For this Sunday, November 17, 2019, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the November 21 issue of the New York Review of Books:

Page 13, Emily Raboteau, "Lessons in Survival," a review of two books about America's dealing with rising seas along America's coasts.

Page 36, Robert Kuttner, "Blaming Liberalism," a review of the book *Why Liberalism Failed* about the crisis of liberal democracy around the world.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

Lessons on Survival can be read without a password on the NYR site, click here.

A copy of Blaming Liberalism is attached

Blaming Liberalism
Robert KuttnerNOVEMBER 21, 2019 ISSUE
Why Liberalism Failed
by Patrick J. Deneen, with a foreword by James Davison Hunter and John M. Owen IV
Yale University Press, 225 pp., $30.00; $18.00 (paper)
Olive & Market Street, 2012; photograph by Julie Blackmon
Julie Blackmon: Olive & Market Street, 2012
As if to mock the triumphalism of 1989, liberal democracy has faltered with stunning abruptness. Even the most robust democracies are suffering from dysfunction and defection. The election of Trump in the US, the Brexit quagmire in the UK, and the diminished support for mainstream parties across Europe all reflect the accurate perception of a failed governing class.

For both the far left and the far right, recent events are evidence that liberal democracy is inherently flawed and even doomed. To Marxist critics, parliamentary democracy was always a smokescreen for the rule of capital, and the current travails of democracy mean we have reached the terminal crisis of capitalism at last.1 Even non-Marxist progressive economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Dani Rodrik agree that we can't have both unrestrained global capital and a functioning democratic nation-state. Among traditionalist conservatives who cherish an organic conception of society—as opposed to free-marketeers—liberal democracy is a dangerous betrayal of deeper sources of culture and civilization such as the family, the tribe, the nation, and the church. Liberalism, in this telling, is reaping the consequences of an assault on tradition. For Patrick Deneen, a political philosopher at Notre Dame, today's crisis is not transient but fundamental to liberal democracy.

In Why Liberalism Failed, published in 2018 with an expanded paperback this year, Deneen recounts the widespread disaffection from democratic politics and governance, the growing distrust of the global marketplace, the erosion of values and virtues such as loyalty and

self-restraint, and the weakening of family and community. He blames it all on what he calls "liberalism." Deneen's quarrel is not merely with modern liberal philosophers such as John Dewey or John Rawls, or with today's Democratic Party and liberal assertions of new rights for women and oppressed minorities. No, his target is the entire liberal tradition, all the way back to the Enlightenment. For Deneen, even ills that most people would attribute to conservatism—such as the instability wrought by market fundamentalism—are the mischief of liberalism.

When it appeared in 2018, with jacket quotes from Ross Douthat on the right and Cornel West on the left, Deneen's book garnered respectful reviews. Harvard legal scholar Adrian Vermeule, writing in American Affairs, called Deneen "a worthy successor of Tocqueville." The New York Times review, by Jennifer Szalai, was mixed but prominent, stating that it "articulates something important in this age of disillusionment." The book's thesis was convenient for conservatives looking to blame all ills on liberals, and also appealed to some progressives for its excoriation of market excess. It seemed to speak to a broad public bewildered by the abrupt collapse of liberal democracy. The 2019 paperback edition even includes a blurb from President Barack Obama, who praises its "cogent insights into the loss of meaning and community."

Deneen's thinking echoes an older line of reactionary argument on the folly and perversity of liberal democracy that extends back from twentieth-century anti-liberal intellectuals, like Leo Strauss and fascist theorists Carl Schmitt and Giovanni Gentile, to nineteenth-century nationalist and monarchic critics of liberalism, like Joseph de Maistre.2 He bases his indictment on a caricature of liberalism as "the greatest possible freedom from external constraints," which he contrasts with "the ancient conception of liberty," defined as "the learned capacity of human beings to conquer the slavish pursuit of base and hedonistic desires." This capacity, he believes, was anchored in "norms and customs"—religious observance, the nuclear family, clear hierarchies of authority—that necessarily required "constraints upon individual choice." Liberalism, he contends, rejects this self-restrained conception of liberty, rewarding permissiveness, debauching self-discipline and modesty, and ultimately resulting in calamitous consequences for society: "the loosening of social bonds in nearly every aspect of life—familial, neighborly, religious, even national—reflects the advancing logic of liberalism and is the source of its deepest instability." By inviting individual excess, Deneen argues, liberalism destroys community and thus the liberal ideal of a self-governing society.

