

The Tragedy of Liberalism

Patrick J. Deneen

America is a nation in deep agreement and common belief. The proof lies, somewhat paradoxically, in the often tempestuous and increasingly acrimonious debate between the two main US political parties. The widening divide represented by this debate has, for many of us, defined the scope of our political views and the resultant differences for at least the past one hundred years. But even as we do tense and bruising battle, a deeper form of philosophical agreement reigns. As described by Louis Hartz in his 1955 book *The Liberal Tradition in America*, the nature of our debates themselves is defined within the framework of liberalism. That framework has seemingly expanded, but it is nonetheless bounded, in as much as the political debates of our time have pitted one variant of liberalism against another, which were given the labels “conservatism” and “liberalism” but which are better categorized as “classical liberalism” and “progressive liberalism.” While we have focused our attention on the growing differences between “classical” and “progressive,” we have been largely inattentive to the unifying nature of their shared liberalism.

While classical liberalism looks back to a liberalism achieved and lost—particularly the founding philosophy of America that stressed natural rights, limited government, and a relatively free and open market, “progressive” liberalism longs for a liberalism not yet achieved, one that strives to transcend the limitations of the past and even envisions a transformed humanity, its consciousness enlarged, practicing what Edward Bellamy called “the religion of solidarity.”¹ As Richard Rorty envisioned in his aptly titled 1998 book *Achieving Our Country*, liberal democracy “is the principled means by which a more evolved form of humanity will come into existence.... Democratic humanity... has ‘more being’ than predemocratic humanity. The citizens of a [liberal] democratic, Whitmanesque society are able to create new, hitherto unimagined roles and goals for themselves.”²

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Right: *Madame Récamier de David*, 1950, by René Magritte (1898–1967); Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, NY, © 2017 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



In the main, American political conflicts since the end of the Civil War have been fought along this broad division within liberalism itself. We have grown accustomed to liberalism being the norm and defining the predictable battlefield for our political debates. Largely accepting at least the Hartzian view, if not also Fukuyama's claim that liberalism constitutes the "end of history," we have been so preoccupied with the divisions and differences arising from these two distinct variants of liberalism that our debate *within* the liberal frame obscures from us an implicit acknowledgment that the question of regime has been settled—liberalism is the natural order for humanity. Further, the intensifying division between the two sides of liberalism also obscures the basic continuities *between* these two iterations of liberalism, and in particular makes it nearly impossible to reflect on the question of whether the liberal order itself remains viable. The bifurcation within liberalism masks a deeper agreement that has led to the working out of liberalism's deeper logic, which, ironically, brings us today to a crisis within liberalism itself that now appears sudden and inexplicable.

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What is especially masked by our purported choice between primary allegiance to classical liberalism's emphasis on a free market and limited gov-

ernment, on the one hand, and progressive liberalism's emphasis on an expansive state that tempers the market, on the other, is that both "choices" arise from a basic commitment of liberalism to *depersonalization* and *abstraction*. Our main political choices come down to which depersonalized mechanism seems most likely to secure human goods—the space of the market, which collects our seemingly limitless number of choices to provide for our wants and needs without demanding any specific thought or intention from us about the wants and needs of others; or the liberal state, which, via the mechanism of taxation and depersonalized distribution of goods and services, establishes standard procedures and mechanisms to satisfy the wants and needs of others that would otherwise go unmet or be insufficiently addressed by the market.

The insistent demand that we choose between protection of individual liberty and expansion of the state's efforts to redress injustices masks the reality that the two grow constantly and necessarily together: Statism enables individualism; individualism demands statism. The creation of the autonomous individual, that imaginary creature of Hobbes and Locke, in fact requires the expansive apparatus of the state and its creation, the universal market, to bring it into existence. And, as Tocqueville predicted, once liberated, the individual no longer has reliable personal networks to which to turn for assistance, and instead looks for the assistance of the state, which grows further to meet these insistent demands. While the battle is waged between liberalism's two sides, one of which stresses the individual and the other the need for the redress of the state, liberalism's constant and unceasing trajectory has been to become both more individualistic and more statist. This is not because one party advances individualism without cutting back on statism while the other achieves (and fails) in the opposite direction; rather, both move simultaneously together, as a matter of systemic logic that follows our deepest philosophical premises.

