

[Culture](#)

[Book Reviews](#)



An American flag flies outside the Aspray Boat House polling site before the doors open to voters in the midterm election in Warwick, Rhode Island, Nov. 8, 2022. (AP/David Goldman)



by Stephen Schneck

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 29, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

PATRICK J. DENEEN
AUTHOR OF *WHY LIBERALISM FAILED*

REGIME CHANGE

Toward a Postliberal Future



Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future

Patrick J. Deneen

288 pages; Sentinel

\$30.00

Let me say from the get-go that, for me, liberalism is as good as it gets for the political order. A politics that is not liberal is a loss for human flourishing. Patrick Deneen's "postliberal" manifesto only reinforces my conclusion.

The United States was established on liberalism — meaning our government is legitimized and limited by the sovereignty of its citizens (a democratic republic) and our political order is structured to secure liberty by recognizing unalienable rights.

Stalinists in their day pooh-poohed liberalism, arguing that its vaunted liberty and rights were smoke and mirrors to dupe the proletariat about its subservience to the bourgeoisie. Later, French so-called postmodernists argued that liberalism's liberty and rights were actually camouflaged instruments of repression.

In his new book, [*Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*](#), Deneen, a professor of political theory at the University of Notre Dame, blends a bit of both of these critiques to insist that liberalism leaves a working class floundering in chaos while disguising that same class' marginalization by a "managerial elite."

Needed, he insists, is a revolutionary regime change to replace liberalism with "aristopopulism."



Patrick Deneen (Courtesy of University of Notre Dame)

Regime Change begins with a brief reprise of Deneen's 2018 bestseller, [*Why Liberalism Failed*](#), which highlighted the forces behind the election of President Donald Trump. Contending that we live in dystopian times thanks to the havoc generated by our liberal political order, the analysis is that liberalism is essentially an engine for progress. Generations ago, such progress seemed a good thing — overcoming slavery and so on — but in our time, liberalism's unremitting progressive change is eroding the foundations of civilization's social order.

As *Regime Change* proceeds, we learn that these eroding foundations are the "traditional" structures of society, like family, religion, morality and local community.

Today's upper class, the managerial elite, ostensibly is insulated from the ill effects of this erosion thanks to various forms of privilege and being educated in techniques to navigate disruptive change. But not the working class.

When Deneen speaks of the working class, the image conveyed is of white blue-collar workers displaced economically by globalization's mauling of "flyover country" smokestack industries. Yet, while globalization's economic dislocations are also purported to be the result of liberalism, it is liberalism's disruption of the social structures of the working class that is the book's focus.

For the working class, we are told that traditional marriage and family can no longer be expected, that church is increasingly not part of working-class lives and that time-honored mores and moral norms no longer have convincing authority. Unions, clubs and civic organizations are less available for communal solidarity. Small towns and old blue-collar neighborhoods decay and wither.



Downtown Arlington, Georgia, is shown Oct. 6, 2022. The town in southwest Georgia's Calhoun County has an estimated population of 1,225. (AP/Jeff Amy)

The upshot is a psychology of alienation, loneliness, lack of trust, vulnerability and eventually fear, despair and resentment. No wonder, Deneen notes, that rates of divorce, alcoholism, drugs, pornography, suicide and other evidences of social decay are so high now among the working class.

So, liberalism and its presumed engine of progress are allegedly to blame, yet the managerial elite is also portrayed as knowingly complicit.

The elite deploys meritocratic tricks, such as the admission rules to Harvard, Princeton and Yale, to protect those of its own class and to reinforce the marginalization of the working class. Meritocracy also militates against tradition and history, thereby adding to liberalism's erosion of traditional social structures in society.

Through the sorting hat of merit, moreover, the managerial elite can geographically and psychologically separate itself from liberalism's dystopia to live in gated suburbs, resort communities and the condominiums of upscale city centers.

Most deplorably, for Deneen, today's managerial elite smugly justifies its own privilege with a fig leaf of pretend egalitarianism by promoting affirmative action for racial minorities, sexual identities and immigrants — while simultaneously berating the working class for alleged racism, misogyny, homophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes.

The visceral resentment of the working class and its fear of being replaced by technology, immigration or the globalized economy are seen as the fuel to ignite for regime change. Needed is only a vanguard of a few leaders to awaken the working class not only to awareness of the causes of its condition but also to recognize its own power.

Deneen speaks of this vanguard as elites who are traitors to their own class — intellectuals, one hopes, rather than demagogues.



President Donald Trump supporters storm into the U.S. Capitol in Washington Jan. 6, 2021, during a rally to contest the certification of the 2020 presidential election. (CNS/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)

The ultimate goal would be to replace the current elite and to replace liberalism with aristopopulism. How would this begin?

The book refers the reader to Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, which speaks of methods "extralegal and almost bestial" and "mobs running through the streets, shops boarded up, the entire populace ... leaving the city." While this may echo Jan. 6, 2021, surely Deneen is not proposing violence or things extralegal; surely his preference for regime change would be winning the battle of democracy at the ballot box. Regardless, as the book continues ...

"What is needed is the application of **Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends** — the use of powerful political resistance by the populace against the natural advantages of the elite to create a mixed constitution ... in which genuine common good is the result" (author's emphasis).

In moving from social and political analysis toward actually fleshing out Deneen's aristopopulism, the book's argument wobbles.