The book proceeds methodically through every major realm of life—politics and government, education, culture, the family, sexuality, science, and technology. For Deneen, liberalism is also to blame for global climate change, which, he contends, was caused by "the dream of liberation from nature's constraints." By embracing multiculturalism, liberalism creates an undifferentiated melting pot and destroys actual cultures—a person who values all cultures, in Deneen's view, has no culture. In his discussion of education and the liberal arts, Deneen warns that, "if liberalism ultimately replaces all forms of culture with a pervasive anticulture, then it must undermine education as well."

Deneen blames liberalism for the emancipation of women, leading to a society in which "children are increasingly viewed as a limitation upon individual freedom, which contributes to liberalism's commitment to abortion on demand." Assessing technology, Deneen writes, "The residual cultural practices that survived the era of technology now give way to a transformed world in which technology is itself our culture." The growing sense of enslavement to technology, according to Deneen, is also somehow the fault of liberalism, even though those same trends exist to an even greater degree in autocratic societies and their containment has been a prime goal of civil libertarians.

By advancing individual freedom at the expense of tradition and custom, he argues, liberalism asks too much of the democratic state as guarantor. The result is an "ever-enlarging sphere of state control." "As culture fades, Leviathan waxes and responsible liberty recedes." For Deneen, the classically liberal idea associated with Adam Smith that the free market optimizes choice is just another form of license. The result is an ever-expanding marketplace. Paradoxically, the individual is rendered "powerless and overwhelmed by the very structures that were called into being in the name of her freedom." Summing up, Deneen declares that "democracy, in fact, cannot ultimately function in a liberal regime." Liberalism, he concludes, "has failed because it has succeeded."

Considering Deneen's exaggerations, omissions, and misrepresentations of liberalism, the acclaim his book initially received is startling, even scandalous. The warm reception can be explained, I think, by two basic factors. First, the book appeared at just the right moment, when Americans were reeling from the rush to authoritarianism at home and abroad. Deneen's title and premise did not seem hyperbolic; something about liberalism had evidently failed.

Second, Deneen is adroit at cataloging the multiple ills of modern society and governance, so his story has a certain seductive appeal. The book includes cogent descriptions of trends that worry Americans. Schools are indeed doing a poor job of educating the young. Global climate change is surely an existential catastrophe. Common values have been replaced by a cacophony of mutual distrust. But are all these developments the fault of liberalism? Skim the book, and you sense the mind of an astute social critic. It takes two or three readings to appreciate the intellectual dishonesty.

Deneen's sweeping claims are dubious, both historically and intellectually. Liberalism is not and never was merely "the greatest possible freedom from external constraints." Rather, it is fundamentally about limiting abuses of public and private power and creating space for free inquiry. The liberal project evolved over more than three hundred years beginning in the late seventeenth century. Its antecedents include the development of the scientific method and related arguments over faith and reason dating back to Copernicus, Francis Bacon, and Galileo. The core liberal principles included the rule of law, limits on inherited privilege, constraints on arbitrary power, freedom of conscience and speech, and reliance on liberty to develop a natural aristocracy of talent.

Contrary to Deneen's cartoon of liberalism as mere license, liberals were deeply committed to cultivating private and public morality, balancing rights with responsibilities, and striving for the common good. You can hardly read a page of the Federalist Papers without encountering these concerns. Federalist 57 declares that every political constitution should strive "to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society."

Deneen's liberalism is built on one whopper after another—gross generalizations and pure inventions. For example, he contends that "liberals believe that the nation-state must eventually be superseded by global governance." Most liberals believe no such thing.

Liberalism as it actually evolved was not the result of philosophic musings about absolute freedom; it was deeply rooted in events. The effort to make religion a private affair was a response to centuries of brutal religious wars. In 1648 the provisional solution to sectarian strife was the doctrine of the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War, cuius regio, eius religio—the king dictates the religion of his subjects. But that remedy trampled religious freedoms for Protestants who found themselves in a Catholic kingdom, or vice versa. Among its other goals, liberalism sought to reconcile religious liberty with shared political community.

Modern liberalism begins with John Locke, whom Deneen abhors and caricatures. Contrary to Deneen, Locke was no theorist of individual license. He valued rights because they both temper tyranny and fulfill human potential. His views were informed by the practical dilemmas of religious conflict, monarchical abuse, and civil war in his own time. In England, after several decades of conflicts between the king and Parliament, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 began as a dynastic quarrel over succession; it ended with constitutional constraints on the monarchy, as Parliament asserted countervailing rights by invoking feudal concessions that sovereigns had made to other medieval estates. But the bloodless Glorious Revolution went beyond those concessions and began the tradition of constitutional democracy. Parliament, not the crown, at last gained the power to levy taxes and appropriate funds for war. The king had to call periodic elections and could no longer suspend Parliament.

