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**Patrick J. Deneen, *Dlaczego liberalizm zawiódł?*
[*Why Liberalism Failed?*]**

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Patrick J. Deneen, *Dlaczego liberalizm zawiódł?*

tłum. M.J. Czarnecki, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy,
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Abstract

Keywords Patrick J. Deneen's book is another work in recent years prophesying the im-
liberalism,minent demise of liberalism, which would collapse under the weight of its
democracy,founding contradictions. The author offers an integral critique of liberalism both
communitarianismas an economic and political ideology. Although he convincingly denounces its
aporias, his argumentation suffers from a number of errors of reasoning, which
are high-lighted in this review.

Streszczenie

Słowa kluczowe Książka Patricka J. Deneena to kolejna w ostatnich latach praca wieszcząca
liberalizm,rychły koniec liberalizmu, który miałby zapaść się pod ciężarem fundujących go
demokracja,sprzeczności. Jej autor proponuje integralną krytykę liberalizmu zarówno jako
komunitaryzmideologii ekonomicznej, jak i politycznej. Choć jej aporie piętnuje przekonująco,
to jednak w swojej argumentacji dopuszcza się licznych nadużyć, które zostają
naświetlone w niniejszej recenzji.

Books like this are usually described as an event. In 2018, an author who did not yet belong to the top league of political thinkers published a brief text addressed, as he himself admitted, to a narrow circle of professional American political scientists. Nonetheless, within a short time, almost everyone was talking about the book: its extensive reviews were published by *The New York Times* and *The Economist*,¹ and none other than Barack Obama encouraged people to read the book, translated thus far into more than a dozen languages.² However, the wit, brilliance, and polemical talent which undoubtedly characterise the author of the *Why Liberalism Failed* are not enough to explain the phenomenon of such great interest in the book. It should instead be assumed that this is one of those texts that have unerringly sensed the “spirit of the times,” i.e. inscribed into the current social mood and prompted readers to in-depth reflection. In this sense, Patrick J. Deneen’s booklet, although devoid of autobiographical references, can be safely put on par with James D. Vance’s famous *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, published two years earlier.³ However, whereas Vance became famous for his attack on the liberal Washington establishment and the hypocrisy of the American meritocracy, Deneen’s criticism is much broader, as he makes accusations not only against today’s distortions of liberal democracy but above all against the very foundations of liberalism itself.

The book by Deneen, a political philosopher at the University of Notre Dame, counted among the increasingly influential Catholic communitarians in American public life, is certainly neither the first critique of liberal ideology undertaken from the position of “right-wing” communitarianism (to name but a few works by Gertrude Himmelfarb⁴ or Christopher Lasch,⁵ a good dozen years older than this book) nor the only recent diagnosis of liberalism’s decline and discredit. On the contrary, one gets the impression that attacking liberal democracy in its current form—from both the right and the left—has become fashionable among thinkers and political commentators, primarily since liberalism does indeed provide ample grounds for doing so.⁶ Deneen’s book, however, stands out against this background in at least two crucial respects. Firstly, as mentioned above, the timing was perfect: when it was written, Brexit began, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, and a wave

¹ J. Szalai, “If Liberalism Is Dead, What Comes Next,” *The New York Times*, 17 January 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/books/review-why-liberalism-failed-patrick-deneen.html>> (accessed on 2.06.2022); “Liberalism Is the Most Successful Idea of the Past 400 Years,” *The Economist*, 27 January 2018, <<https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2018/01/27/liberalism-is-the-most-successful-idea-of-the-past-400-years>> (accessed on 26.05.2022).

² Vide C. Foran, “Here’s What’s On Barack Obama’s Reading List,” CNN, 16 June 2018, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/16/politics/barack-obama-reading-list-mitch-landrieu/index.html>> (accessed on 30.05.2022).

³ J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, New York: Harper, 2016, *passim*.

⁴ G. Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*, New York: Knopf, 1999, *passim*.

⁵ Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: Warner Books, 1979 [1980], *passim*.

