

## Liberty, Equality, ...Disintegration? A Conversation with the author of 'Why Liberalism Failed'.

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Brian Dijkema, a senior editor with *Comment*, discusses the book *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018) with its author Patrick J Deneen.

**BRIAN DIJKEMA:** In the beginning of the book, you say, “Liberalism has failed not because it fell short but because it was true to itself.” You say failure is the logical end of liberalism. Can you describe this logic?

**PATRICK DENEEN:** What we call liberalism today is in fact a transformation from a classical and Christian definition and understanding of liberty to one where liberty is understood as capacity to live one’s life in the absence of external constraints, brackets the question of truth and goodness, and leaves it up to the individual to define the nature of one’s own good. This is profoundly different from an understanding of freedom as the result of a kind of self-discipline and self-government.

A society based on this transformed understanding of liberty ultimately has an internal logic that leads to not just a political transformation but the transformation of an entire way of life. The deepest commitments of liberalism result in an inability to perceive or understand or even think in terms of a common good aside from the expansion of individual autonomy and individual liberty. So ironically, as we become more free, we require increasing and growing forms of centralized state authority to govern and manage the now highly individualistic definitions of liberty.

We tend to think of these two things as the opposite ends of the political spectrum in some ways: progressives versus libertarian conservatives. My argument, though, is that these two things have not just grown in theory but that they combine in fact. The evidence leads us to conclude that the more we achieve a kind of radical individual liberty—which you can track through all kinds of social science findings and the decline of marriage, decline of childbearing, the decline of community, and so forth—the more we also see the waxing of the state. These are not coincidental. They’re actually linked deeply together. The success of liberalism leads to its simultaneous failure to do the thing that it actually claimed to set out to do.

**BD:** You also note that the market is the twin of the state in this regard. How does the transformation of liberty you describe end up with a larger state and a larger market that, ultimately, constrains our freedom?

**PD:** At the heart of this liberal conception of liberty—how it’s actualized—is the reduction our obligations and duties to particular people. Under liberalism these become, or are perceived as, a limitation on our autonomous freedom and our capacity to choose. It seems to me that the

great contestation of our politics isn't over the question of whether this is the *right* conception of human freedom. The real core of our politics has tended to be, which *means* is the best at securing an increasingly depersonalized world, a world in which we are able to reduce particular and specific obligations we might have to particular people.

On the political left the preferred impersonal mechanism has been the state. The state is the medium of providing the various necessities and desires of life that people need, and the bureaucracy is the form that this ultimately takes. On the political right, the preferred mechanism is the market, which is the mechanism that accumulates the millions if not billions of individual choices and turns that into essentially a utilitarian, utility-maximizing vehicle, again, for depersonalized decision-making. So the contestation of our world has been over the two depersonalized forms or mechanisms that realize individual liberty.

But today we have a decreasing sense of control over these mechanisms. A great deal of our political discontent today comes from the sense that we, as a people, no longer control the mechanism of the state, the thing that was supposed to free us. This mechanism actually begins to limit our freedom in ways that are certainly both visible and increasingly almost invisible.

The same is true of the mechanism of the market, which, as I note in the book, is deeply tied in with the state. The market becomes a mechanism for collecting depersonalized choices, which in turn takes on a logic of its own, which leads it to expand. The market regards any kind of limitation on the choices of individuals as arbitrary. And so the idea of a market as a place is increasingly transformed to the idea of a single market. Notice the way we speak of it. When we speak of this thing called "the market," we're talking of this one comprehensive entity in which every human being on the planet is presumably contained. We go from a world in which a polity is the place where a market exists within. In classical thought, the agora is something that exists within the polity. It is, in a sense, contained within some conception of the common good.

But what we have is a vision of a single market in which is contained all of the variety of political institutions and organizations in states. So the market is arguably the one comprehensive thing that every human being now belongs to, but that, in turn, we also do not control anymore. In fact, if you listen to the way that people talk about the market, what one will hear is this kind of way of speaking that talks in terms of inevitability, of the inability of any particular actor to control the forces of the market. There's a logic to the market that undermines the capacity, you could say, to make political decisions about the market.

