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Postliberalism

THE FIRST TIME I heard of Patrick Deneen was when I was hired to be one of his temporary replacements, at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. It was 2013. Deneen had left Georgetown for the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, in 2012. Another Georgetown colleague of his had been teaching abroad, so they needed some theorists to fill in for these courses.

When I got the Georgetown job, I was thrilled. The market for political theory PhDs is always bad, and this was not long after the financial crisis of 2008, so things were worse than usual. When my husband and I drove up from Memphis (where I had held a postdoc) that summer, it was my first time setting foot in DC. I can still remember waking up in the heart of the Smoky Mountains, driving through lush Virginia, and then finally crossing the Arlington Memorial Bridge. This bridge has the feel of a Parisian promenade, wide and studded with streetlights. It lines up with Arlington Cemetery on the Virginia side, but takes you straight toward the Lincoln Memorial, which, temple-like, defines the west end of the National Mall. From there we drove past the Kennedy Center and the famous Watergate buildings, before heading up the long, winding road of Rock Creek Park—joggers all around, high bridges overhead. I remember wondering why no one had ever told me how gorgeous this place was.

In fairness, though, Patrick Deneen *had* said something about the beauties of Washington, DC, in a blog post about his decision to leave

for Notre Dame. I came across this post while researching the visiting position at Georgetown. Here is what he had to say in October 2012:

[I] will admit that moving to South Bend has not been without moments of second-guessing about leaving all the cultural, culinary, and aesthetic bounties of a place like Washington, DC. These are beautiful and wealthy places, filled with interesting people leading interesting lives, places overbrimming with so much prosperity that one inevitably benefits even if one is not among the super-wealthy. Living in such places, one actually does experience a kind of “trickle-down” wealth . . . in the ancillary benefits of good schools, a constantly upgraded infrastructure, well-maintained private homes, well-stocked libraries and manicured public parks, interesting intellectual discourse, an atmosphere where personal health, personal growth, and well-being are stressed and therefore contagious.¹

This may be the nicest thing Patrick Deneen has ever said about life in any modern city, let alone “The Swamp,” and the nicest thing he has ever said about cultural elites.

But it was also just a small digression in a post that was otherwise highly critical of life in the nation’s capital and of all the mainstream conservatives who flock there. Deneen called them out for the hypocrisy of their politics—Republicans kept talking about small government, but they never came close to achieving it, even when they were in power! Deneen’s farewell post also spoke to a persistent theme of his writing, which is that today’s cultural elites are all of a piece, and they are corrupt. Whether they reside in DC or some other “super-zip,” and whether they are Republicans or Democrats, they are all subject to a kind of idolatry. Not only are they all superficially the same—eating at the same restaurants, shopping at the same stores—they also share a fundamental worldview, which involves an overwhelming preference for national and international concerns over the local and domestic. The effects of this are perceptible on the spiritual plane. Deneen wrote that today’s best-educated leaders “are deeply bound by a shared perspective that what matters is the big and the expansive.”²

Deneen framed his departure from DC as a rejection of this mainstream outlook and a retreat to somewhere smaller—somewhere more settled and contained, more connected, and more spiritually true. He drew a comparison to St. Augustine’s return from Rome to Thagaste—and to his disillusionment with the “people drawn by common vices in the pursuit of earthly power.” Referencing Augustine’s *City of God*, Deneen wrote: “We are more apt to see the lights of that better city from locations less bright, less distracting, less self-important.”³

In many respects, the 2012 farewell post demonstrates the consistency of Deneen’s philosophical interests and political concerns and anticipates themes that were central to his breakthrough book *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018). In other respects, however, his thinking underwent dramatic shifts after he left DC, and after *Why Liberalism Failed* landed with tremendous national success. Whereas in 2012, in addition to disdain and skepticism, Deneen showed some sensitivity to the attractions of elite modern urban life, ten years later he was naming the American elite “one of the worst of its kind produced in history,” calling to “replace” them, and advocating for “regime change.”⁴ In 2012 he was keen to identify modern idols; by 2022 he was, along with some friends, smashing them down and casting about, around the world, for something new. The latter included jaunts to illiberal Poland and Hungary.

This chapter is about Patrick Deneen’s political thought and actions, the transformations these underwent during the first Trump administration, and the early days of Postliberalism and American Catholic integralism (also sometimes called neo-integralism).