⁶ Among the numerous works on the subject translated into Polish in recent years, the following should be pointed to: S. Holmes, I. Krastev, *Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, London: Penguin Books, 2019, *passim*.

of electoral victories of what is usually referred to as populist groups swept through the countries of Europe. In such a context, the thesis of liberalism's decline indeed found more fertile ground than when Francis Fukuyama's triumphalist diagnosis of "the end of history" still enjoyed pretty wide acceptance.⁷ Secondly, Deneen's criticism of liberalism is integral: it is aimed equally at the moral progressivism of American Democrats and the free market ideals of most Republicans. As a result, the author has managed—despite his pronounced worldview leanings and his tendency to antagonise potential allies—to find surprisingly many supporters on both the right and the left side of the ideological spectrum (and even, symptomatically, among members of the liberal centre, perhaps sensing that they have often—to quote the late Marcin Król—"been foolish,"⁸ and that their historical moment is indeed slowly beginning to pass).

What does Deneen explicitly argue for in his book? (published in Poland in early 2021 by the Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy in the acclaimed "Library of Contemporary Thought" series, and very conscientiously translated by Michał J. Czarnecki.) First of all, for the fact that modern liberalism is, in a way, a victim of its own success, "Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself."⁹ Failure was inevitable, as liberalism was, from the outset, characterised by contradictions and aporias, which it only managed to mask as long as it remained one of many competing political ideologies. But once liberalism became the dominant ideology and took a mental grip on almost every aspect of public and private life (which, according to Deneen, is the case in the United States and other countries of the broadly understood West), internal tensions began to burst from within, exposing with all strength the flawed foundations on which liberalism was built.

What are these foundations? Deneen distinguishes three closely related ones. Firstly, the voluntarist conception of human freedom. The author astutely points out that, contrary to what liberals suggest even today, they did not "invent" the idea of political liberty since it was, after all, a key value developed in classical Greek philosophy and later Christian thought. Liberalism, however, radically redefined its understanding: previously, it had meant a state of rational self-governance, restraint of the passions that hinder us, and the art of self-control achieved through the cultivation of virtue. Moreover, if individual liberty was also constrained from the outside, it was not so much by legislated law as by "long-standing social norms and customs as guides for action,"¹⁰ primarily serving the good of the community and counteracting the despotic rule that constantly threatened it. Liberalism departed from this self-disciplining role of liberty, prioritising individual autonomy and promoting an individualistic lifestyle, constrained by as little social

⁷ Vide F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York–Toronto: Free Press–Maxwell Macmillan Canada–Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992, *passim*.

⁸ M. Król, *Byliśmy głupi*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czerwone i Czarne, 2015, *passim*.

⁹ P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, foreword J. Davison Hunter and J.M. Owen IV, New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2018, p. 3. The second edition of the book has been translated into Polish as: *Dlaczego liberalizm zawiódł?*, transl. M.J. Czarnecki, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2021, p. 35. [In the original English-language edition, there is no question mark in the title, while in the Polish translation, there is—translator's note].

¹⁰ *Ibidem* (introduction to the Second Edition).

interdependence as possible.¹¹ Ultimately, the only external constraint on the human will was to be the law, enacted with respect for civil liberties and guaranteeing their universal observance. And while the theorists of liberalism have argued that their thought merely reflects the actual nature of human behaviour, Deneen regards it as *par excellence* normative and accuses liberals of practising social engineering under the guise of objectivity—not the “partial” one, called for by Karl Popper,¹² but the radical one. “In the same way that courses in economics claim merely to describe human beings as utility-maximising individual actors, but in fact influence students to act more selfishly, so liberalism teaches a people to hedge commitments and adopt flexible relationships and bonds.”¹³