Aristopopulism, we learn, would be a mixed regime in the manner of Aristotle, who thought mixing aristocracy and democracy was the best practicable government. *Regime Change* imagines a pie-in-the-sky blending of working-class populism with a classically educated and conservative new nobility inculcated with the civic virtue needed to assure a politics of the common good.

The common good here is depicted as especially attentive to the voice, status, prestige and power of the working class, such that it results in a "deep and sympathetic alliance" between the elite and the working class. Critically, the common good must affirm Western civilization's traditional structures of social life.

Advertisement

To achieve the mixing of classes, examples from the book emphasize subsidiarity and solidarity. Deneen recommends much smaller districts for representation (as America's long-ago antifederalists advocated), moving the nation's capital around (as Jean-Jacques Rousseau recommended), national service for youth (as President Bill Clinton once discussed), breaking up the tech and social media monopolies (very progressivist), and even revising university admission processes to replace racial and sexual affirmative action efforts with something more working-class-friendly.

National foreign, industrial, economic and social policies likewise would prioritize the working class and promote traditional mores.

Whatever their value, these examples of ways to mix classes probably could be accommodated within liberalism. The book's last chapter, "Toward Integration," however, details a clear and worrisome break from liberal theories of governing. In the chapter, Deneen speaks of a need to overcome the "*disintegration*" of liberalism with "*postliberal integration*."

Readers of National Catholic Reporter will be familiar with the tone of this argument, as it has been advanced by [Catholic integralists](#) like Adrian Vermeule and P. Edmund Waldstein.

Without the separation of church and state provided by liberalism's rights, faiths of those not allied with the state's power are jeopardized.

[Tweet this](#)

As Thomas Jefferson's famous open-ended unalienable right, "the pursuit of happiness," illustrates, liberalism does not decide for citizens what the good is. Liberalism provides the space — the liberty — for citizens to pursue "the good" for themselves. Catholic integralists reject having this open space; they want to fill it in with Catholic teachings. Integralism is a rejection of liberalism's separation of church and state.

Deneen is on the same wavelength with his idea of postliberal integration but he extends the integration far beyond religion to argue for the integration of the political order with seemingly all aspects of life — into civil society, into business, into media, into family life, into morality and so on.

This is when *Regime Change* becomes most concerning. He speaks of "eschewing liberalism's core value of *separation*." Let's be clear, though; liberalism's "separations" are largely what we commonly call "rights." Deneen proposes that we eschew rights.

Liberalism's rights of property, speech, press, assembly, religion and so forth separate and protect what is ours from intrusion by the power of the state or the power of others in society. If that separation is replaced with integration what would happen?

Well, consider the right of religious freedom as an example.

The populist political phenomenon that Americans associate with Trump is actually much bigger than Trump. It's a global movement and, just as it has in the United States, in many countries the new populism has fostered "religious nationalism" — just another name for integralism. A few examples would be Hindu nationalism in India, Sunni Islam in Turkey, Buddhism in Myanmar, Christianity in Hungary. In each of these countries the integration of religion with the state has come at a cost for believers of minority faiths.



A supporter of the Hindu nationalist political group Vishwa Hindu Parishad is dressed as the Hindu deity Hanuman during a rally in New Delhi on Dec. 9, 2018. (AP/Bernat Armangue)

Without the separation of church and state provided by liberalism's rights, faiths of those not allied with the state's power are jeopardized. Integration trounces diversity. And as the rights of religion go, so would all other rights.

While Deneen may see integration as a one-way process by bringing "the good," like Catholic teachings, to inform state policies, it would inevitably be a two-way process.

Think about the reverse, would we want the political order integrated into our faith? Would we want the political order integrated into our media, our social life, our family relations? Deneen really needs to clarify the limits to aristopopulism's potential integration of the political order into human life.

Let me also challenge a central assumption of *Regime Change* — that liberalism generates an unstoppable dynamic of progressive, chaotic change. I believe Deneen

confuses liberalism with the shifting values of the free market of economics and the market-like forces of open society.

The disorienting changes in modern life are not necessary outcomes of the liberal political order. They are the result of insufficiently regulated global capitalism and the free market's wide-ranging impact on society and culture.



Migrant farmworkers harvest romaine lettuce in King City, California, April 17, 2017. (CNS/Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

Liberalism, rightly understood, is established on formal, universal rights. To be sure, such formal rights depend on an order in civil society (solidarity and subsidiarity) and civic virtue in the citizenry to be effectual. It takes a village, as someone once said. And, as I imagine Deneen would agree, civil society and civic virtue are not as healthy globally as they should be.

Wanted, then, is to strengthen the institutions of civil society, which could be traditional institutions or new ones, and better inculcate civic virtue. For a variety of reasons related to my suspicion of integralism, I don't think such strengthening is a job for the state. But we don't need regime change or revolution or radical transformation. We certainly should not jettison liberalism and adopt aristopopulism.

Regime Change is a provocative book and offers a window on how political conservatives struggle to accommodate or canalize reactionary populism. Ultimately, the book fails at that task.

The focus of all concerned with our civilization's current political woes should be reform and improvement of civil society and the formation of citizenry with invigorated civic virtue. Given that, liberalism is the best political order for human flourishing.

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: 'Regime Change' argues for a controversial postliberal future.