Deneen is a key leader of the Postliberals—the second group of conservative intellectuals, who, after the Claremonters, got behind Trumpism. And Deneenism is the most palatable, sanitized version of Trumpy populism that one is likely to encounter. His writing combines a stern social conservatism and republicanism with strident antiliberalism and anti-elitism. It is likely to be alienating to economic liberals (so to both neoliberals and neoconservatives) but appealing to anyone who cares about culture and community, or about the environment, or who has suffered the vicissitudes of late modern capitalism in their own lives. It was appealing to JD Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019 and

had been friendly with Deneen (and his “crunchy conservative” friend Rod Dreher) since 2016.⁵ Vance has cited Deneen as a major intellectual influence and has self-identified as a member of the “postliberal right” that “tacks right on culture and left on economics.”⁶

Deneen, Front Porch Republic, and Limits

When Deneen departed Georgetown and the nation’s capital, he had the perfect platform from which to announce his decision: a blog he had cofounded in 2009, called *Front Porch Republic*. Deneen and a few like-minded colleagues founded the site in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and Barack Obama’s presidential victory (and his administration’s neoliberal response to the economic crisis). Deneen had been anticipating a crisis of liberalism for many years (he was once a proponent of “peak oil” theory), and the economic collapse of 2008 seemed to ratify his contention that modern neoliberal economics—based on ceaseless competition and growth and a profit-motive detached from real value—was unsustainable in the long term.⁷ *Front Porch Republic* was inspired in part by the work of Wendell Berry, a nationally renowned writer and poet who is beloved across the political spectrum for his commitment to localism. (The food writer Mark Bittman calls Berry “the soul of the real food movement.”)⁸ Deneen shares Berry’s broad interest in the relationship between nature and culture.⁹ So do I.

The tagline for the *Front Porch Republic* site is “Place, Limits, and Liberty,” each of which are major themes in Berry’s writing. That writing reveals a classical sensibility—by which I mean it shows a deep appreciation for the formative, positive dimensions of culture that liberals tend not to acknowledge or speak about. Berry cares about all the ways in which art, writing, and the other artifacts around us shape our souls, give texture to our relationships and lives, and prepare us to act well in the world. “Humans differ most from other creatures,” wrote Berry in his classic essay “Preserving Wildness,” “in the extent to which they must be *made* what they are—that is, in the extent to which they are artifacts of their culture.”¹⁰

Berry is also a writer who cares deeply about the economy. His oeuvre might be described as a one-man crusade against the modern

mindset: against, for example, excess consumption, mass modern forms of economic production, and bureaucratized education. He is a thoughtful but radical critic of capitalism, with its cutthroat competitiveness and rejection of humane limits, and its inability to recognize true value, which Berry says is always grounded in love and affection.¹¹ He seeks a new kind of economy that would be part of a “double recovery” of both nature and culture.

The *Front Porch Republic* writings are more political, and more conservative, than Wendell Berry’s, but more “liberal” than the work, say, of paleoconservatives like Paul Gottfried. The writing, like Berry’s, is ecologically grounded and earthy: something like Little House meets Thoreau meets Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si*. These are writers who, like Berry, have studied the Tocquevillian art of association and various Christian traditions and want to foster those older forms and revive that older world. They are not thinkers who, like Gottfried, are overtly reactionary or nativist in their sociological thinking.

After 2013, Deneen published much less on the *Front Porch Republic* site. He turned increasingly to bigger national outlets like *The American Conservative*, *First Things*, and *Public Discourse*. And it is during this period, too, that he wrote *Why Liberalism Failed*, which went to press in 2018.

Wendell Berry is a writer who stubbornly rejects abstractions and theorizing—as well as most partisan politics and polemics. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, Patrick Deneen embraced an opposite sensibility. This was a book enamored of general ideas.¹² And though the work included a strong critique of the conservative establishment for its neoliberal economics, some of Deneen’s choices gave the book a strong partisan inflection. By choosing to attack “liberalism” and the so-called liberalocracy—words that in an American context point left—Deneen’s partisanship shone right through.

Deneen, Bloom, and Closing American Minds

Rush Limbaugh catalyzed Michael Anton’s moment in the national spotlight when he read from the Flight 93 essay on air in September 2016. President Obama played a similar role for Patrick Deneen when he put *Why Liberalism Failed* on his list of favorite reads for 2018.¹³

When it was published in January 2018, the book struck a nerve because it offered a clear general explanation of all that had recently gone so wrong. For liberals shocked by Trump's success, the book was eerily prescient and appropriately catastrophizing; for the right, it offered "liberalism" as a convenient scapegoat while also calling neoliberal economics to account. For Deneen, Trumpism—or something like it—was the culminating, and inevitable, outcome of the inner logic of liberal democracy and proof of his book's central thesis. Trump was the strongman brought to bring liberalism to heel. By the time *Why Liberalism Failed* was published, Michael Anton was working as a spokesman for Trump's National Security Council. But Trumpism, as it were, had become an opportunity for Deneen, too.

Deneen's core argument in *Why Liberalism Failed* is that liberal democracy is doomed from the start because it is based on the destabilizing philosophical premises of individual autonomy and the conquest of nature, which together act as solvents on the social fabric and culture at large. According to Deneen (and many other conservatives), liberal democracy has survived as long as it has only by leaning hard on older forms of social cohesion—old religious beliefs, cultural norms and traditions, and forms of education. He holds that, thanks to mistaken early modern ideas, there is only one direction for modern liberal constitutionalism to go. Indeed, Deneen's title suggested that the failure has already happened, and he argues throughout the book that liberal elites, in truth, already constitute a despotic class: the liberalocracy.

