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

Talk of liberalism is just about everywhere now. The resurgence of the discussion is due in large part to the recent book by University of Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*. Deneen's basic thesis contends that liberalism, as the last standing ideology defeating all others, has failed precisely because it has succeeded. The discontent vocalized by democratic citizens throughout America and Europe can thus be understood to be a result of the principles at the core of liberal political and philosophical thought.

Deneen's *modus operandi* is an activity that resembles what the American political philosopher David Walsh calls putting "liberalism itself to the test" ("Truth and the Liberal Tradition," *Modern Age*, 1994*:* 254). For Deneen,

> Liberalism's success today is most visible in the gathering signs of its failure. It has remade the world in its image, especially through the realm of politics, economics, education, science, and technology, all aimed at achieving supreme and complete freedom through the liberation of the individual from particular places, relationships, memberships, and even identities (16).

The referent for "remaking of the world in its image" would be the fundamental principles of the liberal world view. Deneen's claim here is insightful, for it helps his readers to see more clearly the nature of first principles. In his book, *Unity of Philosophical Experience*, the medieval historian Etienne Gilson

> In the first place, philosophers are free to lay down their own sets of principles, but once this is done, they no longer think as they wish—they think as they can […] any attempt on the part of a philosopher to shun the conse-

> quences of his own position is doomed to failure. What he himself declines to say will be said by his disciples […] (243).

Deneen's account of liberalism pays close attention to those principles that the early modern thinkers were "free to lay down." The first principles established by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and lets not forget Descartes, are such that they (or their followers) are "constrained" to draw the conclusions that are set by the limits of their principles. There are a variety of approaches to reading the early moderns, especially Hobbes and Locke. Deneen's reading, however, alerts the readers to the fact that the conclusions drawn can only come from their principles. If we do not like the conclusions with respect to Lockean anthropology or epistemology, we are not free, as Gilson notes, "to shun the consequences" of one's own position. This was precisely the philosophic activity we witness in the Platonic dialogues. As Socrates so often shows his interlocutors, if you are not satisfied with your conclusions, then you must re-examine your principles, or run the risk of being trapped in a contradiction.

At the heart of the liberal worldview, according to Deneen, is the contention that human beings are predominantly understood as individuals severed from any context except that which is chosen. As a result of this first principle, democratic citizens have become disembodied from the real order of things (*nature and culture*), tend to see the world through the lens of well-being and the present (*history*), and their Cartesian philosophical method orients us towards a loss of place and transcendence (*non-metaphysical*). This "myth" that grounds the political philosophy of liberalism means that human beings are "rights-bearing individuals who could fashion and pursue for themselves their own version of the good life" (1). Deneen's description echoes Alexis de Tocqueville's similar observation about Americans regarding the relationship between freedom, rights, and limited government:

> In fact, Americans see in their freedom the best instrument and the greatest guarantee of their well-being. They love these two things for each other. They therefore do not think that meddling in the public is not their affair; they believe, on the contrary, that their *principle affair is to secure by themselves a government that permits them to acquire the goods they desire and that does not prevent them from enjoying in peace those they have acquired* (*Democracy in America*, 517. Emphasis mine).

For both Tocqueville and Deneen, such a condition is troubling. To see why this is the case, it is helpful to consider a critical review of Deneen's book offered by Shadi Hamid ("The Rise of Anti-Liberalism," *The Atlantic*, February 20, 2018). Hamid observes that while liberalism has its faults, he "wouldn't want to live under a non-liberal or even a less liberal system." His position rests upon his concluding argument against those like Deneen: "What liberalism's critics

appear unable, or unwilling, to address is whether a lack of meaning is a worse problem to have than a lack of freedom." Hamid's question can be rephrased this way: would we hope to live in a liberal democracy surrounded by endless choice that is presupposed to no *telos*, or live in something akin to an Islamic world where there is an absence of freedom? On the surface, such a stark dichotomy is rather attractive intellectually, and the answer quite obvious.

At the same time, the dichotomous dialectic of meaning or freedom is one that Deneen is intimately aware of already. Hamid neglects the profound temptation for a lack a meaning in life, especially as it relates to social and political life in contemporary democratic societies. Deneen provides the historical and social context that gives strength to his critique of liberalism. Speaking to the "basic political psychology" of the democratic age, Deneen writes that

> a signal feature of modern totalitarianism was that it arose and came to power through the discontents of people's isolation and loneliness. A population seeking to fill the void left by the weakening of more local memberships and associations was susceptible to a fanatical willingness to identify completely with a distant and abstract state. (59)

In Deneen's reasoning, the first point is to recognize that the existential void of meaning will seek fulfillment in something, and in a political context, a total system does not merely become an option, but deeply alluring. The liberal myth of autonomy, along with the rise of the equality of social conditions, puts democratic citizens into a paradoxical condition: they are liberated from ties of presupposed association, and yet, such liberation "in turn generates liberalism's self-reinforcing circle, wherein the increasingly disembedded individual ends up strengthening the state that is its own author" (59). Deneen goes on to note that once human beings are isolated, thrown back upon their resources of themselves alone, "the more likely that a mass of individuals would inevitably turn to the state in times of need" (61). Deneen's deepest concern, one shared by Tocqueville, is not just that democratic citizens will be set in an oscillating dialectic between statism and individualism. Rather, such citizens will neglect to consider the darker paradox, namely, that "statism enables individualism, individualism demands statism" (17).