Locke wrote his Two Treatises of Government a year later, extrapolating from the conflicts of the day to a general theory of constitutional government. He was a close student of morality and of power. Proposing the germ of constitutional separation of powers, he wrote, "It may be too great a temptation to humane frailty apt to grasp at Power, for the same Persons who have the Power of making Laws, to have also in their hands the power to execute them."

In the century between Locke and the Federalist Papers, liberal arguments included vibrant debates about the individual, community, human nature, and virtue. America's constitutional Founders debated how to have a state strong enough to do its job, yet constrained by strict limits on power via explicit separation of powers and stipulation of rights. Constitutional democracy was limited in other respects. It was democracy for white men, it coexisted with slavery, and the franchise was expanded only gradually. Liberal constitutionalists were

gentlemen who feared the rabble as much as they feared tyrants, and recognized the risks of a Caesarist alliance between these two antiliberal forces. The conservative liberal Edmund Burke, a foe of the French Revolution cited approvingly by Deneen, cherished tradition and dreaded the mob, but also famously warned George III that he was courting disaster by failing to govern as a constitutional monarch and respect the liberty-loving Americans.3

Where Deneen offers arbitrary and ancient norms as the way to limit humankind's base desires, the Founders offered an ingenious and accountable system of government. They were no less concerned than Deneen is about human frailty; their entire constitutional design was intended to counter bad behavior and corruption—but on a republican foundation.

Deneen has a disingenuous habit of cherry-picking quotes to make great liberal thinkers sound as if they were arguing the opposite of their actual views. He characterizes his nemesis, Locke, as wishing to expand liberty "defined as the capacity to satisfy our appetites." In truth, Locke viewed well-constructed government as a barrier to mere hedonism. He wrote that the foundation of virtue lies in the ability of a human being to "deny himself his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way." Quoting Tocqueville, one of history's greatest liberals, out of context, Deneen would have us believe that the American propensity to form associations, which Tocqueville celebrated as one of the young republic's greatest strengths, somehow alarmed the French visitor.

You wonder if Deneen noticed—or willfully neglected—many of history's greatest actual liberals: Lincoln's quest for the "better angels of our nature," FDR's fireside chats about what we owe our neighbors; Walter Lippmann's complex meditations about government and the good society; or Isaiah Berlin's work on positive and negative conceptions of liberty. Contrary to Deneen's picture of liberalism undermining morality and community, the cultivation of civic, republican, and personal virtues was a central preoccupation of influential liberal thinkers and politicians from Jefferson, Tocqueville, and Lincoln to the recent writings of Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, and Amitai Etzioni. As Paul Starr observed in his 2007 book, Freedom's Power:

Far from being oblivious to the value of community and social ties, liberal principles aim to protect civil society from being dominated by the state and to allow the many communities in a modern society to develop freely. Liberals are keenly aware of two phenomena that the communitarians ignore: disagreement and power. Although some values are widely shared, people frequently have different views about what would be good for the community.4

Deneen ignores this central conundrum of how to reconcile disagreement in a polity without resorting to arbitrary power, and he ignores the ways liberalism has resolved this conflict historically. As the twentieth-century liberal philosopher Albert Hirschman observed, the liberal project aims to domesticate irreconcilable "passions" and tame them into tractable "interests" capable of negotiation and resolution, so that different communities might share the same civic space as free people and not as mere subjects. Deneen idealizes a pre-liberal civilization in which fundamental values were supposedly universally shared. But as the history of religious

wars suggests, values ostensibly rooted in voluntary norms and beliefs were deeply coercive. One person's revealed truth is another's apostasy. If people of differing faiths are to coexist in the same polis, faith needs to be a private, not a state affair.

In the pre-modern period, the only people who had even a measure of political freedom were the monarchy, courtiers in the aristocracy, prelates in the upper reaches of the church, and a handful of skilled artisans. In Deneen's description of pre-liberal freedoms, his oft-repeated term "self-rule" implies self-government, but he really means internalized self-control (often coerced by monarchs, feudal constraints, or religious commands). In the pre-liberal era, the mass of people had nothing approaching what today would be called agency.

