

## **Book Review**

Deneen.P. J. (2018). *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale University Press.

### **Reviewed By**

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History is full of academic efforts undertaken to understand and solve the political and socio-economic challenges that the world has faced. Recent events like that of economic crisis of 2008, Brexit and the controversial election of Donald J. Trump have intensified such scholastic pursuits that are carried out to develop a better sense of underlying principles governing the global politico-economic arena. Some of these efforts blame defective economic policies for all the troubles that the world faces while other endeavors tend to offer only a superficial analysis of political or economic woes. Very less amount of work that spells out the root cause of all the issues while offering a philosophical and insightful discussion is available. Patrick J. Deneen, a professor of Political Science at University of Notre Dame, in his recently published book titled as “Why Liberalism Failed”, has broken this stagnation and analyzed the global issues from a different perspective which offers a very rigorous and profound analysis of the “conflicted” and “troubling” ideology of liberalism. He in his book has very confidently exclaimed that the ideology of liberalism, which was once declared by Francis Fukuyama as the only ideology to survive after the dismemberment of USSR, has failed to produce desired results. The failure of this ideology has become the fundamental cause of all the troubles like that of economic inequality and environmental degradation which the modern world faces. To support his argument regarding the failure of liberalism and while explaining the causes behind its failure, the author has successfully attempted to identify the contradictions that are there between the propagated values of liberalism and the present day reality. The conflicts between the teachings of different scholars like that of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Nicholo Machiavelli, who are considered to be the architects of liberalism, have also been pointed out. The author has carried out an overarching discussion explaining the causes and consequences of failed liberalism throughout all the chapters of his book.

Introduction of the book constitutes to be one of the most important parts of this reading. It not only gives the central idea of the entire book, but also briefly explains reasons behind failure of liberalism, which are then discussed comprehensively in subsequent chapters. One of the most convincing arguments made by the author in this portion is that there exists a very conspicuous contradiction between the idea of limited government which liberalism originally preached and

the presence of an omni-present, powerful, indifferent and elusive government that actually exists. Writer has made a very valid point that with the increasing pervasiveness of the government, unelected bureaucracy has become more powerful resulting in giving birth to sense of powerlessness and impotency amongst the citizens; the point that is very much relatable even to the conditions in Pakistan. This has thus resulted in the flagrant violation of the liberalist promise of creating a self-controlled government. Through this and numerous other contradictions, it has been highlighted that how the expounded values of liberalism like that of complete liberty, equality, justice and accountability have not been translated into reality. More interestingly, the reason mentioned by the author behind this failure of liberalism to deliver is the successful implementation of liberalism itself. The author has also provided a very insightful and in-depth explanation of the life of any ideology and claims that the election system of modern USA is broken and not trusted by the majority of the people. This part of book is rich in references to the work of philosophers like Plato, Socrates, Karl Marx, Francis Bacon and Francis Fukuyama. The author has also given indirect references to the prevailing debates like that of bureaucracy versus democracy, which adds to the academic strength of the book.

After the introduction is over, author has discussed the teachings of different pioneers of liberalism at length. While pointing out the different meanings attached to word liberty by the classical and modern liberals, Patrick J. Deneen has explained that how the meaning attached to the word liberty has evolved. He asserts that the meaning attached by modern and progressive liberals to the word liberty is to acquire freedom from every restriction that may come from culture, nature, norms or religion. This has given an impetus to the desire in humans to control and subjugate nature through science and technology which has eventually resulted in speedy depletion of limited worldly resources, making liberalism unsustainably materially, morally and economically. Also, this unrestricted liberty as preached by the progressive liberals, has created hyper-individualism and have convinced people that they can have sexual intercourse with any one without any restriction, due to which the hatred against the children has increased along with an increase in moral bankruptcy. The author not only puts the onus of exhaustion of environmental resources on the ideology of liberalism, but also declares that such issues will aggravate further if we do not let go of our belief that the right policies constituted on the principles of liberalism are the only solution.

In the next chapter, Patrick has explained the basic assumptions of two streams of liberalism i.e. classical liberalism and progressive liberalism. The writer has argued that apparently, there exists a disconnect and disparity between the two offshoots of liberalism, but, both of them still support the ideas and objectives of each other. To support this argument, author has pointed out a very interesting observation that the classical liberals, who are against the expansion of state, still look towards state for the protection of national and international markets. Similarly, the progressive liberals, who are fine with the expansion of the state, struggle and show activism against the the intervention of the state when it starts enforcing morality and manners. In addition to this, the

author in this chapter has also pointed out the deep and far reaching impacts of the divide between progressive and classical liberals on every aspect of life, especially on the politics in USA. This chapter, like the previous ones, is also full of allusions to the works of renowned liberal scholars. Author has developed his conclusion after analyzing the writings of the advocates of liberalism.