The second foundation of liberal ideology is an aversion to “forms” and the resulting ideal of “boundlessness” in almost every aspect of human life.¹⁴ The notion of limitations, Deneen argues, is for liberals fundamentally arbitrary and, as such, treated with suspicion. Thus, the main aim is to remove or at least loosen as many forms of bondage imposed on humanity as possible. This is directly linked to liberalism’s founding belief in the “plasticity” of human nature and its capability for profound modifications that do not threaten our condition but, on the contrary, stimulate a continuous expansion of the human and social spheres. The most prominent manifestations of this tendency in history are, in Deneen’s opinion, the project of technological subjugation of nature and economic and cultural globalisation, while nowadays—it is the questioning of anthropological difference, i.e. the posthumanist tendency to obfuscate what distinguishes humans from all other beings, and the criticism of explicit gender distinctions, allegedly building a wall between men and women, and failing to include non-binary people.¹⁵

Finally, the third foundation the author points to is liberalism’s genetic distrust of democracy, especially in its classical form. Democracy requires the practice of civic virtue, understood as conscious and active engagement in civic life, and a dense network of institutions that shape and promote this virtue. Liberalism, on the other hand, with its imperative to privatise freedom, seeks to weaken these institutions as much as possible, seeing them as a threat to the unfettered self-determination of individuals. As Deneen writes, the irony is that liberalism’s legitimacy rests on democratic consent, but “democracy, in fact, cannot ultimately function in a liberal regime.”¹⁶ And however surprising this thesis may sound at a time when liberal democracy has become the “default” form of political relationship, it is enough to refer to the canon of not classical but contemporary liberal thought to say that the author is quite right. As we read, for example, in the canonical work of Isaiah Berlin: “It is that liberty in this sense is not incompatible with some kinds of autocracy, or at any rate with the absence of self-government. Liberty in this sense is principally concerned with the area of control, not with its source.”¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24 et seqq.

¹² K.R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London–Boston: Routledge–Beacon Press, 1957, *passim*.

¹³ P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed...*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 13–14.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 91 et seqq.

¹⁶ *Ibidem* (Introduction to the Second Edition).

¹⁷ I. Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” [in:] *Four Essays On Liberty*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 160.

In Deneen's view, each of these three foundations he identified is flawed, making mature liberalism volatile and facing imminent collapse. The edifice of liberal politics, he argues, is erected on inherent, insurmountable contradictions that are beginning to stand out today as never before. For Deneen, the suicidal paradox arising from liberal voluntarism is the progressive statism being the inevitable consequence of liberals' elimination of any allegiance of atomised individuals to any other intermediary entity but the state designed to protect their autonomy.¹⁸ The "boundlessness" of liberalism, on the other hand, compels it to constantly exceed limitations without ever achieving satisfaction. This insatiability, however, cannot be met by the "moral and material reservoirs" it exploits,¹⁹ which, in contrast to the radically expansive liberal ideology, are finite. So—asks Deneen—is the doctrine of unlimited economic growth in a world of depleting natural resources and the complete plasticity of human nature in terms of identity confusion leading us to the edge of the abyss?

Finally, the increasingly difficult-to-suppress incompatibility of liberalism with democracy results in the gradual transformation of liberal regimes into quasi-aristocracies, where diminishing civic commitment in the name of protecting negative liberty ultimately serves a narrow power elite, and the reaction to the progressive alienation of the liberal establishment becomes increasingly uncontrollable paroxysms of populist anger.²⁰

From this diagnosis, merciless to liberals, Deneen draws the ultimate conclusion of his work, that liberalism as an ideology is finished, and he convinces his readers to this judgment. He observes that if the position held by liberalism today were threatened by some powerful external rival, such as communism during the Cold War, then the remedy for liberalism's ailments could ultimately be found in a move towards a fuller realisation of its guiding ideas. But since the "party of liberty," as Friedrich von Hayek used to call liberalism,²¹ is evidently collapsing under its own weight, "to call for the cures of liberalism's ills by applying more liberal measures is tantamount to throwing gas on a raging fire."²² This is why it is time for liberalism—the first of the three great competing political ideologies of the modern world—to share the fate of its 20th-century rivals—fascism and communism—and finally capitulate, precisely at the moment of its own apparent greatest triumph. As the author of the reviewed book argues: "The most challenging step we must take is a rejection of the belief that the ailments of liberal society can be fixed by realising liberalism. The only path to liberation from the inevitabilities and ungovernable forces that liberalism imposes is liberation from liberalism itself."²³