Though these conclusions are dramatic, Deneen's book had more in common with the work of the late Allan Bloom than it did with the sensationalism of Anton's "Flight 93 Election." Deneen is not himself a Straussian, but he was influenced by Strauss, and in particular by Strauss's idea that there was an essential similarity to American liberalism and conservatism.¹⁴ His critique of liberalism follows conceptually on the heels of Bloom's critique of higher education (itself derivative of Strauss's critique of modernity). Deneen had once been a student of Bloom's. He attended Rutgers University in New Jersey and then enrolled at the University of Chicago as a PhD student in 1986, with the prestigious Committee on Social Thought where Bloom was teaching.¹⁵

But soon he became “disillusioned by the program and put off by Bloom’s circle of students.” He must have felt strongly about this, because he made the dramatic decision to leave and complete his degree back at Rutgers, under the supervision of his former professor, Wilson Carey McWilliams, who would become a longtime mentor and close friend. Despite his departure from Chicago, Deneen spoke highly of Bloom and *Closing* in his review: “I loved the book and credit it, at least in part, for my eventual return to the academy and a career as a professor of political philosophy.” There was nothing here of the vulgar cruelty vis-à-vis Bloom that we saw with Jaffa.¹⁶

Bloom’s influence on Deneen’s thinking is evident throughout *Why Liberalism Failed*, and there are substantive and stylistic parallels between the two best-selling books. Stated simply, Bloom was concerned with the (alleged) failures of liberal education in America, and Deneen with the (alleged) failure of the liberal order as such. On the most fundamental level, both authors were interested in “big idea” questions about the role of morality and values in the contemporary world, and both made weighty arguments about the paradoxes and tensions that come with modern moral openness and liberal freedoms. But both men also offered extreme, even dystopian, accounts of their respective contemporary milieus; their writing is soaked in nostalgia for bygone eras, and both books engage in overheated polemics (and sloppy scholarship) that sparked cascades of reviews and criticism.

The guiding argument of *The Closing of the American Mind* was that the contemporary American virtue of “openness” threatened to bring about America’s downfall.¹⁷ Bloom argued that, for Americans, a belief in equality goes hand-in-hand with moral relativism and a faith in “openness” that together outstrip any other value. Such a configuration of beliefs and priorities means that there is no room left in the American mind for serious moral and political thinking—for serious thinking about better and worse, right and wrong, and good and bad ways of life. It also leads to a hatred for absolutist thinking, but then this gets combined with an absolute (and so contradictory and irrational) commitment to specific democratic values like equality and human rights. Bloom traced these habits and tendencies through the history of the

social sciences and philosophy, attempting a genealogy of American relativism and intellectual narrowness, with mixed results. In some respects, *Closing* was the book-length version of two conservative “gotcha” quips: “So you think all morality is relative, but is that claim relative too?” and “So you believe in toleration, but what about the intolerant?” Thoughtful liberals and philosophers have responses to these questions. But as with so many things liberal-adjacent, the answers are complex, academic, and not very quippy.¹⁸

One thing that Bloom does convey effectively—and which strikes me as still true today—is how people in modern democracies are confused about the role that moral evaluations play in democratic life and politics. In the universities, this often means either that ethical and moral questions are avoided entirely or that the answers are presumed and righteously taken for granted. In a chapter called “The Sixties,” Bloom argues that this moral thoughtlessness and taken-for-grantedness was “an almost inevitable result of generations of teaching that the most instinctive of all questions—What is good?—has no place in the university.”¹⁹ In other words, Bloom argued, there was hardly any place on modern campuses for genuine exploration of conflicting ethical, religious, or political outlooks—for modes of thinking that did not already presume clear normative answers, and yet which also took seriously the possibility that one might be able to discover the truth.

For Bloom, this made real disagreement and discussion (as well as true philosophy, which is what he cared about most deeply) impossible and left modern citizens ill-equipped for political life. If no one in the university is really investigating how best to live, or what constitutes a good life, or what justice means and how to get it, then why would we ever expect politics to be deep or interesting? If everyone already knows what to believe and how to be an activist for progress, then what did that mean for the university? Bloom went on to connect this argument to the campus unrest of the era, posing the rhetorical question, “If the university’s teachers cannot teach about the good, why should the students not teach it?”²⁰ He did not like his citadels being upset by students who thought they knew something about justice.

Bloom experienced some of the campus turmoil of the 1960s personally, but his response to it in *Closing* was that of a cloistered snob, or worse: He

refused to take the moral claims of the activists seriously and clung tightly to a conception of the university as strictly intellectual and activism-free—as though ideas and truths never compel one to action. As the late Christopher Hitchens put it, “Chaos, most especially the chaos identified with pissed-off African Americans, was the whole motif of the *Closing of the American Mind*.”²¹ It is true, I think, that some institutions in society—and perhaps the university above all—should be insulated from day-to-day politics. But Bloom’s assessment of civil rights activism in the late 1960s was overweening given realities the protestors were working to confront.

It is a familiar story.