The result is a political system that trumpets liberty, but which inescapably creates conditions of powerlessness, fragmentation, mistrust, and resentment. The liberated individual comes to despise the creature of its making and the source of its powerlessness—whether perceived to be the state or the market (protests to the former represented by the Tea Party and to the latter by Occupy Wall Street). The tools of liberalism cease to be governable and become instead independent forces to which disempowered individuals must submit—whether the depersonalized public bureaucracy or depersonalized globalizing market forces, aided and abetted by technology, from surveillance to automation, that no longer seems under the control of its masters. Much of our common response to liberalism’s triumph today is a celebration of our completed liberty, but it takes the form of discussions and debates over the ways in which we can lessen the unease accompanying our powerlessness and dislocation as we submit terms of surrender to ungovernable forces in politics and economics. The movements that resulted in Brexit and the election of Donald J. Trump suggest that some will reject the terms of surrender altogether, even at the cost of considerable political and economic disarray. Across the world today, liberalism’s moment of triumph is being marked not by the tolling of victory bells but the sounding of air-raid sirens.

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Liberalism is failing not because it fell short but because it was true to itself. Liberalism is failing because liberalism succeeded. As liberalism has “become more fully itself,” as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims and realizations of liberal ideology. But because our normal politics have led us to operate entirely within the liberal frame, we assume that the various ills of our politics can be cured by applying a better liberal solution—whether a classical or progressive solution to an ill that is viewed as arising from the ills of the opposite. Rather than see the accumulating evidence of rolling systemic blackouts as a failure to live up to liberalism’s ideals, we need to see clearly that the ruins liberalism has produced are the very signs of its success.

To this end, I want to offer three areas for consideration where one can see liberalism’s two opposing parts advancing a consistent and uniform end by effectually engaging in a pincer movement from two different directions, and in the process destabilizing the very possibility of a shared political, civic, and social life. These areas are, first, liberalism’s hostility to *culture*, with preference given to a pervasive and universalized *anti-culture* (to borrow sociologist Philip Rieff’s term); second, liberalism’s assault on the liberal arts and humanistic education; and third, liberalism’s creation of a new and fully realized aristocracy, or what I call a “liberalocracy.”

Liberalism as Anti-Culture

First, both classical liberalism and progressive liberalism are commonly arrayed against the persistence of culture as a basic organizing form of human life, and together devise

economic, social, and political structures in order to replace the variety and expanse of existing cultures with a pervasive *anti-culture*. Local cultures, often religious and traditional, were seen by the architects of both classical and progressive liberalism as obstacles to the achievement of individual liberty. Shaping the worldview of individuals from the youngest age, cultural norms came to be seen as a main obstruction to the perception of the self as a free, independent, autonomous, and unconnected chooser. Whether in the form of classical liberalism's tale of the "state of nature," which portrayed the natural condition of human beings as one in which culture was wholly absent, or progres-

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sive critiques of tradition and custom (for instance, the main object of John Stuart Mill's concern about "tyranny of the majority" in his classic essay *On Liberty*), a continuous feature and core ambition of liberalism was the critique and eradication of culture as a *given*, to be replaced by a pervasive *anti-culture* in which remnants of cultures would be reduced to consumer choices.

The advance of this anti-culture takes two primary forms. Anti-culture is at once statist, especially arising through a legalistic regime of standardizing law replacing widely observed informal norms that come to be described and discarded as forms of oppression. It is the simultaneously the consequence of a universal and homogenous market, resulting in a monoculture which, like its agricultural analogue, colonizes and destroys actual cultures rooted in experience, history, and place. These two visages of the liberal anti-culture thus free us from other specific people and embedded relationships, replacing customary norms with abstract and depersonalized law, liberating us from personal obligations and debts, replacing what had come to be perceived as burdens on our individual autonomous freedom with the pervasive legal threat and financialization of debts. Thus, in the effort to secure the radical autonomy of individuals, liberal law and the liberal market replace actual culture with an encompassing anti-culture.

