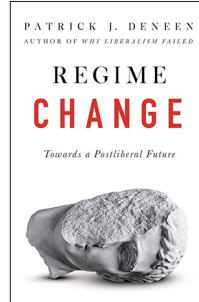


Book Review

Patrick Deneen.
Regime Change: Toward a Post-Liberal Future
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In his latest book, Patrick Deneen frames contemporary political turmoil as a re-instantiation of the classical conflict between the many and the few. The ancient solution to this problem was a mixed regime in which the classes were mixed and balanced, directing themselves towards the common good. Modern society is dominated by an elite few whose aims are greater economic freedom and transformation in social relations, as exemplified by classical liberals and socially progressive liberals.

Both types of liberals are united in an opposition to the inherent economic and social conservatism of common people which Deneen refers to as the 'many' (x-xi). The many desire elements of the American right and left, namely pro-life policies, a greater role for religion in public life, economic protectionism, the social safety net, and anti-monopolism. As ultimate ends the many seek, "stability, order, continuity, and a sense of gratitude for the past and obligation to the future (xiii)." Deneen's solution to this divide is not a different political system, but rather the replacement of the current elite with one more amenable to the conservatism of the many through a mixed constitution. To bolster his framing of the situation and advance his solution, Deneen splits his text into three sections. The first outlines the problems of our current elite, the second presents his common-good conservatism

(hereafter CGC), and the final section offers strategic advice for pursuing it.

In chapter 1, Deneen notes that the current conflict between classes is marked by negative partisanship, with neither admitting their own faults nor offering a defense of their class (17). Classically, however, each class was viewed as capable of unique virtues, while also being prone to particular vices. In contemporary American society, the few disdain those of lower station while the many exhibit numerous anti-social behaviors such as addiction, out-of-wedlock births and divorce. Conversely, the many are a repository of tradition and common sense, while the elite are creators of high culture and a sense of duty towards the many due to their own privilege. To prevent malformation, each class needs to act a check to the other, hence the need for a mixed constitution (22-25).

In chapter 2, Deneen describes the current elite as possessing four unique traits which distinguish them from historical elites. They are managerial, possessing interchangeable skills and favoring productivity and exercise, antihierarchical while displaying cognitive dissonance to their own status, reliant upon John Stuart Mill's harm principle as an offensive weapon to limit the people's opposition through claims of victimization, and the concentration and use of power through non-government entities such as universities, the media, and corporations (27-29).

Having presented the problem, Deneen now

constructs his alternative in CGC. Chapter 3 classifies the western political streams of classical and progressive liberalism and Marxism as ideologies of disruptive social and/or economic progress. They only differ in their preference for the few or the many. These he contrasts with CGC which favors the many as an inherently conservative group seeking stability and rule by common sense (93-94).

The fourth chapter begins with the question, “Who is best capable of rule on behalf of the common good - a qualified few, or the general mass of the people (99)?” Progressives favor expertise, CGC the people’s common sense (102). Common sense stems from the vast pool of knowledge handed down over generations, makes connections between fields as opposed to specialization, and contributes to a stable society of generational continuity. A society which favors expertise requires increasing expertise to run, meaning that it functions as another mechanism by which ever-churning progress is advanced (110-111). The preference of one type of knowledge constitutes and advances a political project, rather than being the mere result of it.

Chapter 5 explains and promotes the ideal of a mixed constitution. The elite must be protectors of tradition and common sense of the people. Both of these contain the elite’s ambitions, while the elite lift up the people through their advanced education and resources (125-26). Deneen spends the rest of the chapter tracing the lineage of this idea in the Western tradition.

In turning to his third section on prescriptions, Deneen states that the current progressive elites must be confronted by and displaced by a “muscular populism” with new elites lifting up the people, which he calls “aristopolitism” (147). In chapter 6,

he advises that this displacement takes place by means of the “raw assertion of political power,” to circumvent the economic and cultural institutions dominated by the current progressive elite. His guide in this area is Niccolò Machiavelli. Reflecting historically, Machiavelli viewed antagonism between the classes as both unavoidable and a healthy means by which the people could extract concessions from the nobility in Republican Rome. Historical examples provided include verbal tirades between the Roman Senate and mobs, mobs running through the streets causing economic shutdown and flight of the citizenry, public demonstrations, and refusal to serve in the military (165-67).

The use of Machiavelli is concerning, especially given the violence and discord associated with contemporary populism such as the falsely premised January 6th attack. As Christians we need to be cognizant that righteous goals are not advanced by unrighteous means. I do not believe Deneen is encouraging violence, but his advocacy for Machiavelli results in ambiguity. A far better tutor for disruptive political action would Civil Rights leaders who accomplished unthinkable advances in the rights of minorities without violence.

Deneen’s final chapter introduces a new idea that liberalism is inherently a system of separations of aspects of society, such as the division of labor, separation of powers, of Church and State, etc. He proffers how integrating these separations might help society move past liberalism (189).

While offering a convincing explanation of our country’s current woes, Deneen’s solution is hampered by the reality of right-wing populism in this country. By his own admission, “This movement from below is untutored and ill led. Its nominal champion in the United States

was a deeply flawed narcissist who at once appealed to the intuitions of the populace, but without offering clarifying articulation of their grievances and transforming their resentments into sustained policy and the development of a capable leadership class (152).” In reflecting their leader, populists in America have mobilized, not for CGC, but instead false election fraud claims, anti-vaccine hysteria, and at times violence. This is not to say that Deneen’s plan has no merit, but merely to state that it must take into account the anti-culture that exists in the populist right and offer a program to purge these vices from the movement.

On another front, evangelicals must decide if this is a fruitful path to follow in obedience to Christ. In seeking to replace the current elite, Deneen is arguing for pursuing the very path warned against by social theorist, James Davison Hunter in his work *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. In that text, Hunter proposes a program of faithful presence within culture to spread the gospel as opposed to the seizing of power to impose Christian values from above. It is ultimately up to the Church to decide whether a program of leavening or taking over as the baker are better approaches to cultural change.