But what does Deneen propose instead? First and foremost, a retreat from ideological macro-projects and a rejection of the temptation to replace liberalism with some other "great political narrative." The source of almost all the ills of liberal democracy

¹⁸ P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed...*, p. 41; Deneen devotes an entire chapter two of his book to this issue: "Uniting Individualism and Statism."

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

²⁰ Chapters six ("The New Aristocracy") and seven ("The Degradation of Citizenship") deal with this question.

²¹ F.A. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

²² P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed...*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

today is, in his view, the fact that liberalism has taken as its goal the fundamental reorientation of man, society and the state without regard for human habits and preferences, “an ideological remaking of the world in the image of a false anthropology.” In the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville, he argues that “A better course will consist in smaller, local forms of resistance: practices more than theories, the building of resilient new cultures against the anticulture of liberalism. [...] through the cultivation of cultures of community, care, self-sacrifice, and small-scale democracy [...]”²⁴ And he adds: “Only a politics grounded in the experience of a polis [...] can begin to take the place of our era’s distrust, estrangement, hostility, and hatreds.”²⁵ Only on this footing can a better and more adequate theory of social life organically develop over time. It cannot be a theory that rejects the undeniable achievements of liberalism and postulates an unwise and even less realistic return to the “preliberal” age. Instead, it should propose a way of overcoming atomisation and uprooting, that is, the social phenomena into which “the party of liberty” has pushed us, for better or worse. For, as Deneen concludes his argument, “The greatest proof of human freedom today lies in our ability to imagine, and build, liberty after liberalism.”²⁶

Deneen’s integral, wide-ranging critique cannot be denied brilliance and persuasive power: the reconstruction of the origins and evolution of liberalism and its present-day shortcomings is sound and indeed thought-provoking. At the same time, however, such a one-sided book, whose author decides in advance to discredit the liberal theory and practice, automatically arouses in readers a spirit of agonism and encourages polemics—if not to indicate the author’s errors of reasoning or to expose his attack as unjust, then to offer some counterpoint to these consciously tendentious analyses. Otherwise, we are doomed to passive assimilation of such biased and surreptitiously thrown-in opinions as the one about the harmfulness of liberalism to the idea of women’s emancipation (“Yet the main practical achievement of this liberation of women has been to move many of them into the workforce of market capitalism, a condition that [...] [is regarded] as a highly dubious form of liberation”²⁷), which would need to be reinforced with at least a dozen footnotes to stop it from being a massive error. Meanwhile, instead of multiplying footnotes, this opinion could be rephrased as follows: “The main practical achievement of the conservative ban on abortion led to many women dying during pregnancy and childbirth, which is an extremely questionable form of life protection.” But would Deneen agree to such a biased brachylogy aimed against a political ideology close to his heart?

From this perspective, the main objection to Deneen should be his tendency to over-generalise, which, to reinforce his bold thesis, he repeatedly allows himself in

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 19–20.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. xv. Ryszard Legutko, in his generally favourable review of Deneen’s book, finds fault with placing excessive, characteristically American hopes in grass roots democracy (*vide idem*, “Can Democracy Save Us?”, *American Affairs*, 20 February 2018, <<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/can-democracy-save-us/>> [accessed on 23.05.2022]).