Long-standing local rules and cultures that governed behavior through education and the cultivation of certain kinds of norms, manners, and morals came to be regarded as an oppressive limitation of the liberty of individuals. Those forms of control were lifted in the name of liberation, a process that led to regularized abuse of those liberties, born primarily of the lack of any sets of practices or customs to delineate limits on behavior. Two leading examples of the dissolution of proscriptive cultural norms and practices are of recent vintage, yet are offered as examples by the two "sides" of liberalism as evidence of the shortcomings of the other side, not as endemic features of liberalism itself.

On the one hand, culture has always developed extensive norms regarding the fraught arena of sexual interaction between young men and women. On college campuses, for instance, these norms were once upheld through local practices of *in loco parentis*, which strictly governed relations between young men and women. These once customary norms were loosened in the name of liberation and autonomy, allowing

young adults full sexual freedom. Today, among the consequences of the dissolution of *in loco parentis* is the rise of new forms of administrative and bureaucratic organization arrayed to address the aftermath of predictable sexual anarchy.

In the name of redressing these abuses, and to the intense distaste of “classical liberals” who mistrust expansion of government into ever more personal spheres, the federal government has increasingly intervened in order to re-regulate the liberated behaviors. However, now, in the wake of disassembled local cultures, there is no longer a set of “norms” that seek to cultivate forms of sexual discipline, since this would constitute an unjust limitation of our freedom. Now there can only be punitive threats that are imposed after the fact, along with clarification of the punitive consequences should lines of consent be breached.

In effect, this immorality tale is the Hobbesian vision in microcosm: First, tradition and culture must be eliminated as arbitrary and unjust (“natural man”). Then, we see that absent such norms, anarchy is the result (“the state of nature”). Finding such anarchy unbearable, we turn to a central sovereign as our sole protector, that “Mortall God” who will protect us from ourselves (“the social contract”). We have been liberated from all custom and tradition, all authority that sought to educate by habit and within the context of ongoing communities, and have replaced it with a central authority that punishes wrongdoers who abuse their freedoms. And, now lacking any informal and local forms of authority, we are virtually assured that those abuses will regularly occur, and that the role of the state in ever more intimate personal affairs will increase (“prerogative”).

An identical liberation of appetite is also achieved in the economic realm. Here, various cultures’ governing markets are dismantled in the name of homogenous “laws” of globalized and depersonalized transaction, with the pursuit of appetite disconnected from the common good of a community. Instead, reliance is placed upon abstract and distant regulation of markets by the liberal state, backed up, not always credibly, by the promise of punishment. The economic catastrophe and near collapse of the world economy in 2008 was, above all, the result of the elimination of a culture that existed to regulate and govern the granting and procuring of mortgages. This activity was historically understood to be consummately local in its essence, requiring relationships that developed over time. Laws grounded in long-standing customs once existed to shore up a local mortgage culture, forbidding banks from opening branches in communities outside the ones where they were based—a practice premised on the belief that the granting and accepting of debt rested upon trust and local knowledge. These laws, and the culture they supported, were based on the idea that “the bankers’ interests and the interests of the larger community are one and the same.”³ The mortgage market was thus understood to be not a naked arena of anonymous and abstract relations but a commercial activity grounded in relationships formed over time and in particular places in which trust, reputation, memory, and obligation were requirements for the operation of a specific market. As Thomas Lamont, a partner at J.P. Morgan,

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stated in 1928, “The community as a whole demands of the banker that he shall be an honest observer of conditions about him, that he shall make constant and careful study of those conditions, financial, economic, social, and political, and that he shall have a wide vision over them all.”⁴

By 2008 the financial industry, much like contemporary college campuses, had been divested of its long-standing culture rooted in nature, time, and place. Indeed, training in the dorm parties and fraternities of one’s college appears to have been the perfect preparation for a career in the mortgage bond market. The mortgage industry rested upon the financial equivalent of “hookups,” random encounters of strangers in which appetites (for outsized debt or interest) were sated without any care for the consequences for the wider community. Apparently, responsibility- and cost-free loans were mutually satisfactory and wholly liberated from the constraints of an older financial order. However, in another reflection of the state of affairs on college campuses, these arrangements led to gross irresponsibility and abuse, damaging entire communities and demolishing lives. The response has been the same—calls for greater government regulation and oversight of the consequences of untrammelled appetite, including threat of penalization (rarely enforced) and requiring massive expansion of an administrative state to oversee a most basic human interaction: the securing of shelter. Liberated from the confinements and limitations of local market cultures, the result is not perfect liberty but the expansion of Leviathan. The destruction of culture thus achieves not liberation but bondage.