And in the same way we see a blowback against the state, there's a blowback against this idea of a globalized market as well as this uncontrollable mechanism, this inevitable force that governs us.

**BD:** One thing that I've found frustrating with the discussion of economics and trade is the complete inability of those who are in favour of trade to speak of it in moral terms: the idea that a market is actually a community of people and institutions serving one another's needs. There's been very little discussion about economics as a moral enterprise.

**PD:** What we have today is a market that's completely detached from any conception that there is a sense of moral ends. That accords exactly with what I've been saying about liberalism. Liberalism demands that any consideration of goods to which our activities are oriented have to be bracketed, have to be put to the side out of the fear that there will be contestation, and even violent contestation, over the question of the good. Of course, this would be of interest when we get to discussions about religion. Liberalism proposes, as John Rawls put it, a *modus vivendi*, a way for us to get along so that we bracket questions of the good.

But notice what happens as a result of this: it's not that we don't have a society in which there's no, let's say, overarching conception of what we are as human beings. In fact, there is one. It becomes the liberal understanding of the human person, this liberal, autonomous, free, detached, depersonalized, choosing individual that liberalism itself makes. It doesn't leave us in this abstract place where we just make our identities in some ways. It actually shapes us into a particular kind of human being. If we conceive of ourselves as utility-maximizing creatures, one of the things that will inevitably take second place will be hard things, difficult things that may require sacrifice. Something like the decision to have a family is now seen as increasing the constraint on my economic liberty and my ability to make ongoing economic decisions. It is not a coincidence that a society devoted to this conception of the human being will be one in which certain aspects of life will be strengthened, will be more realized, and other aspects will recede.

**BD:** One of the things that kept coming up in your book is the way that liberalism is a fractious ideology: it fractures our relationships with each other, with knowledge, with nature, with time, and ultimately we become fractured. How does this happen?

**PD:** The problem with integrated thinking is that everything's connected so we're already fracturing things by trying to talk about them separately! But let's begin at the beginning. Human beings are like any creature: we're embodied, yet we live our lives largely within our own consciousness. We live in the world inside of our own head, to improvise on the [Matt Crawford](#) title. We are radically individuated. We don't share a consciousness with another person. So it's one of the great challenges as well as achievements of human civilization to seek and to shape and to mould ways that these individuated selves can combine together, to form wholes out of these parts and to create and foster forms of relationship that, in turn, shape our selves in one way or the other. It's a great challenge to any civilization to shape and form these kinds of bonds and relationships that can persist over time, to allude to the category of time that you mention.

Liberalism in some ways reverses that narrative. It says that all of these kinds of forms of relationship and bonds—think of the Latin root of the word “religion,” *religare*, which means to bind together—represent and constitute limitations on our true selves. Rather than being achievements of civilization, these are limits on the true authentic self. Authenticity in this view can only occur when we have, to the greatest extent possible, liberated ourselves from all of these kinds of institutions. At the heart of liberalism is a concept that the true human self is an individuated self; that's the state of nature discussed by Hobbes, for instance.

This view of the human person redefines the purpose and end of civilization. Civilization isn't how we shape and form people within a set of relationships, but the liberation of ourselves *from*

those relationships except insofar as we choose to join them and that we have the ability always to choose to leave them. Think of marriage. The bars to entering and to exiting [marriage](#) have to be made as low as possible in a liberal civilization as a kind of core feature.

So it shouldn't be surprising to us that we see evidence of the decline of all of these sets of institutions that we describe as civil society. Everything from voluntary associations, of course, to membership in churches. We've seen the rise of a much more individualistic view of religion, the stuff that Christian Smith studies in his work, moral therapeutic deism. Even now, liberalism is reaching into arguably the most natural and the most fundamental and elemental of our relational institutions, the family, and the bringing of new life into the world, children. At the heart of the liberal order is a remaking of not just these kinds of institutional arrangements but our very self-understanding and how we relate to those arrangements.

