Liberalism’s success, our failure

Why liberalism failed, by Patrick Deneen, Yale University Press, 2018, 264 pp., $18 (paperback), ISBN: 9780300240023, $30 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780300223446

In the summer of 2018, Barack Obama published a list of books worth reading. One was Patrick Deneen’s ‘Why Liberalism Failed’. Obama’s assessment: ‘I don’t agree with most of the author’s conclusions, but the book offers cogent insights into the loss of meaning and community that many in the West feel, issues that liberal democracies ignore at their own peril’.

Liberalism, according to Deneen, founded itself on the notion of securing liberty by granting rights, a free-market system and space for individual initiative (chapter one). But, as he takes stock of liberalism, he sees the liberal state as expanding in ways the founders of liberalism would have found frightening. Rights seem to be limited to the rights that the rich and powerful, the oligarchs, define as rights. Individual initiative and the free market system are more for the oligarchs, and those the oligarchs choose to enable, than for the average citizen in the liberal order (chapter two).

For Deneen, this set of circumstances is a logical result of the philosophical ideas that the founders of liberalism embraced. They represent the inner logic of liberalism as it has worked itself out over the centuries. Liberals operate according to a feigned objectivity, an objectivity that turns out to be a mask concealing the liberal’s desire to seize power for himself and his elite group of friends. This posture reveals itself in politics, economics, education, science and technology (chapters four, five and six).

From the 1770s to the present, liberalism has had control of American political discourse. Beginning with the American Revolution, liberal American oligarchs sought to take power from their English liberal counterparts, but whether one follows Madison, Adams, Jefferson or Hamilton, we see that each implemented or hoped America would follow a paradigm within the liberal umbrella. Take, for instance, debates between Adams and Jefferson. At the time of the American revolution, they were united in the most liberal faction pushing for revolution. They knew, along with their fellow revolutionaries, that they would need to implement an intense propaganda campaign in order to convince the majority of the population, against their desires, to revolt against the British. The propaganda campaign succeeded.

In 1790, both Adams and Jefferson praised the opening events of the French revolution. They ended up disagreeing over the constitutional mechanisms that they thought ought to be put in place in France. But they did not disagree about the liberal principles that ought to guide revolutions. In the 1820s, as both Adams and Jefferson ended their days, they patched up whatever quarrels that they had during their lives, and became united, enamored and full of hope at the future prospects of liberal revolutions in Europe as represented by the liberal Greek revolution of the 1820s.

Liberalism is not liberal

Deneen feels that the liberal state is no longer liberal. It has become, instead, more like the illiberal state of the French revolution than the limited state for which early liberals hoped.
One sees the same trends in economics, education and science. Liberal institutions are becoming increasingly exclusive to an elite that could not care less about the middle class or individual freedom. They also seem incapable of promoting anything other than a system in which there are an elite few with an incredible amount of wealth and resources, and the many who are trending downwards towards subsistence living. Liberal educational institutions, rather than creating an environment for promoting the truth, are instead conditioning schools, which inculcate the ‘correct’ sentiments in the students who will be granted the privilege of entering elite economic, political and social institutions (chapters six and seven).

Liberals place excessive emphasis on science and technology in education. They inculcate a mentality in which man is the master or the controller of nature. Beginning with Francis Bacon, liberals seek to torture nature to reveal her inner secrets. But even torture has its limits. Liberals for centuries inculcated a scientific mentality of man dominating nature, without regard for virtue, happiness or the common good, and now they fear that nature, in the form of climate disasters, poses one of the largest potential threats to human existence.

According to Deneen, beginning with Shelley’s Frankenstein, we can see the constant oscillation between ecstasy and anxiety over science and technology that takes place in a liberal society. We now have movies like Contagion that deal with potential disasters caused by the environment or science gotten out of control. From 2001 a Space Odyssey, to Terminator, to Her we have movies that treat us to the Android or AI problem of technology and the human person. Rather than the practice of the virtues leading to freedom, in modern liberal society, we live under the myth that technology will enable our freedom, and freedom is often understood as becoming free from any coercion or influence of our family or local community. This freedom, of course, is the freedom of the oligarch, to manipulate and control the masses while enjoying his freedom to suck the lifeblood from the economy. For Deenen, modern technology has sapped us of our potential for virtue or self-government (chapter 4).

Liberalism and the moral order

According to Deneen, the essential conflict in liberalism is between the Catholic version of the moral order and the liberal one. The liberal order attempts to free the inclinations of man by offering a range of institutions in which those inclinations are given free expression. Both Classical moral philosophy and Christian theology have proposed an education and institutions that tame and transform inclinations. They have done so while holding to the unity between faith and reason or faith and science, because the truth is one. Understanding this unity leads to Catholics in their respective fields acquiring a requisite level of theological understanding that enables them to see that unity. Deneen would propose that this can best be done in intentional communities that may or may not be able to arrive at a synthesis with liberal institutions.

However, the ultimate difficulty of liberalism is not that it is interested in technology, science, or education. It is that the liberal is committed to seeing these areas of human life outside of the moral order as it can come to be understood by reason or faith. Liberals fail to see the importance of form as the basis for our knowledge of the nature of things. Once form is rejected, as Plato saw, society will turn to experts, who present themselves as the authority on morality because they know the inner workings of nature as manifested by their ability to exploit science and technology to make advances in the exercise of power.
These experts will lead the population into vice, because a population enslaved by its passions is much easier to control than one composed of virtuous citizens.

One way in which Deneen could have improved the book would have been to write concretely about how liberalism uses sexual revolution and debt in order to break up the moral order, enslave the citizens and establish its agents in positions of power. He could have pointed directly to the Reformation in England, the growth of the British Empire, the French Revolution, the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and the rise of Neoconservatism, to give a few examples, in order to flesh out how liberalism failed. This method would be superior, because it would also point to the positive ways that Catholics could accept legitimate developments in technology and science, ensuring that they can advance in the context of moral order, in a manner compatible with nature and united to the truths of the faith.

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