The dissolution of culture is simultaneously the prerequisite for the liberation of the disembedded individual, a pervasive and encompassing market, and the empowerment of the state. A pincer movement occurs in which individuals appeal to available authorities for a loosening of cultural norms and practices in the name of individual liberation, leading to various (legal, informal, and economic) interventions that succeed in diminishing or dissolving constitutive features of informal and long-standing norms.⁵ Absent norms, individuals pursue liberalized liberty defined as the absence of constraint, in which all that is not restrained by law or resulting in obvious harm is permitted. However, in the absence of guiding standards of behavior that were generally developed through cultural practices and expectations, inevitable abuse, conflict, and undisciplined appetite lead to the breakdown of basic decencies. The only auspice that can now adjudge those claims is the state; consequently, there is an increase in legal and political involvement in issues that were once generally resolved (or even forestalled) at the local level by adherence to cultural norms. Liberal individualism demands the dismantling of culture, and as culture recedes, Leviathan waxes.

Liberalism against Liberal Arts

In the course of eliminating cultural norms, liberalism has proven to be arguably the most effective regime for dismantling—whether intentionally or unintentionally—the liberal arts and humanistic studies. In the name of liberty, the liberal arts are abandoned willingly in the name of an ever more perfected liberation from the past, freedom from

authority, overcoming limits, and the demands of utility. In place of the liberal arts are raised what were once known as “the servile arts” (alternately, “the mechanical arts”).

Liberalism undermines liberal education in the first instance by detaching the educational enterprise itself from culture, by making education an engine of the anti-culture. Education must be insulated from the shaping force of culture as the exercise of living within nature and a tradition, instead of being stripped bare of any cultural specificity in the name of a cultureless multiculturalism, an environmentalism barren of a formative life within nature, and a monolithic and homogenous “diversity.” Liberalism’s claims to further the ends of multiculturalism and diversity in fact distract from its pervasive anti-cultural and homogenizing impetus.

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Liberalism further undermines education by replacing education in self-government with education that becomes a means to realizing autonomy, understood most saliently as the absence of constraint. In the humanities, liberatory movements based on claims of identity regard the past as a repository of oppression, and hence demand the displacement of the very object the humanities had come into existence to convey and to study. As the ground for the humanities is undercut by this liberatory project, the disciplines that advance the practical and effectual experience of autonomy—science, technology, engineering, mathematics (the STEM disciplines), and the economic disciplines (especially economics and business)—come to be regarded as the sole areas of legitimate study. The classical understanding of liberal arts—aimed at educating the free human being, in particular the free citizen—is displaced by emphasis upon the servile arts, those of the private person. An education fitting for a *res publica* is replaced with an education suited for a *res idiotica*, in the Greek sense of a “private” and isolated person. The left believes that education is being destroyed by neoliberal economic demands, while the right claims that the emphasis upon identity politics and radical sexual liberation are the cause. Yet, here again, these two stances are different sides of the same coin: Both serve the project of advancing liberalism, particularly the creation of the cultureless individual shorn of a past whose main ability consists in doing any kind of abstract cognitive work anywhere.

In an effort to keep pace with the demonstrated successes of their counterparts in the STEM disciplines, the humanities became the most conspicuously liberationist of the disciplines, even challenging (albeit fecklessly) the legitimacy of the scientific enterprise. Natural conditions—such as those inescapably linked to the biological facts of human sexuality—came to be regarded as “socially constructed.” Nature was no longer a standard in any sense, since it was now manipulable. Why accept any of the facts of biology when those “facts” could be altered, when identity itself was a matter of choice? If humans had any kind of “nature,” then the sole permanent feature that seemed acceptable was the centrality of will—the raw assertion of power over restraints or limits, and the endless possibilities of self-creation.