That said, there was something to Bloom’s argument about the normative confusion at the heart of the modern university. Leo Strauss put it memorably in his book *Natural Right and History* (1953): “We are then in the position of beings who are sane and sober when engaged in trivial business and who gamble like madmen when confronted with serious issues—retail sanity and wholesale madness.”²² The modern liberal academy was good at science and business but had become awfully squeamish about deep investigation of matters of right and principle and at the same time moralizing and unquestioning. This often resulted in a stifling and spiritless intellectual climate—a bad brew of triviality, orthodoxy, and denialism—where too much was predictable and not enough was up for real debate.

The upshot of Bloom’s book was a call for more rigorous philosophizing in schools and universities, and for richer humanities and religious education. He worried that absent such a development in America’s intellectual and cultural spaces, nihilism and/or authoritarianism would swoop in to fill the void. Modern liberal peoples would continue their descent into rootlessness and meaninglessness; they would eventually become desperate and scramble for a despot (or perhaps a Jordan Peterson) to give shape to their lives. Openness would lead to tyranny.

In *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen follows the basic contours of Bloom’s argument about liberal education and openness, now applied to liberal

society at large. But Deneen, unlike Bloom, is not on the side of openness and liberality. The grand, mantralike thesis of the book—repeated ad nauseam by Deneen throughout and in many subsequent interviews—is that liberalism failed by virtue of its own success. Just as, according to Bloom, liberal education risks choking on the virtue of openness, collapsing into relativism and emotivism, liberalism has already failed, thanks to its openness and wholesale abandonment of limits.²³ Deneen writes: “As liberalism has ‘become more fully itself,’ as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology.”²⁴ Liberalism, by his account, has been marvelously successful in shaping the modern world, but this paradoxically means it has also succeeded in tearing apart webs of human sociality, convention, and community.

Liberalism’s latent individualism has destroyed political life and ransacked the natural order. Eventually, Deneen argues, the liberal desire for freedom leads, through paths of “deracination,” “depredation,” and “disintegration,” to despotism. It’s a vicious circle of individualism and statism, of political atomism that fuels state tyranny. And whereas Bloom presents his story as a warning, Deneen offers his as an inevitability.²⁵ This is pure Ideas First determinism: We are doomed because of the ideas that have shaped our lives (and since, for Deneen, liberalism has a static definition, it cannot be ameliorated).

It is easy to see how a person could become captivated by Deneen’s sweeping explanation of modern life. There is a good deal of truth to his idea that liberalism—which originated as a mode of politics meant to mediate between conflicting worldviews, and to protect individuals’ rights and dignity—has had disintegrative effects on some dimensions of modern social life and community, especially if one considers liberal economic policies as part of the ledger. But Deneen overstates the extent of atomism, social decline, and state tyranny—and quite dramatically, much as Bloom had overstated and misunderstood the problems of the modern campus. Bloom saw decline, but the era he discussed also witnessed the most dramatic expansion of higher education in American history. Deneen’s book similarly views the dizzying social,

political, and technological changes of recent decades, and all he can see is chaos and instability. Meanwhile, many of us—especially those whose lives have benefited from progressive social changes—see reconfiguration rather than destruction and wonder when things have actually been better. I often look around today and compare it to the world my grandmothers inhabited, and I can't help but shake my head at men like Bloom and Deneen.

But there are also essential differences between the two thinkers. Whereas Bloom critiqued higher education in the United States out of a sense of concern both for the life of the mind and for modern liberal democracy, in *Why Liberalism Failed* Deneen is working toward quite a different telos. He does not think liberalism salvageable, and so his purpose is far more radical and closed. Bloom, like Strauss, wrote as a friend of liberal education and liberal democracy, who wanted to deepen them and so sustain them; Deneen writes as their highly critical undertaker, or even their cheery embalmer. For Deneen, the pathologies that modern liberalism unleashes are much more concerning and destructive than Bloom lets on; so it's time to forgo liberal freedoms and work toward wholly different political ends. He titled his 2023 book *Regime Change*; when he calls himself Postliberal, he really means it.

It's also fair to say, I think, that Deneen is more earnest about politics than Bloom ever was (he is more like Jaffa and the Claremonters in this regard). Bloom is quite explicit in *Closing* that he cares about higher education and liberal democracy mainly because they provide a haven for the activity of philosophy, which he held to be the highest sort of life (and, in effect, the meaning of life). While I find Bloom's outlook a tad too rarefied (there are many other good reasons to care about politics and higher education), one of the refreshing features of *Closing* is how it provides an unabashed defense of the humanizing potential of liberal education—as something deeply rewarding, of tremendous inherent worth, and even self-constitutive. His defense of liberalism is thinner, but it is nevertheless characterized by a grudging hopefulness.