Deneen wields the word norm as an all-purpose sacred amulet; to read his book, you would never know that Enlightenment liberalism was a reaction not to benign "norms and customs," but to absolute monarchies and a despotic, often corrupt Church. He simply omits the Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery, serfdom, pogroms, and denial of the rights of women, to name only a few such assaults. If liberalism is guilty of having asserted individual rights, it had good reason.

As the liberal project evolved, it had to reckon with a new force not present in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries—great corporations and private economic power that translated into political power. Liberal constitutionalists were far from radical egalitarians. For them, private property was sacrosanct; and it took more than two centuries for the franchise to become universal (and in the America of President Trump and Chief Justice John Roberts, the right to vote is still contested). But they did appreciate that extreme economic inequality undermined political equality, promoted corruption, and led to destitution.

So in the twentieth century, progressive liberalism turned to affirmative government—"Hamiltonian means to serve Jeffersonian ends," in the famous inversion of the Progressive Era journalist and philosopher Herbert Croly. Where eighteenth-century liberalism had linked limited government and laissez-faire market economics, progressive liberalism in new circumstances used affirmative government to temper market excess. This meant a modern welfare state, as well as antitrust laws, labor protections, regulation of corporations and financial markets, and intensified public investments.

In the twentieth century, the main axis of argument between liberals and conservatives became whether to regulate markets in a broader public interest. Yet Deneen treats modern conservatism as just another variant of liberalism—as if the political and ideological history of the past century had not occurred. To assert this claim, Deneen conflates liberalism with libertarianism—the true home of radical individualism. He treats the corporate excesses of our own day as merely another variant of what he terms liberalism.

John Locke
John Locke; drawing by David Levine

Leading libertarians, such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, allied themselves with a conservatism based on a common embrace of corporate capitalism, which has invaded more and more spaces that were once public or personal. (The title of Shoshana Zuboff's recent book nicely captures the phenomenon: The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.) The pervasive incursions of commercialism are in fact the source of much of the pathology that Deneen attributes to liberalism. Even Adam Smith, understood by the standards of his time, was far less of a market absolutist than are the latter-day followers who invoke his "unseen hand." Smith promoted free markets as a source of competition against royal monopolies. But he supported a society of mutual obligation, warned against private monopolies and the tendency of owners to take advantage of workers, and was a strong backer of public investment in education.

Since FDR, progressive liberalism has sought, with too little success, to resist commercial encroachments on multiple areas of family and community life, precisely to safeguard values that Deneen professes to hold dear. The commercialization of health care, the commodification of education, the sale of private data, the outsourcing of employment, and the economic collapse of entire regions are the fruits of market capitalism run riot, not of "liberalism" as it has been understood for more than a century. From Nixon onward, the conservative revolution in US politics has sought to reverse the controls on capitalism of FDR's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Its success is less a failure of liberalism than a triumph of conservatism.

What, finally, is Deneen up to? In pursuit of a broad audience, Deneen, an ultra-conservative Catholic, can't quite come right out and say that all values flow from God and that liberalism's original sin was to challenge faith with reason and divine authority with democratic rights. But this seems to be his credo—the book is at bottom a theologically based broadside against secular modernity.

Deneen excoriates Francis Bacon, a rationalist and an empiricist who is sometimes considered the father of the scientific method, for "urg[ing] human dominion over nature," and for "even reversing the effects of the Fall." That would be the Biblical Fall of man from a state of obedience to God to guilty disobedience, as symbolized by the banishment of Adam and Eve from Eden. The liberal Fall, evidently, is the liberals' failure to place God, especially the Catholic God of literal Scripture, at the center of their project. In treating the Biblical Fall as a historical rather than a metaphorical event, Deneen shows his hand.

Deneen is far from the first conservative writer to blame secularism for the erosion of community norms, though his claims are among the most extreme. Several liberal thinkers such as Alan Wolfe, E.J. Dionne, and Jean Bethke Elshtain have written nuanced arguments about the costs of banishing faith from the public square. They insist that liberal democracy is strong enough to accept some public religious observance, and that many liberal values are grounded in religious ones, but they write as friends, not enemies, of the Enlightenment. Dionne, an observant Catholic, addresses the continuing struggle—unacknowledged by Deneen—to reconcile the Church with twenty-first-century democratic values.