²⁶ P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed...*, p. 198.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

the book. His text shows liberalism as an astonishingly coherent and homogeneous ideology whose entire internal complexity is, at best, an insignificant incident. But is it really possible to lump together the free-market, conservative liberalism of the Austrian and Chicago schools and the social liberalism pioneered in the 19th century by Thomas Hill Green and Leonard Hobhouse? The legal liberalism of John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, based on inherent rights, and the abstract political liberalism of John Gray and Richard Rorty, which pays homage to the pluralist ideal of *modus vivendi*? And finally, the minimalist “liberalism of fear” propagated at one time by Judith Shklar and those of its critics who argue that today’s liberal thought should not be afraid of positive freedom in the sense given to it by Berlin?²⁸

Deneen’s tendency to generalise can also be dangerous when he unjustifiably extrapolates the local afflictions of American politics to contemporary liberalism as such, regardless of latitude. Of course, the work was written for an American audience, and its publicity clearly surprised the author. However, in the preface to the second edition of the book, written after several translations into foreign languages had been contracted, there is no sign of Deneen’s willingness to nuance his position and admit that liberal democracy in the United States, Sweden or South Africa are such different phenomena that it is difficult to characterise them together with a few catchy theses. Not to mention the fact that the author seems to repeatedly attribute liberal origins to problems that today plague not only Western democracies but also countries that are far from the standards of liberalism. For, is liberal ideology really responsible for phenomena as diverse as the crisis of humanistic education, increasing technologisation of life, and the retreat from tedious parliamentary procedures towards governing by ad hoc decrees and regulations? Or does Deneen too often treat liberalism as a bottomless sack into which almost every problematic phenomenon of modern civilisation can be put?

We read in the book *Why Liberalism Failed* that the theory and practice of liberalism have become victims of their own success: their reign in socio-political relations is now so widespread that nothing masks the internal contradictions of liberal democracy any longer, which must soon lead it to collapse, just as happened with the so-called people’s democracies. The problem, however, is that, unlike the other “great narratives” of 20th-century politics, liberalism has acquired an admirable ability to self-correct that has more than once enabled it to get out of trouble and adapt to new conditions. Even much more radical critics of liberalism than Deneen admit this,²⁹ while he is surprisingly silent on the subject, perhaps realising that this characteristic of liberalism somewhat diminishes the credibility of his bold and catchy forecast. Even more

²⁸ Vide J.N. Shklar, “Liberalism of Fear,” [in:] *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, N.L. Rosenblum (ed.), Cambridge–Massachusetts–London: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 21–38; A. Bielik-Robson, “Utracony skarb liberalizmu,” [in:] *Spór o liberalizm*, M. Wróblewski (ed.), Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2011, pp. 121–134. Cf. M. Król, *Liberalizm strachu czy liberalizm odwagi?*, Kraków–Warszawa: Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego–Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 1996, *passim*.

²⁹ Cf. the famous words attributed to Slavoj Žižek when delivering the speech during the Occupy Wall Street movement: “It’s easy to imagine the end of the world, but we cannot imagine the end of capitalism” (vide P. Frase, “Four Futures,” <<https://jacobin.com/2011/12/four-futures/>> [accessed on 21.07.2020]).

problematic in this context is the narrow applicability of Deneen's thesis on the decline of liberalism. Even if we give it the benefit of the doubt, is liberalism equally decaying in countries where it has long dominated political life (especially in the United States and the United Kingdom) and in those which are only just discovering liberal democracy? And how should we assess the political activity of Deneen, who, on the occasion of the publication of the Hungarian translation of his book, met face-to-face with Viktor Orbán and, in the limelight, tried to persuade him of the harmfulness of liberalism?³⁰ It seems that Orbán and others of his ilk have long since grasped this thesis (including by stifling political opposition and significantly reducing pluralism in the media market), but really in the way Deneen wants it? If this is what his allies in the fight against the hegemony of liberal ideology are to look like, then the author's final call: "We need today [...] not a better theory, but better practices,"³¹ should be met with a retort of: Perhaps, but, by God, not like this!

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³⁰ Vide J.C. Isaac, "Does academic freedom matter to conservative intellectuals? Budapest Blues," *Public Seminar*, 21 November 2019, <<https://publicseminar.org/2019/11/budapest-blues/>> (accessed on 30.03.2023).

³¹ P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed...*, p. 197.

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