Deneen cares much more than Bloom about the things that constitute everyday political life for most people—things like elections, community associations, and school board meetings. His more earnest

and idealistic interest in democratic politics vis-à-vis Bloom means, it seems to me, that he has a higher bar for what politics should mean, and more room, too, for serious disappointment. Deneen's own conservative Catholicism arguably also makes him more deeply resistant to the particular kind of society that liberalism creates. He is presumably upset not just about the problems created by free markets and consumption, but also by what he views as libertinism and moral disorder. Both Deneen and Bloom present growing moral pluralism as something that invites antimoral relativism and nihilism. But for Deneen, liberalism is unsalvageable. Only a small slice of the population—the elites—can do well under liberalism, which corrupts everything else and destroys the traditional ways in which most people (according to Deneen) are able to thrive. He has said that he was formerly a man of the left, and his populist concerns come across as sincere.²⁶ But whereas other critics of contemporary liberalism argue for a reorientation from within, Deneen wants something more dramatic.

The divergences between Bloom and Deneen are clearest in Deneen's account of education, which is closely tied to his understanding of human freedom. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, the early modern philosophers were made into major culprits, thanks to their emphasis on individual freedom, and Deneen presented the true great books as those that foster virtue and moral obedience, as opposed to those that challenge authority. When he imagines a new curricular reading list, Plato and the biblical authors are included; the founders and other modern authors—not to mention the postmodern ones—are not. To account for this, he explained that such an education was better because it “reinforced a basic teaching embedded deeply within its own cultural tradition, namely an education in limits.”²⁷ He had been making these argument for quite some time. In a 2013 speech called “Against the Great Books,” he criticized modern thinkers for being so critical of ancient authorities and values, and heaped praise on older forms of education, noting that “the aim of such an education is not critical thinking, but the achievement of liberty governed by the discipline—even *dictatorship*—of virtue.”²⁸

Deneen's mode of thought presupposes that there are specific truths and ways of seeing the world that must be left unchallenged; he wants

to protect and cordon off moral and political living, even if that means sealing off critical thinking. It's an all-cave-no-light account of liberal education, and one that should be deeply unsettling to anyone who cares about free thinking. And as far as politics goes, Deneen tends to obscure the fact that the modern liberal political project, going back to Locke or earlier, was conceived as something that imposed strict limits *on government*—in order, especially, to secure space for individual freedom, including the free moral conscience.

Deneen's Antiliberalism

I first read *Why Liberalism Failed* in 2019. At the time, we were living with my in-laws in Wichita, Kansas. We were there for our own recuperative Augustinian retreat from life in Washington, DC. I had just given birth to my second son and had resigned my faculty position at American University, where I had gone to work after my year at Georgetown. I resigned because I was burnt out, unsettled in the academy, and thinking about doing something new. By then, I was more or less out of conservative academia, but it was also at around this time that I really started paying attention to conservative intellectualism. And that's when I first read Deneen's best-selling book. I found it frustrating and slightly bewildering.

One of the reasons I disliked it was what Deneen said about liberals and elites, which to me seemed silly and conspiratorial. I readily concede that liberals and elites do tend to be more cosmopolitan and rootless than their conservative counterparts, and that they are sometimes plagued by hypocrisy and self-righteousness. But, like Bloom and so many Straussians, Deneen spoke as though anyone who did not share his particular values was an amoral nihilist or relativist, rather than someone with real and fundamental moral disagreements. And Deneen's cynicism went much further. He accused liberal elites of being wholly without genuine affection, feeling, or meaning in their own lives. He suggested that their marriages were mercenary, they did not truly care for their own children, and they did not put down real roots or have a sense of home.²⁹ Reading this from my in-laws' basement in Wichita,

with my newborn and a three-year-old underfoot, I could only laugh. Did Deneen truly believe that people like me don't understand the inherent limits of life? That we don't care about home and family, about our kids and communities and friendships? There are people out there who fit his description of unencumbered jetsetters. But as a general description of professional people, it was a caricature, cynical and distorted. As Ezra Klein put it in an interview with Deneen, "Everybody I know is tangled up in complex family, loving, critical, difficult, beautiful family relationships."³⁰

The most glaring flaw of *Why Liberalism Failed* was its account of liberalism. To tell his abstract story of inevitable decline, Deneen offered a highly idiosyncratic and hyperabstract conceptualization of liberal democracy—a strawman definition that at best was radically incomplete, and at worst an unthinking import from far-right Europeans who had been complaining about "the suicidal nature of liberalism" for many decades.³¹

On the very first page of the book, Deneen offered a standard definition of what he meant by the term "liberalism": a "political philosophy conceived some 500 years ago" that "conceived humans as rights-bearing individuals who could fashion and pursue for themselves their own version of the good life." He went on: "Limited but effective government, rule of law, an independent judiciary, responsive public officials, and free and fair elections" were some of the hallmarks of liberalism.³² This was a reasonable definition that captured the basic political and institutional features of modern liberal democracy.

But by the end of the introduction, Deneen had swerved to his much more reductive and essentialist definition that focused on individualism and the idea of the conquest of nature; liberalism, he said, imposed an "ideological remaking of the world in the image of a false anthropology."³³ With this, Deneen took two important themes within liberalism and reduced them to an essence.³⁴ By reducing liberalism in such a way, he avoided engagement with liberalism's political forms, the limits it imposes on government, the importance it places on freedom and self-government, and its connections to Christianity and the Protestant Reformation. He treated liberal democracy as a rigid ideological

program, but what we call liberalism today is a highly variable historical phenomenon.³⁵ Deneen's reductive portrait left too much out—and cast it all aside too hastily.