In a sense this leads to the fragmentation of the self. Our self-definition always has to be subject to complete remaking. You could say that there's a lack of integration of the human person because we're forced into a condition of regarding our own selves as the subject of our own making, and we have no choice but to understand ourselves in those terms. The condition that says everything is subject to choice becomes a condition that we have no choice but to participate in. This is particularly paradoxical for people who want to live lives of integrity and integration bound in institutions of family, of civil society. These very things become subject to radical choice. So if you're going to remain in a Reformed tradition or a Catholic tradition or what you will, it is because you've made that set of choices.

**BD:** It seems you're describing a communal sense of formation into that radical individualism that we just don't recognize or see. We are habituated unconsciously; we inherit it.

**PD:** What's interesting is that one of the deepest tendencies of a liberal society is to reduce as much as possible the sense that we are inheritors of something. We all have to be born, of course, but even that is suspect. Our very beginnings are perceived as a limitation. You can see this in moves to make reproduction the result of a technological set of choices.

One of the things that liberalism does is change the default. The default would once have been that you would be, or believe, what your parents were because that's simply who you are. You could leave it, but it was not seen as the thing that one did. But the default changes within liberalism: it becomes now as much a matter of free choice whether one remains as whether one does not. It's seen as evidence of liberalism if you *remain* a Catholic, Reformed, a Jew, and so forth.

**BD:** In speaking of reproduction you're really talking about our conception of nature. In your book, you note that this view fractures our relationship with nature, and that this comes from a transformation of our understanding of knowledge. How did this happen, and how does that manifest itself today?

**PD:** If society is organized around the principle that we seek to live lives of integrity oriented toward the good and the true that transcend the person, then it becomes a matter of our science, or our knowledge to know what the good *is*. And that good, if it's beyond us, is in some

ways laced into—and indeed is consistent with, broadly speaking—the created order, in Christian terminology, or the natural order, to use classical terminology. In both cases, nature is understood in some ways to be a kind of guide and a source of a kind of wisdom. But it's a source that we have to come to know in order to understand how it is that we should live our lives. The world or the created order as a whole is one in which we are rightly seekers but we are seekers of something that we ourselves did not make.

This is, I think, the classical understanding of what education is, what philosophy is, what theology is, the effort to know and understand that which *is*. But if liberty is understood now as the reduction of all obstacles to that which we want, then one of the greatest obstacles to that which we want becomes the limitations of the natural or created order. So one of the first orders of business in the beginnings of liberal philosophy and the modern order itself is to transform our understanding of nature, now not as a source of knowledge and wisdom and an orientation toward the good, but rather an obstacle and a limitation on our true freedom. This of course articulated profoundly in the thought of Francis Bacon, but you also find it articulated in his secretaries, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, in a succession of thinkers. And as I say in my book, John Dewey is simply a continuation of this view.

John Dewey in one of his more telling quotes speaks of his admiration for Francis Bacon and how Bacon in particular taught us to see that nature is like a prisoner who withholds its secrets from us and that we have to subject nature, this prisoner, to torture in order to extract its secrets. The mastery and domination of nature becomes the heart of the modern project. Nature is now subject to our command, and as a result it's completely pliable. To use Dewey's favourite term: it's plastic and can be moulded to our needs and our desires. Ultimately, this affects the way we think of ourselves. We, no less than nature, are subject to our own dominion. So the thing that we might have thought once as human nature, the thing that defines us as human beings, is no less subject to our capacity to exert dominion over it. This is why the project of the conquest of nature now is increasingly turning inward. Think of the enthusiastic embrace of expanding and extending the dominion of human technique over our bodies.

**BD:** Thus we get things like plastic surgery and other manipulations of the body at the same time we get [plastic](#) choking our seas and killing our rivers. Tragically, nature becomes actual plastic.

You talk about how liberalism effectively cuts us off from the past; that it is something to overcome. And it also prevents us from considering the future, and leaves us in an anxious present. Can you describe this?

