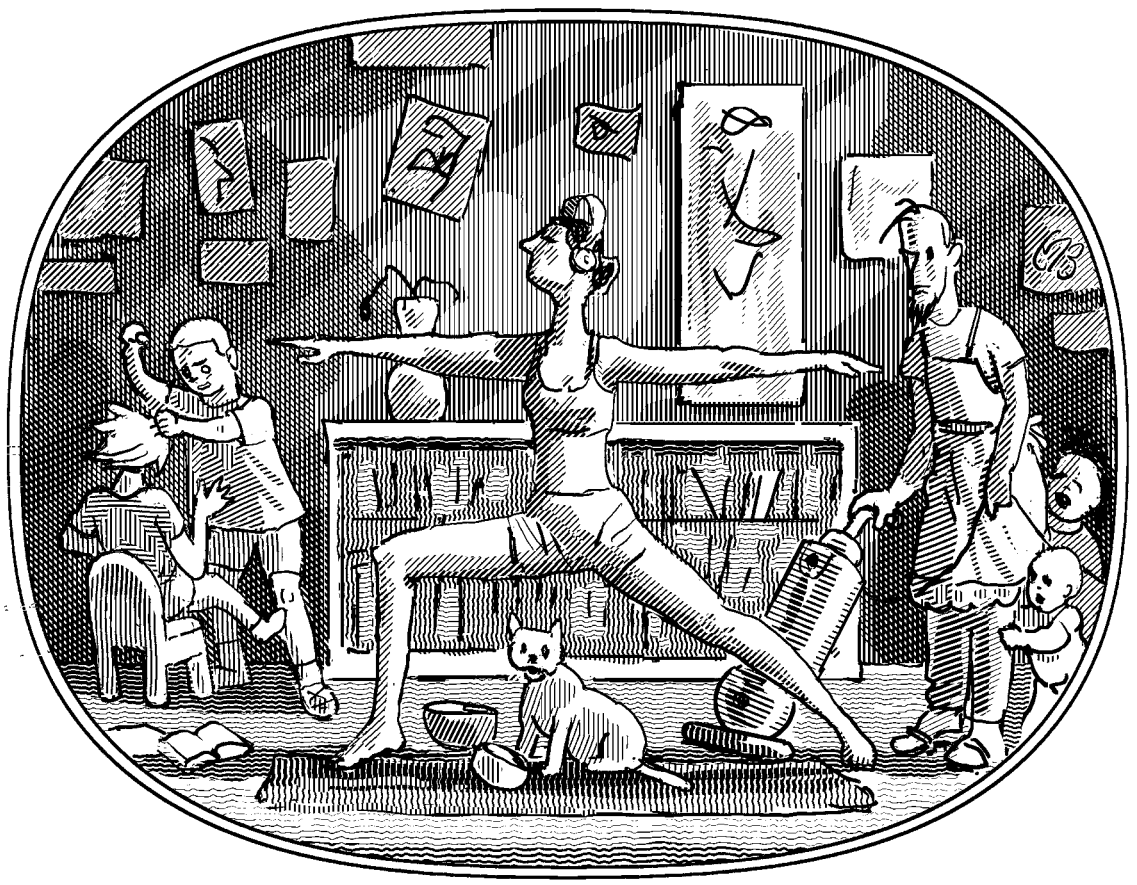
Book Review by Harvey C. Mansfield

The Rolling Revolution

The Recovery of Family Life: Exposing the Limits of Modern Ideologies, by Scott Yenor.
Baylor University Press, 368 pages, $49.99



It will be hard to do justice to the virtues of this excellent book—its comprehensiveness, helpful novelties, surprising insights, humor without indignation, philosophy, common sense, and its importance today—but I will give it a try.

Scott Yenor, a professor of political philosophy at Boise State University, comes to this policy study from earlier books on David Hume (*David Hume's Humanity*, 2016) and on the idea of marriage in modern political thought (*Family Politics*, 2011). In *The Recovery of Family Life* he uses Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, Sophocles, and Leo Tolstoy, among others, to explain what he means. Though practical, his book is rooted in theory because, as he argues, family life today is threatened by what might seem a theoretical proposition, one that very few of its partisans would avow or perhaps even recognize: that humanity will not be perfected until marriage and the family have been abolished.