I am highly sympathetic to Deneen's love of localism and community, and his critique of modern atomism and materialism. But when I read his book in Wichita, it left me cold. Part of it was personal—as I've said, his account of liberals and elites was just so silly and off-base—and part of it was philosophical—his account of liberalism was so ham-fisted and ahistorical. But it was also political.

For one thing, Deneen sneered at modern feminism. The early Trump years were a period of heightened feminist consciousness across the country. Several women had accused Trump of sexual assault, and shortly before the 2016 election the *Access Hollywood* recording was released where Trump bragged about assaulting women. ("I moved on her like a bitch," he said of one acquaintance. "When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. . . . Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything.") Many people perceived Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton in the election as a betrayal of women; on the day after his inauguration, millions of people attended Women's Marches across the country. The year 2017 was also the start of the #MeToo movement. By the time I read Deneen's book, the country was in the thick of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, transfixed by Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Trump's choice for the Supreme Court.

For a brief interlude it seemed like the hearings might affect Kavanaugh's nomination. They didn't. But that was the context in which I read *Why Liberalism Failed*, and Deneen's approach to feminism in that book struck me as woefully inadequate: "The main practical achievement of this liberation of women has been to move many of them into the workforce of market capitalism," wrote Deneen, calling this "a highly dubious form of liberation." He continued:

Today, we consider the paramount sign of the liberation of women to be their growing emancipation from their biology, which frees them to serve a different, disembodied body—"corporate" America—and participate in an economic order that effectively obviates any

actual political liberty. Liberalism posits that freeing women from the household is tantamount to liberation, but it effectively puts women and men alike into a far more encompassing bondage.³⁶

I did not buy it. As Jennifer Szalai wrote in her review of the book, “You don’t have to be a raging neoliberal to find this a highly dubious form of generalization.”³⁷

Deneen also seemed to believe that the Republican Party was becoming genuinely working-class under Trump. That seemed implausible to me, since Democrats continued to have a strong working-class constituency, including a sizable majority of minority voters; it seemed to me that GOP populism made sense only if you excluded nonwhites. Further, the Democratic platform was much more consistent with the kind of working-class initiatives that Deneen seemed to favor.³⁸ In hindsight, he may have understood Trump’s potential here better than I.

Vermeule, Ahmari, and “Against the Dead Consensus”

As a book of academic political theory, *Why Liberalism Failed* was something of a barn-burner, but in the end Deneen still exercised a degree of restraint in his conclusions and recommendations. The final pages have a prudent and even quaint quality (especially when compared to a collection of essays that he published in November 2016, where his introduction concluded with a flourish about “refounding” America in explicit departure from “the philosophic principles that animated its liberal founding”; he recommended “appropriating those structures and even the language of liberty and rights to build a new a civilization worthy of preservation”).³⁹ In the 2018 book, Deneen eschewed grand new theoretical or revolutionary programs, recommending instead grassroots experiments in community building and localism. He acknowledged the possibility of illiberal or local authoritarian radicalism but evaded any clear delimitation of governmental powers. Would individual rights be respected by the new localism or not? Would traditional liberal ideals governing limits on governmental power stay

in place or gradually be dissolved? On such questions, in the original edition of *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen demurred.

In some ways, Deneen's evasive ambiguity signaled a capitulation to ongoing liberal domination, an observation that was first articulated in an early review of his book by the Harvard Law professor Adrian Vermeule, published in Julius Krein and Gladden Pappin's *American Affairs* journal in Spring 2018. The review was called "Integration from Within."⁴⁰ The title of the review was revealing. Integralism is the Catholic intellectual movement in which Vermeule has been a vocal participant since his conversion to Catholicism in 2016, and it is adjacent to Postliberalism. It rejects the traditional liberal separation of church and state and posits that the state should be subject to (or integrated with) Catholic norms and spiritual authority; it is one of the main subjects of chapter 10.

In "Integration from Within," Vermeule offered high praise for Deneen's book but also contended that it ultimately lacked ambition. "An outstanding work," he wrote, "might have been a masterpiece." Vermeule's argument was that, by concluding with an open-ended and explicit retreat from theory and ideology, and by petitioning for a return to localism in the style of Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option*, Deneen relapsed into dependence on the pluralistic liberal order. Just as liberals worried that Deneen's localist communities would infringe on hard-earned rights and liberties, Vermeule was concerned that "localist communities after Deneen's fashion must tremble indefinitely under the [liberal] axe." In other words, the local communities that Deneen favored might still be subject to liberal norms; Vermeule was explicit about the need to undermine liberal democracy more dramatically. His review included a reimagining of the ending of *Why Liberalism Failed* whereby, rather than a retreat into localism, antiliberals co-opt the power of the state to undo liberal freedoms, very much in keeping with what Vermeule, as an integralist, calls "strategic Ralliement." The thing to do would be "to co-opt and transform the decaying regime from within its own core." He suggested that the vast bureaucracy created by liberalism might "by the invisible hand of Providence, be turned to new ends, becoming the great instrument with which to restore a substantive politics of the good."