Ironically, while postmodernism has posed itself as the great opponent of rationalist scientism, it shares the same basic impulse: Both have risen to dominance in the university in conformity with the modern definition of freedom as the emancipation of the will. In the humanities, this belief today takes the form of radical emancipatory theory that focuses on destroying all forms of hierarchy, tradition, and authority and making the enshrinement of the human will the aim of education. The special focus of such theory is sexual autonomy, a pursuit that reveals how closely radical emanci-

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pation ultimately sides with the scientific project's focus on mastering all aspects of nature, including the "final frontier" of human reproduction and natural sexual differentiation. The humanities and social sciences also focus with particular sharpness upon identity politics and the redressing of past injustices to specific groups. This is done under the guise of "multiculturalism" and "diversity,"

values that are invoked in the name of an effort to continue the evisceration of culture (including the actual transmission of cultural traditions) in the pursuit of liberal autonomy. So long as oppressed groups show evidence of commitment to the liberal project, their inclusion becomes a tool for advancing liberalism; if disadvantaged groups show reluctance to join in or disagreement with liberalism's aims, they are rejected as incompatible.⁶

Yet while contemporary emphases in the humanities reveal consistency with the aspiration to autonomy that also underlies the modern scientific venture, this conformity has not granted long-term viability to the disciplines that once focused on the liberal arts. In the absence of strongly articulated grounds for studying the liberal arts in distinction to the modern project of autonomy and mastery, students and administrators are voting with their feet and pocketbooks to support the areas that show greatest evidence of mastering nature. It is a sign of the success of the vision of autonomy advanced by the main players in today's humanities fields that their own disciplines are shrinking and even disappearing, with preference going to STEM and economic pursuits.

As a practical effect, the insistence that students are no longer to be required to take a sequential education in the liberal arts, in the belief that they should sooner begin study of something "practical," aligns perfectly with the interest of faculty in focusing on the "creation of new knowledge" and the concomitant focus on research and graduate students. Students and faculty alike mutually abandon a focus on the liberal arts, essentially out of the same imperative: service to the conception of freedom at the heart of the liberal order. Amid their purported freedom, students increasingly feel that they have no choice but to pursue the most practical major, eschewing subjects that native curiosity might attract them to in obeisance to the demands of the market. Unsurprisingly, the number of majors in the humanities continues to decline precipitously, and a growing number of schools are eliminating disciplines that are no longer attractive in the university marketplace. The liberal arts are replaced by what were once deemed merely to be the "servile" arts.

Liberalocracy: The New Aristocracy

Finally, liberalism today is most obviously undergoing a legitimation crisis because of its extraordinary success in producing a new aristocracy, or “liberalocracy.” Liberalism’s architects, whether its classical architects such as John Locke or more progressive builders such as John Stuart Mill, similarly encouraged the displacement of aristocratic orders—delegitimated because of their wholly arbitrary claim to rule—and their replacement with a new kind of aristocracy whose claim to rule would be based on its ability to use talents that would become salient in a world shorn of cultural norms, natural constraints, geographic stability, and interpersonal obligations. Liberalism proposed to establish the base conditions for the emergence of this new aristocracy—our so-called meritocracy—that would blend Locke’s classical liberal hope that an “industrious and rational” class would arise and Mill’s recommendation that the authority of custom be shattered so that exceptional individuals who engaged in “experiments in living” would emerge and advance progress.

The results of this civilizational transformation are accumulating everywhere. Our society is increasingly defined by economic winners and losers, with winners congregating in wealthy cities and surrounding counties, while losers largely remain in place, literally and figuratively, swamped by a global economy that rewards the highly educated cognitive elite while offering bread crumbs to those left in “flyover country.” Trends observed decades ago by Robert Reich and Christopher Lasch, among others, who decried the growing phenomenon of “the secession of the successful” or the “revolt of the elite,” are today institutionalized, especially through family, neighborhood, and schools, and replicated by generational succession.⁷ Children of the successful receive the requisite preparation and entry into the ruling class, while those who lack those attainments are much less capable of affording, much less being even sufficiently knowledgeable about, the basic prerequisites needed to push their way into the upper echelon.