This idea will be familiar to readers of Plato's *Republic*, in which it's presented as a logical consequence of justice rather than a program for action. But in the two feminist thinkers Yenor cites, Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) and the lesser-known American Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*, 1970), it is the fundamental goal of a movement. The end is not justice in human relationships, as with Plato, but radical autonomy in which relationships of any kind are minimal and temporary. This minimizing of relationships, though almost never espoused as such, is rampant in liberal democracies today. It takes an author like Yenor to add up the separate parts of a mostly unconscious conspiracy, tracing its pervasive influence to the depth of its attraction, extent, and danger.

The working out of feminism's goal is what Yenor calls a "rolling revolution." One of the felicities of his book, for which he deserves grateful recognition, is to introduce helpful new concepts with new names. The rolling revolution has been at work for decades, starting from its formulation by Beauvoir and Firestone, but then, unlike the great modern political revolutions—American, French, and Russian—not exploding from its origin but actually concealing it and *rolling* thereafter without explicit devotion to its foundations. It constantly pursues its end, but its progress is undertaken by stages in different aspects of society, from the capture of universities to occupations more remote from the family, such as the military. While every new conquest for feminism moves in the direction of its radical idea—never before practiced by any human society—the revolution is made to seem inexorable rather than radical.

Agents of the rolling revolution are "underlaborers" in the movement, "retail feminists" who go part of the way by promoting such subordinate goals as same-sex marriage or

equal pay for women that can be justified on their own terms without mentioning the ultimate goal. Feminists often take pains not to frighten others or even themselves with proposals that seem to go beyond the measures that a majority or near-majority of Americans will accept, but this apparent moderation is always qualified with a "now" or "yet" or "so far." They never say at what point they will stop demanding new measures of equality in such manner as to leave marriage and family, with their inevitable inequalities, in permanent existence.

The most important example of an under-laborer is Betty Friedan, who in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) adopted the principle of Beauvoir but didn't want to abolish marriage and family; this wouldn't sell (*yet*). She also had the goodness to refer to lesbians as "the Lavender Menace" to feminism because they turned off middle-class women who want family with career, plus lipstick. This is "pseudo-moderate feminism," which covers over the intrinsic contradiction between the two principles of career, which makes women autonomous, and family, which associates women with husbands and children, who compete with career for attention.

It is characteristic of liberalism to *formalize* institutions like career and family so that they do not conflict, in particular to give them the quality of a contract to which parties can consent on their own terms without being obliged by the apparent demands of the activities, in this case those of wife and mother. For this purpose one can refashion the family to assume the formal qualities of a career—chosen, negotiated, changeable, compensated, competitive—rather than duties fixed by the nature of the activity. When liberalism encounters traditional family values it formalizes them, removing the qualities of loyalty, fidelity, respect, and love as if to wring out the impurities requiring various traditionally feminine virtues. Yenor calls this the "liberal wringer," a practice of liberalism antedating the feminist movement—revealing that feminism, and the Marxism of Beauvoir and Firestone, are indebted to their enemy liberalism (as indeed Marx's economics admitted a debt to capitalism).

On the level of theory John Rawls would be an example of a liberal wringer, as his abstract system squeezes out the natural desire of self-preservation in human beings and the fear that attends it—relied on by early, 17th-century liberal philosophers—by placing them behind a "veil of ignorance" in the "original position" (these are Rawls's novel concepts). In his *Theory of Justice* (1971), and relying on common sense, he preserves the family as a "major social institution" like a retail feminist. But his feminist critic Susan Okin objected that women behind that veil would not want their sex to determine their lives.

Rawls was not abstract enough because, by retaining that confining social institution, he had forgotten nature's imprisonment of women in marriage and family. Rawls gave them a choice whether to marry and be mothers, but this was a "shaped choice," assuming the necessity and the justice of marriage and family rather than a choice not predisposed in any way by nature's "grooves," as Yenor puts it. Responding to Okin, Rawls confessed his error but tried to maintain the child-rearing function by suggesting compensation to women for what might seem to be the injustice of greater responsibility than men in it. He did not imagine, Yenor notes, a choice by children under the veil of ignorance demanding, as children might do, individualized attention rather than day care, or a father and mother rather than no father or two of them, as competing with the desire of (feminist) women to be free of the little devils.