Vermeule concluded the review with a frank plea for the takeover and final destruction of liberalism. He dismissed liberal-minded concerns about excess coercion and instead insisted on the need for a strong strategic position “from which to sear the liberal faith with hot irons.” The idea would be to “defeat and capture the hearts and minds of liberal agents,” to take over the old regime and then turn it to the service of Vermeulean ends. “In my view, only in this way will liberalism well and truly fall victim to its own success,” he wrote, “and this line of approach would make straight the crooked turn at the end of Deneen’s near-masterpiece.” Where Deneen remained cautious and hedging, Vermeule was excitable and, from the perspective of mainstream American conservatism or liberalism, highly unorthodox.⁴¹ Vermeule was a good student of Carl Schmitt, who was a fierce critic of liberalism and defended an existential version of politics characterized by a hard distinction between “friends” and “enemies.”

It did not take long for Deneen to come around to Vermeule’s point of view.⁴² In a new preface written for the paperback edition of *Why Liberalism Failed* in February 2019, Deneen explained that the time for “epic theory” (as opposed to normal theory and grassroots localism) had come much sooner than he had thought. He now believed he “was wrong to think that this project would take generations.” The conclusion of his new preface read:

Augustine’s *City of God* was made necessary by the sudden and unexpected overturning of the “eternal” Roman order in A.D. 410. It seems more apparent every day that a comparable epoch-defining book will arise from our age, and I hope some young reader of this book will be the person to write it. And while I also hope to follow this book with one that offers a way out and a way forward, for now the book in your hands aspires to explain why this new departure in the epic form is not only necessary but inescapable.⁴³

Deneen gave a few reasons for his change of heart in this new preface, including the upset of the 2016 election and the “accelerating demolition of the liberal order in Europe.” The change in circumstances had clearly given him hope that dramatic change might be possible now rather than

at some point in the distant future. He did not shy away from extremist, apocalyptic language, writing as though there were never any signs of peace and stability in the modern world. It was a strange mode of expression for a self-professed conservative with a prestigious job at one of America's top universities and a best-selling book promoted by Barack Obama.

Deneen was soon at work on his next book, and in March 2019 he took a step toward more overtly partisan public intellectualism when he signed an open letter published in *First Things* magazine called "Against the Dead Consensus."

First Things is the foremost Christian periodical on the American Right.⁴⁴ It was founded by the Richard John Neuhaus (1936–2009), an influential clergyman and writer, and its original mission was to "advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society."⁴⁵ R. R. Reno eventually became editor-in-chief of the journal after Neuhaus's death, and though *First Things* had typically defended Catholic fusionism, that began to change under Reno's leadership.⁴⁶ By the time "Against the Dead Consensus" was published, Reno had overseen a major controversy at the magazine concerning the publication of a book review by the theologian Romanus Cessario that defended the 1858 kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara—a position that clashed with contemporary civic norms liberties, and was highly controversial according to church doctrine.⁴⁷ (Mortara was a Jewish boy who had been secretly baptized by his nanny in the 1850s and so taken by Catholic authorities and raised by Pope Pius IX; this caused a tremendous uproar across Europe and the United States at the time.)⁴⁸

"Against the Dead Consensus" had few signatories, but it garnered a lot of attention because several, like Sohrab Ahmari, Rod Dreher, and Patrick Deneen, had public profiles, and because they were breaking decisively with the old Reagan/Buckley style of conservatism. This was something different from the pseudonymous scribbling of Anton, Krein, and Pappin, though the letter also brought the religiously oriented *First Things* crowd together with James Poulos and Matthew Peterson, both leaders at the Claremont Institute.⁴⁹ As Sohrab Ahmari would later explain, most of the signatories to the "manifesto" were

young Roman Catholics.⁵⁰ In 2019 very few conservative intellectuals still defended Trump publicly. “Against the Dead Consensus” did not endorse him but did celebrate the end of the old order, and so it marked a turn.

The letter reads as a religiously inflected version of Michael Anton’s defense of Trumpism, and, as its title indicates, the authors took a strong stance against the old “fusionist” GOP consensus, which it characterized as a morally corrupt handmaiden of liberal tyranny. Abortion came up repeatedly (the right to abortion was presented as a result of the fetishizing of autonomy and a prime example of liberal cruelty). The letter writers continued in this dramatic and moralizing vein: “The old conservative consensus paid lip service to traditional values. But it failed to retard, much less reverse, the eclipse of permanent truths, family stability, communal solidarity, and much else. It surrendered to the pornographization of daily life, to the culture of death, to the cult of competitiveness. It too often bowed to a poisonous and censorious multiculturalism.”