**PD:** One of the revolutionary aspects of liberalism is to reconceive of human beings as timeless creatures. What is one of the characteristics of the so-called state of nature? It is a placeless place and a timeless time. You can say the same thing about John Rawls's "Veil of Ignorance." We know nothing about not only where we are or even who we are; we also don't know *when* we are.

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order.

Obligations to your forebears or obligations to the future are both constraints on the present you. The self-making self can't make the self in regard or in relationship to what has preceded one. And in particular, what one's inheritance might be.

You could say it gets translated into reality in the following way: People are increasingly not aware of their own past. Because of our mobility, the rapid technological changes of our society, and other reasons, we have very little cognizance of previous generations. We might not even know who our grandparents were, or where they were buried. What once would have been considered a type of genealogical orphaning is now normal.

But we are also in some ways deprived of a cognizance of thinking about what future generations are. That we lie on the belief that they'll be able to take care of themselves. And I think again, you could see lots of pieces of evidence for this. Not just in the form of the ecological mess we just discussed, but a society whose primary form of gift to the future generations is the gift of debt and indebtedness.

To be unbound by time is to be this free acting individual, bereft of or liberated from the wolf of time. I think this is really one of the more interesting and less commented-on aspects of the liberal order.

**BD:** You seem to be describing a difference between understanding oneself as timeless and as eternal. Many people equate the two, but I think there's a difference in that according to the latter one sees oneself as embedded in a continuous stream of time that requires responsibility. It even affects our churches. I don't want to slag too hard on the modern worship movement, but the idea that you sing a new set of songs every three months or so, or that we don't read older theological texts on a regular basis, make us bereft of a canon of hymnody that everybody knows, that the old and the young can sing together. Likewise with churches or liturgies aimed at one age group. The same thing would be true in libraries which will cull books that are older. It seems that this transformation of time is the difference between timelessness and eternity.

I sort of want to make a bit of a turn here. You say, "At the end of the path of liberalism lies enslavement." And you talk about that in a particular way, as an enslavement to the "tyranny of insatiable desires." I want to quote from W.H. Auden's poem "Sext."

How beautiful it is,  
that eye-on-the-object look.

To ignore the appetitive goddesses,  
to desert the formidable shrines

of Rhea, Aphrodite, Demeter, Diana,  
to pray instead to St Phocas,

St Barbara, San Saturnino,

or whoever one's patron is,

that one may be worthy of their mystery,  
what a prodigious step to have taken.

There should be monuments, there should be odes,  
to the nameless heroes who took it first,

to the first flaker of flints  
[who forgot his dinner](#),

the first collector of sea-shells  
to remain celibate.

Where should we be but for them?

If we're going to begin this much more comprehensive, transformative project, it actually has to begin in some ways as a lived reality rather than as a political project or a manifesto.

And his answer is telling.

Feral still, un-housetrained, still

wandering through forests without  
a consonant to our names,

slaves of Dame Kind, lacking  
all notion of a city.

You mention in your book that liberalism ends up degrading us, makes us uncivilized, and begins even to degrade citizenship. We become "slaves of Dame Kind" and we lose "all notion of a city."

**PD:** Liberalism ends in slavery because its notion of freedom involves the pursuit of desires that can never be sated, that can never be fulfilled. A liberal arts education understood that, and part of what made you free was your ability to control and not to give rein to those desires. And broadly speaking, this education was realized, for the mass of humanity (many of whom didn't have access to education), through culture. That culture was the form in which this education was effected and realized. Culture is broadly speaking the form in which, you could say, this education occurs. It suffuses a person's life. A culture is broadly speaking a collective form of education in learning what it is to be free from the enslavement of our desires.

But of course by the liberal understanding, this is an unjust and illegitimate limitation on our liberty. That culture itself becomes understood as one of these arbitrary forms of control, from which we must be freed. What you could say happens in a liberal society is that all cultural forms must ultimately be rendered into something that is the opposite of what actually was. In

many cases it is turned into a consumer good, where we see culture most today. Even the way we think of culture is largely as a product or a unit of consumption, right? Oh, we're going to go to an Ethiopian restaurant tonight. We're going to get some culture. We'll go to a concert by some French singers.