This confrontation—let's make it a famous confrontation—between liberalism and feminism illustrates the attitude of both opinions. Liberalism has no defense against the liberal wringer when wielded against liberalism, as revealed in Rawls's half-hearted, embarrassed confession. And feminism does not care what happens to children and men, after women get what they are told they ought to want.

What do women really want, according to the rolling revolution? They want autonomy, the condition of being a law unto oneself. Justice at last! To be fully happy, however, they need two modifications. They want "relationships" rather than to be lonely or to live like hermits. But these must be "pure relationships," those entered into without sliding into any groove placed in human nature, such as a maternal instinct. A pure relationship results from a pure choice. It is much more about choosing—or choice itself—than about the motive or the end of the choice, either of which implies an oppressive shaped choice. Impure relationships would be those such as wife and husband, parent and child, tainted by an attraction—in other words, by love. That is why feminists speak of power rather than love, willingly trading sweetness and tenderness for fearless self-concern.

The other modification on autonomy is more serious. According to gender theorist Judith Butler, feminists must accept the fact of sex difference, which is a limit fashioned by nature, but they can overcome it by seeking the sort of recognition heretofore reserved for men. And she is right that women seem to like, if not as much as men, to see their names on office doors. Nor have they proven incapable of holding jobs once reserved entirely or principally to men, though again with some differences. Insofar as women while gaining recognition remain devoted to child-rearing, a job more demanding than a man's hobby, they admit that nature sets limits on them and that they are feminine rather than gender-neutral. Thus, instead of being autonomous as promised by the rolling revolution, they are in the grip of a natural inclination regarding children (even perhaps including men) whom they might love, and have now chosen, along with men, to submit themselves to "others" in order to gain recognition.

When women try to forget they are women they find they cannot, and when they try to imitate men they find themselves subjected to the sort of judgment, made in the world outside the family, that men must endure. When subjected to the cruelty of rejection and failure, always a possibility if one blithely desires "recognition"—of one's virtues, of course, not one's bodily defects, faults, and vices—it helps to have the cloak of a boastful male ego oblivious of one's limitations and careless of unwelcome comment. For women, is it liberation to suffer recognition with the risk of exposure? In order to stand out as liberated they have whisked away the cloak of feminine modesty—the veil of pretended ignorance. When successful women praise the "support" they get from their husbands or substitute husbands, doesn't this mean that he keeps his mouth shut like a loyal wife? That is perhaps the best way for a woman to be "recognized."

In sum, if women's liberation is accepted for the change it has achieved, with some improvements for sure, accompanied by social and moral decay as well, is it helped or hurt by feminism? The feminist search for pure relationships leads to frustration when a woman discovers that nagging inequalities remain to remind her of being a woman, and that the last thing she must do is fall in love.

Yenor's book is more circumstantial than this summary of its argument on the rolling revolution. He discusses curbs to the rolling revolution and what to do now after its considerable success. Limits are set by manifest sexual differences women today are reluctant to admit but that will not "shock anyone with eyes to see and the courage to speak." Men are stronger, more aggressive than women, given more to deeds of courage as well as criminal-

ity; women are more nurturing and agreeable, more sexually modest, looking more for relationship than adventure; men are more attracted to beauty, women to status; men are more interested in things, women in people; boys and girls segregate themselves voluntarily and do so for the rest of their lives. In sum, these facts get in the way of the 50-50 division required for the abolition of marriage and the family, and they have to be attacked as "stereotypes"—that is, artificial forms stamped on gender-neutral bodies contrived to sustain male supremacy in power.

Yenor examines these differences and the power of convention (gender) to bend nature (sex) to its will. Women are indeed more competitive today than they used to be, but they practice indirect aggression in a womanly way. Are they also more adventurous in sex, seeking "orgasm equity" with men? Yenor is a married man with no cause to see for himself, but he notes that women today have less sexual leverage over men since more of them are willing or feel obliged to give out what have been called "free samples." That their maternal instinct has been set on low is indicated by the greatly reduced number of babies; men use their aggressive instinct to get away from fatherhood, though when at home they also employ their protective groove to "father" differently from the way women "mother."