A key impetus behind “Against the Dead Consensus” was clearly a sense of moral opportunism—a sense that Trumpism had opened a way forward toward a more morally upright, and far more monolithic, future. The writers were especially excited about the ways in which new kinds of conservative moral and political thought might reclaim oversight over liberal economics and technology. “Consensus conservatism,” they wrote, “long ago ceased to inquire into the first things. But we will not.” They concluded their piece with a list of six propositions that sound relatively innocuous. They opposed “the society of individual affluence,” “attempts to compromise on human dignity,” and “tyrannical liberalism,” stood for “the American citizen” and “a country that works for workers,” and believed that “home matters.” But when the writers elaborated on each point, they dabbled in replacement theory (“We oppose attempts to displace American citizens”), credited Trump with heeding “the cries of the working class as much as the demand of capital,” and embraced “the new nationalism.” The signatories took aim at the old fusionist compromise with neoliberal economics, but with a distinctive and hopeful emphasis on the

reactionary moral landscape that might be forged by postconsensus right-wing populism.

Sohrab Ahmari, at the time editor of the editorial pages at the *New York Post*, would soon become the most vocal proponent of this emergent—and radical—strain of reactionary conservative intellectualism on the New Right. Several months after publication of “Against the Dead Consensus,” he wrote a follow-up piece entitled “Against David Frenchism.” This attack gave Ahmari instant notoriety because of his choice of target: David French had genuine conservative bona fides. A lawyer by training (French graduated from Harvard Law School), French was also a veteran of the Iraq War. He built his career fighting for the conservative cause of religious liberty.⁵¹

Targeting the staunch anti-Trump conservative in aggressive and personal terms, Ahmari took issue with everything tolerant, compromising, and politically liberal about French. Sounding like a pious version of Anton, he criticized French for a politeness and civility that is “unsuitable to the depth of the present crisis facing religious conservatives.” He instead recommended that conservatives “fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils in the form of a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good.”⁵² Then, echoing Vermeule’s critique of Deneen, Ahmari spoke more plainly still, in archaic terms of totalizing religious fervor. And, intentionally or not, he too was echoing the thought of Carl Schmitt.

Ahmari delineated his core disagreement with French as one of political theology. Whereas French was a traditional social conservative, he was also a political liberal, which meant he was an accommodationist who believed that American institutions can “accommodate both traditional Christianity and the libertine ways of paganized ideology of the other side.” French was part of the old Reagan/Buckley establishment and Ahmari disagreed with this way of thinking. With disarming honesty, he instead embraced “politics as war and enmity.”

Traditional Christians needed to conquer the public sphere and “defeat” the enemy—meaning, presumably, that they should cease to accommodate the “libertine and the pagan” in the public square. It was time to use “the public power to advance the common good, including in the realm of public morality.” Like Pappin before him, Ahmari saw Trump as a genuine force for community: “His instinct has been to shift the cultural and political mix, ever so slightly, away from autonomy-above-all toward order, continuity, and social cohesion.”⁵³

Ahmari’s piece was infused with an overheated moral horror of everything he perceived to be decadent and decaying about liberal society. He plainly felt that the infidels were not only winning, but severely oppressing their “enemies” in the process.

There was also a more serious side to Ahmari’s outlook—a more serious argument, the truth of which should be acknowledged by liberals. Ahmari’s deepest critique was that David Frenchism refused to contend honestly with the rising tides of progressive norms and cultural demands and refused to admit that, for all its pretensions to neutrality, liberal, pluralistic, modern constitutionalism has normative tendencies and implicit preferences and inevitably shapes the liberal democratic psyche in specific ways. In my view, Ahmari was not wrong in this basic observation—though I favor the virtues, including autonomy and freedom, that he condemned—nor is French wrong to hope for an accommodationist dispensation from a liberal politics. But the latter must be fought for and cultivated; unlike the impulse to freedom—or for domination—the liberal spirit of toleration and civility does not come easily. Ahmari and the Postliberals can help us see why these liberal virtues are so necessary, if only because the alternative world that they wish for would be so violent and inhospitable.

The latent violence of the Postliberal movement is evident not only in the Schmittian language that they so readily deploy—the language of war and enmity, of friends and enemies and brutal choices.⁵⁴ It is also visible in their totalizing beliefs about the monolithic nature of the Common Good, and their failure to speak openly about what they would propose to do with the massive plurality of people in modern

liberal societies—libertines and pagans alike—who do not see the world as they do. There is a real sense in which the Postliberals seem determined to reignite the moral and religious conflagrations that inspired the birth of liberalism in the first place.

This problem is hardly limited to the Postliberal wing of the New Right. Chapter 5 introduces the National Conservatives, or NatCons—the broadest group of New Right intellectuals, who are under the leadership of Yoram Hazony, and united around a highly monolithic idea of the American nation. As the liberal writer William Galston has observed, both Deneen and Hazony “have mounted a frontal attack on the entire individualist, rights-based liberal political tradition that they trace back to John Locke.” In so doing, they reject the core of the American political project.⁵⁵