**BD:** Do you think, though, that there's an increasing recognition that the cheque liberalism wrote has bounced? I think you see that in a variety of ways that social science studies have covered: increased loneliness, anxiety, and so on. And if we agree that there's a certain depth to human nature, a persistence to it, won't there be a desire to find, as you put it, "alternatives to the bureaucratic mechanized world that liberalism offers"?

What I thought was helpful about your book is that your answer isn't pat. It says, "Look, this is something we'll have to practice ourselves. We'll have to work this out." That provides space for hope, I think.

But these practices require a discipline that the liberal order strongly encourages us to avoid. Serving the appetitive goddesses is itself an inoculant against the very thing we need: the discipline and sacrifice that are essential to solidarity. So when you say, "We're going to develop these organic alternatives," what place does sacrifice have in them, and how might that actually happen in a world where we're just immune to sacrifice?

What sort of rays of hope do you see for communities that embody this or encourage this?

**PD:** I'm really quite insistent on not offering a particular political program, which is of course one of the aspects of the book I've been perhaps most criticized about, particularly as a political scientist. And it's not for lack of having thought about it! But I recognize that it's deeply within the ambit of liberalism itself to think of this as a kind of problem that we can fix by an application of politics.

It's much deeper than that. It's philosophical. I think it's theological. It goes to the heart of how we think of the human person. It's anthropological. It involves a rethinking of technology, of scientific orientation. To think of this as a political program that we can pass with an act of Congress of course is a preposterous idea.

If we're going to begin this much more comprehensive, transformative project, it actually has to begin in some ways as a lived reality rather than as a political project or a manifesto. It has to come as a result of lived practices. And the irony is that this will have to be as a consequence of choice within the liberal context itself. The kind of "counter-anti-culture," as I put it, will come from a very conscious awareness that is the result of living in a liberal society.

The one main hope of my book was that enough people would be interested in it that they would say, "Wow, this describes something I wasn't able to quite put words to, and it does make me want to change, not just society as a whole; it makes me want to change how I'm living my life and the social and familial and communal forms that I'm living in."

If that alone were a consequence of the book that would be something. And I think the fact that

there's been such an amazing response to this book shows that there is a kind of hunger on the part of not just religious people but of people who I think would describe themselves as secular, who are also quite aware that something is broken. There is, I think, a growing hunger for alternatives that are much more fundamental than simply asking, "Do I have to change my political party?"

We also need to engage in a very different set of theoretical reflections. That's work at the meta level. If the liberal project was itself the result of a transformation of thinking that was affected by a number of very powerful and very influential thinkers who helped to shape a new world, then I think it's the case that we have to begin thinking that this is not a project that's going to take place through a change of party or an electoral cycle.

This is a multi-generational project that's going to require real political theorizing, not the kind that takes place too often in academia today, in which you publish an article and try to get tenure. But the kinds of things that Aristotle and Machiavelli and Hobbes and Locke were engaged in, which is to say conceiving of a different order itself. And I think that's the work, at least at the conceptual level, that's needed as well. So I was thinking at both the level of getting your hands dirty and at the level of getting your mind engaged.

Patrick J. Deneen is Professor of Political Science and holds the David A. Potenziani Memorial College Chair of Constitutional Studies at the University of Notre Dame. His previous books include *The Odyssey of Political Theory*, *Democratic Faith*, and a number of edited volumes. He lives in South Bend, IN

Brian Dijkema is Program Director, Work and Economics at Cardus and senior editor with [Comment](#). Prior to joining Cardus, Brian worked for almost a decade in labour relations in Canada after completing his master's degree with Cardus Senior Fellow, Jonathan Chaplin. He has also done work on international human rights, with a focus on labour, economic, and social rights in Latin America and China.

See also the review of *Why Liberalism Failed* by Alan Roxburgh: 'The End of Liberalism? What the Euro-tribal Churches are Missing. *Journal of Missional Practice*, No.10 (Winter 2018). <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/end-of-liberalism/>