Culture and regional cultural diversity are the major casualties of successful and widespread implementation of liberalism. The world is now left with one dominating culture that promotes complete freedom and other values as propagated by progressive liberals. The author points out that this is one of the major reasons behind the failure of liberalism as because of this loss of culture, a very important moral constraint which earlier regulated the behavior of the people is now no more. This vacuum created by the absence of behavioral regulation by culture is now being filled with the application of technology. It is due to this reason that universities and colleges have installed cameras to monitor the behavior of students as they have now completely “liberated” themselves from the restrictions imposed by culture, which earlier guided their behavior. Moreover, author while criticizing liberalism, also enunciates that liberalism has made people believe that history and past experiences are unpleasant. Due to this conviction, people have now divorced themselves from their past and have stopped reflecting on it. Their focus has now completely shifted towards present with a very little amount of concern for the future. This disconnect from the past and indifference towards the future has promoted hyper-consumerism and individualism, which has reduced the sustainability of the economic resources of the world while adversely affecting the communities around the globe.

Liberalism has also resulted in ushering a new era of advanced technology which has resulted in the loss of human liberty that once liberalism espoused. Author has very rightly pointed out a flaw in liberal thinking which assumed that technology is defined by humanity. Whereas, in actual, it is the humanity that is defined by technology. Patrick J. Deneen has further argued in one of the chapters that owing to the technological advancements, much needed physical proximity between the people has substantially decreased. With the invention of internet in general and social media in particular, the human mind has become dumber after losing its vigor, attentiveness and ability to think deeply and critically. All these observations are quite visible in the present day world and have also been pointed out in various research articles. According to the author, the loss of human liberty and critical thinking is fundamentally due to liberalism itself which is why liberalism has failed. Author has also supported this conclusion pertaining to technology after giving references to the works of present day writers like Nicolas Carr and Sherry Turkle, who have written extensively in their bestsellers on issues like that of ills of internet and social media.

While explaining another reason behind the failure of liberalism in chapter five, author mentions that the success of liberalism has resulted in the decline of teaching of liberal arts and

humanities. More focus is now given to the teaching of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects; which is again very true and visible even in present day context. According to the author, these STEM subjects are taught to maximize and ensure military and industrial success. Through these subjects, a never ending quest of 'liberal human' to fill his unceasing appetite for more economic and material gains is underway. As a repercussion of this increased focus on STEM subjects, author points out that the world is now witnessing a visible and irreversible decline in natural resources, ecosystems and biodiversity, which may further result in chaos, destruction and conflict. Whereas the decline in the teaching of humanities and liberal arts have clipped the freedom of thinking and critical faculties of people, the teaching of STEM subjects has made people more servile to their desires, appetites and lusts. Moreover, the author also points out that in earlier ages, liberty was considered to be an ability of an individual to control his desires. But now, liberty is defined as freedom to satisfy every desire without any restriction. This is the reason why liberalism has failed so miserably.

One of the reasons why liberalism had gained so much mileage was that it promised a complete eradication of oppressive aristocracy and ensured creation of a government that was based upon consent of the people. But, the author mentions that the aristocracy which liberalism promised to obliterate has now been replaced with another type of aristocracy which is even more powerful than its predecessor and is based not on oppression or use of brute force, but on the basis of control over economic and natural resources by a small number of people, predominantly comprising of business elite. This comes as one of the most vivid, thought stimulating and mind-bending criticisms cum observations regarding liberalism in this book. Another startling fact supporting this observation comes through the uncovering of some of the teachings of both classical and progressive liberals. Author reveals after a careful and extensive analysis of the original writings of liberal scholars like John Locke that the classical liberalism allowed for the creation of an aristocracy and supported economic inequality while progressive liberalism, which apparently supported equality, advocated the creation of a strong and powerful state. Through this, the author has bared the obscured contradictions that exist within the teachings of intellectuals adhering to liberalism.