While there is much to praise in Deneen's book, it is also worth considering a certain question that needs further clarification. The question to raise concerns Deneen's judgment that the American Founding put into practice the destructive principles that constitute the liberal ethos. The concern with such an approach is not that there is not truth to it. Rather, it seems to overlook the more fundamental issue that concerns the possibility of democratic societies.

One needs to consider Tocqueville's judgment that the origins of America are not the Founding of 1776; its foundations, instead, were incarnated by the

Puritans who breached the Massachusetts shore in the 17th century. This is no small point. Perhaps the various ways in which one can interpret the documents of the American founding fathers is, at some level, a result of the vagueness of the documents themselves. One can see in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution the seeds of both a Thomistic political philosophy as well as a Lockean individualism that is problematic. The juxtaposed readings are not so much a critique of these American documents as it is a simple sociological affirmation that they were not intended to address the most serious problems and vital potencies of American democratic life. Could it be the case that much of the contemporary discussion about the American Founding of 1776 ends with interlocutors talking past each other?

This initial question orients us towards an additional one worth examining, which is Deneen's answer to the failure of liberalism. According to Deneen, what democratic citizens need is the cultivation of what he calls "civic polis life." According to David Walsh, it has become somewhat normative to contend that liberalism can be salvaged only by a recovery of ancient and medieval political and philosophical principles. Walsh agrees with such an understanding in a number of significant ways, yet still wonders: "[…] is there not an element of escapism secreted in the very heightening of the contrast between them (i.e., liberal traditions vs. pre-liberal ones)?" The challenge, according to Walsh, is "that of finding a *modus vivendi* that will enable the life of reason to be carried on in a world that is pervaded by unreason." Walsh contends that the "mere assertion of premodern truth, without any attempt to mediate it in language that renders it minimally intelligible from a liberal perspective, would be futile" ("Truth and the Liberal Tradition," 256).

"Polis life" is certainly an echo of Aristotle's understanding of political life centered upon a true and commonly shared account of what it ultimately good for human beings. Deneen certainly has this in mind, but what can be overlooked is that this participation in civic life as self-governance is imbedded in something that must come to exist prior to a theoretical articulation of a more robust philosophical anthropology. As Deneen argues,

> It is likely from the lessons learned within these communities that a viable post-liberal political theory will arise, one that begins from fundamentally different anthropological assumptions […] [built on] the learned ability to sacrifice one's narrow personal interest not to abstract humanity, but for the sake of other humans.

Deneen's anti-utopian description of "polis life" can be defined in following way: "[…] forms of self-governance that arise from shared civic participation" (192). What Deneen is arguing for the emergence of culture itself, although he sometimes coins this as something "new." The predominant notion of the cultures of "state" and "market" can only be understood within a more substantial

whole of cultus as “a set of generational customs, practices, and rituals that are grounded in local and particular settings” (64).

Deneen’s argument seems to be that a “viable post-liberal political theory” can *only* be temporally grounded in the prior actualization of coming together in multifaceted forms of associational life. It is when we come to associate together, in the local and particular arenas of our neighborhoods and civic life, can we learn the “ability to sacrifice one’s narrow interest not to abstract humanity, but for the sake of other humans.” This is why Deneen concludes that,

> What we need today are practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life. *Not a better theory, but better practices.* (197)

Perhaps one could argue that Deneen is giving too much credence to the possibility of a viable political anthropology arising within the democratic age. However, Deneen is more than astute than most to recognize that the dialectic of modern liberal democracy (loneliness and statism) entails, at the most foundational level, that we come together in local forms of association. This claim is not primarily about changing social structures and institutions; such a daunting task is only conceivable after democratic citizens come together and see that they really do need each other. We could say that joining together with other people, in real embodied places, is the unacknowledged potential for democratic citizens.

The judgment about the potency of democracy is important for those who wish to become somewhat intellectually imbalanced in their critiques of Deneen. To recognize that we are in need of one another is the reason for Deneen’s emphasis upon fostering better practices rather than developing a new theory. Deneen’s Tocquevillian precursor to a truer philosophical anthropology first entails rejoining human beings back together in those local settings that are the ground for drawing us outside of ourselves, which is arguably the perennial temptation for democratic citizens. The true founders of America, the Puritans, knew this well with their habits and practices of association.

Our democratic practices have the potential to deepen our attachment to “particular places, relationships, memberships, and even identities.” We could conclude with a provocative question that comes from Susan Pinker’s recent book, The Village Effect: “where is all the buzz about getting together?” Professor Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed* is a major contribution to this deeply existential need in our democratic times.

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