Charles Murray and Robert Putnam have ably documented the pervasive and self-perpetuating class divide that exists in modern American society.⁸ Murray has shown through the notional “towns” of Belmont and Fishtown that the wealthy and powerful in upper-class Belmont enjoy family and marital stability, a decrease in divorce and out-of-wedlock births, and lower rates of drug abuse or criminality, while on all these measures, the socioeconomically disadvantaged Fishtown is descending into anarchy. Arguing from the right, Murray says that Belmont simply needs to practice what it preaches—extol the virtues of virtue, rather than Millian “experimentalism” and value relativism—in order to instruct the denizens of Fishtown in what’s needed to achieve success. Arguing from the left, Putnam urges greater government support for the residents of Fishtown, proposing a host of programs that can help them break the chain of social decay.

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Both Murray and Putnam ignore the conclusion that empirical observation should suggest: Belmont and Fishtown are not aberrations from healthy liberalism; they are liberalism's denouement. From the outset, liberalism held forth the promise of a new aristocracy: a liberalocracy composed of those who would flourish in the wake of the liberation of the individual from history, tradition, nature, and culture, and the demolition or encouraged attrition of institutional supports that were redefined as limits or

obstacles to liberty. Those who are best provisioned by disposition (nature), upbringing (nurture), and happenstance to succeed in a world shorn of those institutional supports aspire to autonomy, even as they reconstruct new liberal variants of institutions ranging from government to the family that are aimed to launch autonomous individuals. Even as the liberal family is reconstituted in order to serve as the launching pad for the autonomous individual, a landscape

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now shorn of widespread social networks leaves those without advantages to make their way in liberal society bereft even of the social ecology for flourishing families among the underclass. Compounding their disadvantage is the "secession of the successful," the geographic withdrawal of a social and economic elite to a few concentrated urban areas, siphoning off those who might once have engaged in local forms of philanthropy and the development of local civil society.

Murray considers it merely incidental that the cognitive and managerial elite does not extol the merits of stable family life and a host of personal virtues that contribute to the maintenance of their social status. But there is a twofold reason why liberalocracy does not advance the conservative message he commends. First, liberalocratic advantages rest extensively on perpetuation of a social arrangement that exalts personal autonomy, even as the autonomous individual is launched from the stable family. Second, autonomy is preserved when the liberal family is constructed in the absence of broader and deeper cultural forms that normally support the flourishing of the family. Neighborhoods, churches, and a variety of social and communal organizations historically supported flourishing families, but also were viewed as anathema to liberal autonomy. Once those institutions were extensively disassembled—a process that initially lead to the instability of families regardless of social class, as documented by Murray—the family could be reassembled along liberal lines, now shorn of those social supports but undergirded by wealth in the form of support systems that could be purchased—a new servant class consisting, among others, of nannies, gardeners, chauffeurs, tutors, and personal trainers. The reconstructed family thus becomes one of the primary means by which the liberalocracy perpetuates itself, much as the aristocratic family was the source of wealth and status in earlier ages. While the aristocratic family was organized around perpetuating a status bound up in the land and estate—and hence emphasized generational continuity and primogeniture—the liberalocratic family implicitly rests upon loose generational ties, the conferral of portable credentials instead of title, the inheritance of capital (and debt) instead of land, and the promise of mobility, impermanence, and fluid identity rather than name and station. Meanwhile, the liberalocracy

is studiously silent about the decimation of family and attendant social norms among what Locke might have called “the querulous and contentious,” since systemic requirements of liberalism dictate that these will be the underclass, the necessary cost for disassembling social forms and institutions that have traditionally supported formation and maintenance of families even among the disadvantaged.