Deneen has a tendency to airbrush the history of the Church. Before the liberal era, an absolutist Catholic Church was a partner to absolute monarchies. Deneen neglects to mention the Protestant Reformation or why it was needed to deal with an increasingly corrupt and exploitive Catholic hierarchy. In more recent times, an authoritarian Church had too cozy an entente with fascism. Deneen blames sexual promiscuity on liberalism, but omits the Church's own twisted rules on sexuality, and the attendant legions of closeted priests, exploited women, and abused children. He doesn't even bother to credit important efforts by the modern Church to bring together religious belief with social justice, such as the Catholic social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, the teachings of John XXIII, or the recent work of Pope Francis. The current pope is no liberal on the subject of women and sexuality, but on religious tolerance, economic injustice, and the environment, he is admirably liberal. Francis, astonishingly, does not appear in Deneen's account.

The most revealing omission in Deneen's treatise is any serious discussion of democracy. If liberalism, as Deneen claims, is killing democracy, one might expect him to provide some alternative conception of democracy not afflicted by liberalism. After all, political theory is rich with endless disputation about such questions as strong states versus constrained ones, federal states versus unitary ones, liberty versus equality, citizenship and membership in the civic community, boundaries between public and private, and the power of temporary majorities versus the rights of political minorities. But one searches this book in vain for any discussion of the democracy that Deneen might commend.

Nor does Deneen bother to compare democracy with autocracy. The practical threat to free peoples today is the proliferation of dictatorships. If, as Deneen claims, Western liberalism is inadequate or even perverse in its defense of democratic liberty and the natural environment, how does it stack up against pre-modern despotism or contemporary despotic regimes in Russia, China, or Saudi Arabia? The ruthlessness and gross corruption of modern authoritarian states, their suppression of private spaces, their invasive use of technology, their pillaging of the natural environment, and their brutalization of religious and cultural minorities are nowhere in his story.

The closest thing he suggests to a way forward is for believers to retreat from modernity and set themselves up as anti-liberal countercultures. He mentions orthodox communities of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, notably the Amish. This is tricky territory. The liberal era that Deneen faults for destroying community is actually rife with new kinds of communities: the LGBTQ community, for instance, or back-to-the-land "deep ecologists." Deneen's tacit point seems to be that only communities espousing traditional religious values have legitimacy. And what happens when a religious community engages in actions that are hostile to the general welfare, such as Hasidic Jews rejecting measles vaccines, or strict Muslim communities repressing the rights of women, or Catholic priests abusing children?

In practice, orthodox communities may or may not embody the virtues of “care, patience, humility, reverence, respect, and modesty” that Deneen attributes to them. But the “Benedict Option” that he commends—of a withdrawal into utopian religious communities5—does not solve any of the pathologies of democracy, and may only compound the descent into tribalism. At best, it offers no theory or strategy for keeping tyranny at bay.

Liberal democracy has endured a long history of premature burials by its detractors. Despite such pronouncements in the 1930s by anti-liberal philosophers and dictators, liberalism enjoyed a remarkable renaissance in the postwar era. World War II was the epic victory of the democracies over fascism. The cold war, for all its faults, represented the triumph of the democracies against communism. The democratic state won broad legitimacy for its success in taming the instability and inequity of the laissez-faire market. The economy not only grew, but it grew more equal. In the twentieth century, the domain of rights was expanded to bring in formerly excluded citizens, notably African-Americans and women.

Democracy does not work perfectly, but it works well enough. It is only in the last few decades that democracy has been overwhelmed by a rampant and resurgent capitalism. This seems less the result of liberal democracy’s inherent flaws than the consequence of private wealth and power escaping the salutary limits imposed during the New Deal era, when democracy was powerful and legitimate and the state was not yet overrun by the market.

It is troubling enough that autocracy is gaining ground in practice, but even more alarming that anti-liberalism is once again becoming reputable as theory. There is no good substitute for liberal democracy. All of the alternatives are even more corrosive of human dignity and personal virtue. Liberal democracy may indeed be under siege; but if we are to constrain the tyranny of dictators on one flank and the rule of overweening global corporations on the other, democracy is all we have.

1
See for instance Wolfgang Streeck, How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System (Verso, 2016) and Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism (Verso, 2014). ↩

2
A fine summary of these thinkers can be found in Stephen Holmes’s The Anatomy of Antiliberalism (Harvard University Press, 1993). ↩

3
Burke, Speech to Parliament, March 22, 1775, addressing George III on the subject of Conciliation with the Colonies: “The question with me is, not whether you have a right to render your people miserable, but whether it is not in your interest to make them happy.” ↩

4
Paul Starr, Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism (Basic Books, 2007), p. 203. ↩

5
See Rod Dreher, The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation (Sentinel, 2017). ↩