

## Book Review

Why Liberalism Failed, by Patrick J. Deneen, Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2018, 248 pp.

The Enlightenment project which began in the West in the 17th century believed in the universality of the absolute principle and paved the way to relativism in the late 1970s. Liberalism was the domineering ideology internal to the Enlightenment project. However, its claims on universalism were fiercely challenged by relativism. Beginning in the 1980s, New Aristotelian thinking developed as a response to both the universal principle of liberalism and relativism. Prior to that, liberalism was also opposed from religious movements and the Nietzscheans from the right, and Marxist movements by the left.

The works by Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty and Michael Walzer provide an alternative to liberal thinking which continued to gain momentum. Liberals of different persuasions such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, David Gauthier and Ronald Dworkin were unable to agree on how to defend the universal principle of liberalism, which they believed was absolute, and succumbed to the dictatorship of relativism. Postmodernism thinking developed, and alternative philosophies mushroomed. The philosophies include not only those of New Aristotelian, but also Republicanism, Feminism, Multiculturalism, Communitarianism, and even the idea of Islam and the secular state by Abdullahi an-Naim.

Acknowledging the importance of a virtuous life in which its ethical principle can be found in religion and Hellenic works, Patrick J. Deneen argues that liberalism failed not because it did not achieve what it aimed for, but because they had been true to themselves (this may sound like an oxymoron). He expects readers to seriously engage themselves with his thought and be patient with his arguments in the book. The book titled "Why Liberalism Failed" was published with the assistance of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia. It is an attempt to shake the foundation of liberalism by outstripping the abstract assumptions of human nature in the liberal project.

Deneen presented his arguments in seven chapters; unsustainable liberalism, uniting individualism and statism, liberalism and anti-culture, technology and the loss of liberty, liberalism against the liberal arts, the New Aristocracy, as well as the degradation of citizenship. In this review, the focus will be given mainly on Deneen's philosophical debate and radical critics on liberalism. He began by reviewing the concept of liberty

from the Ancient Greeks and early Christian political philosophers, before scrutinising the classical liberal thought.

In general, liberty, as understood by the Ancient Greek and Christian philosophers was the ability to realise the potential of human virtue and use it to restrain lower desire. They believed of a hierarchy in human desire. The higher should govern or restrain the lower. By realising man's higher natural potential (virtue), they will be free from the enslavement of lower desire. The problem with the classical liberals' concept of liberty is that they reduced human beings as animalistic, allowing people to choose their destiny without the interference of any authority, be it the state or religion and customs, hence unbridle the lower desire, leaving it unrestrained.

Deneen asserted that the root of current problems such as the huge gap of income inequality, decline of civic associations, rejection of faith, the dysfunction of family tradition as well as environmental degradation must be philosophically traced from the logic of liberty internal to classical liberalism. Both founding fathers of liberalism, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, although may appear to be different, believe that men are by nature free and equal. As rational and autonomous individuals, they seek to maximise pleasure and avoid pain which Deneen and other alternative liberalists say were abstract assumptions on human nature. They are at best dubious, and at worst flawed. This is because instead of basing on facts from the accident of birth (of human ethnicity, geographical location, gender) which are arbitrary, they develop their philosophy based on hypotheses of man's anthropological imagination.

Humans are born in families, each with their very own constructed identities. We are either born male or female, white or black, urban or rural, Western or Eastern. Aside from that, not only do we have to abide by the authority of the state, customs, traditions and norms also bind us. By nature, therefore, we are not free. We are different biologically and socially. There is no human being that is free and equal. Any prescriptions of such assumptions are dubious and flawed, Deneen asserted.

Liberalism is proud of its achievements, such as separating the church from the state, contributing to the abolition of slavery, expanding democratic freedom, securing private property, and legally emancipating minorities and women. Without denying the liberals' success, he saw the success of liberalism as mankind's failure. In fact, in the case of emancipation, he asserted that "freeing women from the household is not tantamount to liberation, but rather puts women and men alike into a far more encompassing bondage".

Late modern enlightenment projects further aggravated problems in the society, despite speaking about progressivism and the importance of the state to tamper with the unfettered market. Deneen mentioned that scientific revolutions, such as the one led by Francis Bacon, expects

mankind to master the law of nature and transform. Although they have led to technological advancements, the damage science has done to the human race is equally devastating. Environmental degradation is a case in point.

Deneen argues that children of late modernity (the liberal left or progressivists), rely on state power to distribute wealth and guarantee welfare, whereas the liberal right (a product of early modernity) believes in market forces based on the “trickling down effect” principle. The majority of the society gets little benefit. Like the movement of a pincer, the state and market merge themselves for the state to become a New Leviathan, therefore creating a big corporation, leaving little space for a civil society.

Instead of educating kids to take care of their parents, liberals advocate debates on the responsibility of the state through welfare programmes or market logic through insurance schemes for old folks. In short, not only did the New Leviathan and big corporation leave people culturally and materially insecure, the space for communal ties was also ruined, replaced by a mobile force of workers, whose ties are only based on profit and loss. In his subsequent argument, Deneen further lamented that liberalism had created technologies that make us lonely. Liberalism also created education institutions that alienate us. STEM had damaged liberal arts and brought about the emergence of a New Aristocracy as well as degradation of citizenship.

In his book, Deneen asserted that “the breakdown of family, community, and religious norms and institutions, especially among those benefitting least from liberalism’s advance, has not led liberalism’s discontents to seek a restoration of those norms. That would take effort and sacrifice in a culture that now diminishes the value of both”.

He wished for a post-liberal culture which is based on a return-to-faith-based and family-centred associations organised around local councils or township systems. Instead of basing on abstract assumptions of liberalism, he believed that the accident of birth tells us that biological facts and social practices can give rise to moral culture. With a smaller community, imperative cultures can be effectively developed. Hence, more fulfilling lives can be established, and the alienating nature of the liberal world can be avoided.

Policymakers or political analysts may find the book impractical as it may not help us understand or solve problems in regard to terrorism, hunger, war, enormous flows of capital and investment, international epidemics or even climate change, not to mention the velocity of technological advancement. However, those who are interested in understanding how debates in political philosophy develop would find this book interesting.

Deneen is a New Aristotelian, influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre’s work “After Virtue” first published in 1981. This had contributed significantly to

his thought. To him, the failure of liberalism cannot be repaired from the inside. This would only add fuel to the fire. However, he does not expect man to return to the pre-Enlightenment period. As part of a larger anti-Enlightenment project, he wants the existing human operating system to be repaired by incorporating virtuous character ethics that may be found in Hellenic thoughts as well as Christian philosophies.

He admitted that he is not able to come out with a better theory, but assures us of advocating better practices. He may not have much voice in the West, but in the East, it seems that he may want us to emulate better practices such as those parallel to Confucianism and Ghazalian thinking.

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