In effect, liberalism advances most efficaciously through both classical *and* progressive liberalisms, the economic liberalism advanced by Locke and the lifestyle liberalism advanced by Mill, even while claiming that the two are locked in battle. Defenestration of social norms, culture, and a social ecology of supporting institutions and associations is advanced simultaneously by the market and the state, while advocates of the former (such as Murray) claim that the resulting deep inequality can be assuaged by moral admonition, and proponents of the latter (such as Putnam) argue that government can substitute for the very success of liberalism’s evisceration of civil society and the reconstruction of family for the benefit of the liberalocracy. Liberals of both varieties regard the resulting generational inequality as an anomaly, rather than recognize it to be a key achievement of the liberal order.

Promoting the “Noble Lie”

The self-deception regarding the true nature of the liberalocracy is, in the main, neither malicious nor devious in nature. Liberalism is arguably the first regime to put into effect a version of the “Noble Lie” proposed by Socrates in the *Republic* of Plato, which claimed not only that the ruled would be told a tale about the nature of the regime, but, more importantly, that the ruling class should also believe in a “Noble Lie” about the nature of the regime. The Noble Lie proposes a story by which the denizens of Socrates’s “ideal regime” are at once convinced of their fundamental equality as members of a common family and the natural basis of their inequality of status, rank, and position. While Plato proposed the ideal regime as a philosophical exercise, liberalism adopted a version of the Noble Lie in order to advance the realization of a similarly constituted order, in which people would be led to believe in the legitimacy of natural inequality backstopped by a myth of fundamental equality. Not only would the “day laborers” be encouraged to believe that their lot in life would be continuously improved by their assent to the advance of the liberal order, but, more importantly, the liberalocrats were to be educated in a deep self-deception that they did not constitute a new aristocracy but were instead the very opposite of an aristocratic order. A primary vehicle of this self-deception has been a constant invocation of “diversity” and “social justice,” expressions of concern for the disadvantaged that are keenly encouraged from a young age among liberalocrats, often cultivated at the very educational institutions most responsible for their elevation into the elite. It is often these very same people who, upon encountering the discussion of the Noble Lie, will pronounce their disgust at such a subterfuge, all the while wholly unaware of the Platonic cave they occupy, one rendered invisible by the artificial lighting designed to hide its walls, internal as well as external. More ironic still, while Plato believed that it would be difficult to persuade the philosopher-rulers

of the existence of the deception, today it is the underclass that increasingly denies the validity of the Noble Lie even as the ruling class clings to its mythos.

The ship of liberalism is in dangerous waters not because it hasn't yet realized its potential but because it overwhelmingly has. Our political battles are likely to continue to be shaped by the dominant narrative to which we have all become accustomed—conservative against progressive, right against left. And all the while, the logic of liberalism will inexorably continue to unfold, impelling the ship toward the inevitable iceberg while its passengers bicker not over the arrangement of the deck chairs but over which end of the ship will stay above water when the iceberg strikes.

What is needed today is not better theory, but better practice. When Tocqueville visited America in the early 1830s, he marveled at Americans' political do-it-yourself spirit. Unlike his French compatriots, who for centuries had acquiesced in a centralized aristocratic order, Americans would readily gather in local settings to solve problems. In the process, they learned the "arts of association." They were largely indifferent to the distant central government, which then exercised relatively few powers. Local township government, Tocqueville wrote, was the "schoolhouse of democracy," and he praised the commitment of citizens to securing the goods of common life not only for the ends they achieved but for the habits and practices they fostered and the beneficial changes they wrought on citizens themselves. The greatest benefit of civic participation, he argued, was not its effects in the world, but those on the relations among people engaged in civic life: "When the members of a community are forced to attend to public affairs, they are necessarily drawn from the circle of their own interests and snatched at times from self-observation. As soon as a man begins to treat of public affairs in public, he begins to perceive that he is not so independent of his fellow men as he had at first imagined, and that in order to obtain their support he must often lend them his cooperation."⁹

For a time, such practices will be developed within intentional communities that will benefit from the openness of liberal society. They will be regarded as "options" within the liberal frame, and will be suspect in the broader culture, largely permitted to exist so long as they pose no threat to the liberal order's main business. Yet it is likely from the lessons learned in these communities that a viable postliberal political theory will emerge, one that begins with fundamentally different anthropological assumptions not arising from a supposed state of nature or concluding with a world-straddling state and market, but instead building on the fact of human relationality and sociability, and the learned ability to sacrifice one's narrow personal interest not for abstract humanity but for specific other humans. With the demise of the liberal order, such countercultures will come to be seen not as "options" but as necessities.