Yenor recommends "womanism" as a remedy to liberalism and feminism. Womanism brings out the virtues of both sexes: "we celebrate the deflating, civilizing irony of a woman just as we celebrate the risky manliness in a man." Womanism opposes the neutralism of liberalism that seeks to conceal sexual differences as a "half-way house" on the way to their rejection by radical feminism (as shown in Rawls's surrender to Okin); its pure relationship is "but a Trojan Horse" to advance autonomy that is independent of sex. Contemporary liberals separate procreation of the child from child-rearing, arguing for "parental licensing" in the skill of parenthood as opposed to the tie arising from giving birth and the love of one's own child. Here is another flash from Plato's *Republic*, where children are removed from parental care, but under liberalism expertise replaces philosophy and autonomy replaces virtue. Yenor is not tempted by artificial Platonism in liberalism. He defends the natural care of parents for children and thinks that its appeal will invite opposition to liberalism at a point of weakness, its abandonment of parental love.

As to the sexual liberation that feminism has adopted from raunchy males, autonomy in practice leads to reliance on consent to regulate conduct rather than a standard of what is appropriate. Consent seems clearer than a standard on which opinions will differ. But consent is more obscure than it first seems. Is it durable consent, Yenor asks, consent you cannot retract once given, or is it continuing consent, saying yes until you say no, as feminists insist? The latter is what a gentleman of the old school would find appropriate, as a concession to the vulnerability of women and a refusal on his part to enforce an apparent right. A woman has a right from gentlemen, who do not insist on earlier consent according to a liberal contract ("But you said…"), a right to change her mind, a right she doesn't necessarily get from consent. But there is condescension in the gentleness of a gentleman, however charming, a small superiority more dangerous than the rude rejection of a modern lover who finds the object of his attentions, on examination, to be disappointing. Moreover, what of consent gained by seduction and false pretenses? What of children: when can they consent? Here enters the standard of appropriateness willy-nilly when children are said to be too young. Adults too can be innocent or stupid; can one use their weakness like a canny salesman to gain their consent?

Yenor says rightly that liberated sex is both too broad, in extending permitted practices, and too narrow, in confining sex to the pleasure of autonomous persons. Autonomous persons are equally autonomous, but what conclusion must one draw in this situation? Must one respect another's autonomy because it is equal to yours, or can one take advantage of it because it has no authority over you? Rapacity seems as reasonable as moderation, and more likely. The sexual liberation unwisely adopted by feminists, because it seemed to promise equality with men, has encouraged predators and frightened decent men into inaction and irresponsibility. Then, instead of appealing to a loving husband, women put themselves under the coercive protection of the law. On the level of ordinary life, this means sacrificing the marital happiness that is the most happiness available to the most human beings in favor of the meager pleasures of gnawing on a pain and nursing a grudge. From a more thoughtful standpoint, sex is confined to one's own orgasm regardless of marriage and family, and thus severed from eros, or desire, which is always for something lacking in oneself. The pure relationship of neighboring autonomies is no relationship.

"Much old wisdom remains to be recovered," Scott Yenor writes. But how does one make use of it without appearing in effect merely to defend patriarchy as if it were the sole alternative to autonomy? One cannot simply accept the manly view of life because it opposes feminism, if only because men, having jettisoned the privileges of so-called "patriarchy," seem startled and confused when asked to justify the disparities that remain between the sexes. They are likely to accept the "reigning civil rights ideology" that all such disparities are due to discrimination against women rather than choices by women. Yenor points out that not all women are devotees of the "career mystique"; some prefer the feminine mystique that Friedan inveighed against. Our liberal education favors almost entirely the career mystique, but women need to be made aware of the principle behind it that marriage and family will be abolished.

From rejection of this principle women need to make their way back toward the mixture of satisfactions that let them be happy, and to consider how to make them, despite their intrinsic contradiction, practicably compatible. Their happiness will not be found in the endless frustration and anger of autonomy. Meanwhile, one may suggest, men need to remind women that men are here, too (and that children need to be brought here). Both moves could be described as raising consciousness, but of both women and men, and thus with greater awareness than what is on offer from the rolling revolution. The confrontation with that revolution will have to be pervasive. Even its slogans will have to be countered with rival slogans. No Limits? No, *Know* Limits.

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