Patrick J. Deneen has also insisted that citizens have been degraded by liberalism. This has happened because of immense focus of liberalism on self-interest and private ownership which has resulted in the creation of one powerful class. The political system based upon the principles of liberalism has promoted the corrupt and have created such institutions that fracture the unity amongst the people, snatch away from them the democratic spirit and allows a selected few to rule. Pointing out the major threats to the ideology of liberalism, the author has professed that the greatest challenge to liberalism comes from the ignorance, lack of wisdom of people and "illiberal democracy". The recognition of misery and powerlessness by the people due to liberalism, according to the book, will soon result in start of a popular struggle for the rule of one illiberal autocrat who will take people out of their troubles and failures. The author has

concluded the book by giving a prophecy that end of liberalism is quite near. The panacea to all the ailments which humanity faces will come in the form of liberation from liberalism itself. And according to the author, creation of a deep state, formation of a populist national authoritarian government after replacing liberalism with some other ideology and strengthening the cultures appear to be some of the ways and possibilities through which eradication of liberalism may take place.

The entire book is written in a very logical and sequential manner and it explains the reasons behind failure of liberalism in a very well thought out, cogent and sensible way. It is also relevant to the present day situation of the world. While being full of references to the writings of renowned scholars who have set the foundations of liberalism, reading it gives a profound understanding of the ideology of liberalism and triggers the process of thinking which leaves its readers with more questions and an enhanced desire to read and inquire. At the same time, it also discusses some of the future prospects and possibilities that may lead to the complete end of liberalism. It also envisages some of the possible scenarios that may exist after liberalism is over. However, there are some shortcomings in this book as well. Some of the claims made by the author are not supported by any research based evidence. For instance, the author mentions in the first chapter that “70 percent of Americans believe that America is heading towards wrong direction”. The statistic presented in this claim by the author is not backed by research. Any student with research background may end up questioning the source of this figure. Similarly, statements like “liberalism has failed- not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded” assume, without presenting any concrete facts, that the ideal form of liberalism has already been successfully implemented. This can give rise to one argument that successful implementation of liberalism has not yet occurred in the first place and ideal liberalism will only be materialized after all the evils, which according to author are the outcome of liberalism, are eradicated.

The author, in this book, has focused more on the failures of liberalism in USA and Western European states and has not discussed the success of “economic liberalism” in developing states like that of India and particularly China. This weakens the entire criticism on liberalism as one is left with a question that if liberalism has failed so miserably in western developed states, then why a state like China, which is politically a communist state, moving towards rapid liberalization of its economy.

Furthermore, the author has put the entire onus of creation of an indifferent, powerful, security concerned, liberty snatching, deep state on liberalism and has not taken into account the impact of belligerency that exists in war-struck areas of the world like Middle Eastern states, where civil war in countries like Syria has given birth to refugee crisis. Also, the impact of terrorist organizations like ISIS and Al Qaeda on the security infrastructure of modern states has not been analyzed which makes criticism on liberalism uni-dimensional.

Failure or success of any project can only be rightly measured if there are pre-determined objective standards, requirements or goals. In case of this book where author has attempted to explain the failures of liberalism, no such concrete ends which liberalism has failed to achieve are mentioned. The ideals or promises which liberalism has failed to achieve, as per the author, are so general in their meaning that any critical observer or historian can give plentitude of convincing examples that may show the successful fulfillment or implementation of the promises made by liberalism. To prove the failure of liberalism, it would have been better if author had mentioned some verifiable and objective facts supported by statistics and figures regarding the state of economy, environment or any other aspect of society explaining the situation before the advent of liberalism and had compared those facts with the post-liberalism situation. But, such kind of pre and post liberalism analysis is missing in this book. Its presence would have definitely nourished the author's position. Similarly, what happens after liberalism is not explained in a lucid manner. Numerous suggestions given by the author to liberate ourselves from liberalism are not supported by any kind of evidence that may explain the chances of their success. However, to conclude, it can be said that the importance of this book cannot be denied as its author, through the application of his diligent and scrutinizing wit, has very correctly highlighted the contradictions that are there within the teachings of different liberal scholars and present day practices. He has also rightly mentioned the taxing situation the world is currently facing in the form of environmental crisis, rising economic inequality and enslaving technology like that of social media, that exist due to liberalism. This book is also recommended to the students of both under-graduate and post-graduate programs as it has the potential to enhance their understanding of the "triumphant" ideology of liberalism and criticism that it faces. It can also educate its readers that how the ideas penned by thinkers centuries ago have transformed the entire societies and are still relevant. Reading the book carefully can also kick start the mental process of thinking, examining and questioning about the political and socio-economic happenings around the world.