Still, the impulse to devise a new and better political theory in the wake of liberalism's simultaneous triumph and demise is a temptation that must be resisted. The search for a comprehensive theory is what gave rise to all the modern ideologies, including liberalism. Calls to restore culture and the liberal arts, to curb individualism and statism, and to limit the technology of liberalism will no doubt prompt suspicious questions. Yet, practices that foster culture, liberal arts, and an equality born of shared fates will prove to be formidable answers to the challenges from a theory whose practices are unsustainable.

Notes

- ¹ Edward Bellamy, *The Religion of Solidarity* (Boston, MA: Concord Grove Press, 1984). Written 1874, posthumously published 1940 (Antioch).
- ² Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 142–43, note 12.
- ³ Simone Polillo, “Structuring Financial Elites: Conservative Banking and the Local Sources of Reputation in Italy and the United States, 1850–1914” (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 157, <http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3328636/>.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.
- ⁵ Stephen Marglin describes one example of such intervention, the effort by the Mexican government (and, indirectly, the US government) to eliminate the culture of the *campesinos*, Mexico’s peasant farmers, under the auspices of the North American Free Trade Agreement: “The devastation of Mexican villages didn’t just happen; it wasn’t just the collateral damage of the market system.... It was a clear case of the state using the market for political and social as well as economic ends—in this case, the ends of an urban elite sure of its conviction that it knew best about what was good for the millions living in the Mexican countryside.” Stephen A. Marglin, *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13.
- ⁶ A recent confirmation of this assessment can be found in this statement by political scientist James Stimson: “When we observe the behavior of those who live in distressed areas, we are observing not the effect of decline on the working class, we are observing a highly selected group of people who faced economic adversity and choose to stay at home and accept it when others sought and found opportunity elsewhere.... Those who are fearful, conservative, in the social sense, and lack ambition stay and accept decline.” In other words, the disadvantaged status of the white working class is their own fault. Cited by Thomas B. Edsall in “The Closing of the Republican Mind,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/opinion/republicans-elites-trump.html>.
- ⁷ Robert Reich, “Secession of the Successful,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/20/magazine/secession-of-the-successful.html>; Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elite and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York, NY: Norton, 1995).
- ⁸ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2013); Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016). As Wilson Carey McWilliams has noted, “Notably, the groups that [liberal reformers] recognize are all defined by *biology*. In liberal theory, where our ‘nature’ means our bodies, these are ‘natural’ groups opposed to ‘artificial’ bonds like communities of work and culture. This does not mean that liberalism values these ‘natural’ groups. Quite the contrary: Since liberal political society reflects the effort to overcome or master nature, liberalism argues that ‘merely natural’ differences ought not to be held against us. We ought not to be held back by qualities we did not choose and that do not reflect our individual efforts and abilities. [Reformers] recognize women, racial minorities, and the young only in order to free individuals from ‘suspect classifications.’ Class and culture are different. People are part of ethnic communities or the working class because they chose not to pursue individual success and assimilation into the dominant, middle-class culture, or because they were unable to succeed. Liberal theory values individuals who go their own way, and by the same token, it esteems those who succeed in that quest more highly than individuals who do not. Ethnicity and class, consequently, are marks of shame in liberal theory, and whatever discrimination people suffer is, in some sense, their ‘own fault.’ We may feel compassion for the failures, but they have no just cause for equal representation, unlike individuals who suffer discrimination for ‘no fault of their own.’” Wilson Carey McWilliams, “Politics,” *American Quarterly* 35, no.1/2 (1983), 27.
- ⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, “That the Americans Combat the Effects of Individualism by Free Institutions,” in *Democracy in America* 2.2.4, trans. Henry Reeve (New York, NY: Vintage, 1954), 109.

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