

Conservatism's Cloudy Future

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Since President Donald Trump's election there has been a sustained debate about the future of conservatism and the nature of the liberal project in American democracy. As an outsider to conservative politics and a figure who explicitly rejected much of the politics of the Reagan-Bush wing of the party, Trump has forced a reconsideration of what conservatism is and whether the traditional focus on individual rights, free markets, and democracy will lead it going forward. Since Reagan's election in 1980, the conservative movement has been dominated by a fusion of social conservatives, national security conservatives, and libertarian-market conservatives. But the Cold War mantra of "tax cuts, lower regulations, smaller governments, and military strength" no longer supplies the answers to contemporary economic and social issues. At the same time, Trump's only loosely defined MAGA economic populism and nationalism, border walls, increased tariffs, and winning, has not been sufficiently articulated or put into practice. My goal in this paper is to map out what I see as some of the most important divides on the right and provide brief critiques of each of their solutions.

Longstanding divisions on the Right on economics and social issues have widened sufficiently that, other than an almost reflexive instinct to cut taxes and regulations, there is little the movement agrees on, and an unclear path forward. Conservative intellectuals noticed and wrote on this first, but now everyone from cable pundits to U.S. Senators is arguing about the future of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism. In 2018, Patrick Deneen, a professor at the University of Notre Dame, wrote an excellent and troubling book titled, *Why Liberalism Failed*, an argument that classical liberalism, and thus democratic, capitalist regimes, had fundamentally failed ironically because it had succeeded so much that it undermined its own foundations. At

almost the same time, Jonah Goldberg, until recently a *National Review* editor and scholar at AEI, wrote *Suicide of the West*, which argued that democracy and capitalism had in fact succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, and yet oddly, too many are stuck focusing on the problems in capitalism and have missed its successes so that we are in danger of giving up on the project of democracy and capitalism right as it hits peak success. In a related vein, in 2019, Sohrab Ahmari, of *First Things*, a prominent Catholic periodical, has written several excoriating pieces arguing that classical liberalism has failed and is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity. He has used David French, an established First Amendment lawyer and until recently, an editor at *National Review*, long seen as an intellectual center of conservatism, as his foil. David French, in return, has offered a spirited defense of constitutionalism, rights, and capitalism. Finally, Marco Rubio and Josh Hawley, both young, reform-minded U.S. Senators, have in late 2019 given very unusual speeches for senators in the majority party that sharply criticize the economic and political status quo in America.

These pieces can all be examined individually; but put together they paint an interesting picture of the fractures in conservatism, fractures that do not line up as neatly as they have in the past. Some argue that things are basically going well, that the economy is booming, that free markets and libertarian regulatory policies are making life generally better for everyone, and that even though conservatives may be temporarily divided over Donald Trump, they should generally get on with the business of arguing against democratic and socialist policies. Others argue that the problem is more serious, that the economy may be booming, but that free markets have not actually created a tide that lifts all boats, and that whatever happens with Donald Trump in 2020, a combination of economic hollowing out and social decay is fatally harming American life.

Curiously Trump, despite being the center of American political angst generally, is not at the center of this debate. Deneen is deeply unhappy with modern conservatism, and a Trump opponent. But Ahmari, who is also deeply unhappy with modern conservatism, is much more favorable to Trump. At the same time, Goldberg and French have all been highly critical of Trump but generally defend the pre-Trump conservative consensus—something like Reaganonomics for the 21st century. These thinkers really are not fighting about Trump. They are fighting about what should happen in a post-Trump American world.

At first blush, it probably seems odd to put Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West* and Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* together. After all, Deneen's argument is that classical liberalism has failed precisely because it has succeeded in so many ways while Goldberg argues the reverse: that classical liberalism—as the source of capitalism and democracy—is society's best hope. On the other hand, Goldberg and Deneen cover much of the same historical and economic ground and they are both at their best when they are critically examining modern political thought. Arguably, both are most susceptible to critique in their attempts to connect the historical dots between the Enlightenment, the American Founding, and the present day.

The strength of Goldberg's book is in the evidence he gives for the astounding growth in rights and economic wellbeing in the last 250 years and his argument that we are basically ungrateful for this success because it seems so normal to us. How has this success happened? Because we adopted the philosophical view that the individual is an autonomous creature whose free will should be prioritized above all. That focus on the individual, plus a western belief in the rule of law, helped create the accidental "Miracle" of capitalism, as he calls it; that has done more to bring people out of poverty than anything in the history of the world (which Goldberg demonstrates in a substantial appendix). Unfortunately, the very success of capitalism has made

us take it for granted. We focus on the inequality that continues to exist in capitalism, indeed, that has dramatically expanded in the last half century, instead of the general improvement of all. Goldberg attempts to shake the reader out of his complacency as if to say, “Look around you, this isn’t normal, and it could be lost.” In essence, liberalism and capitalism have succeeded so well that we are in danger of tearing them down by returning to tribalism and class warfare.

Goldberg’s weakness is in his attempt to explain how this all happened and connect it to contemporary politics. He starts the book by explaining that God does not exist, at least for the purposes of the book’s argument, and he gives the impression that the only “real” truth is economic growth and liberty, yet he relies on the existence of rights for which he essentially denies the source. He spends several chapters trying to explain how capitalism, democracy, and rights came to be, only to conclude that it was a happy accident. What matters is not *why* it happens but that it *works*.

Which might be enough, except as Goldberg notes, it does not always work, or to put it more optimistically, sometimes it works too well. Reading Goldberg is refreshing, as unlike some contemporary advocates of the free-market-at-any-cost, he is more than willing to discuss the downsides of the creative destruction of capitalism. While it is true that globalization expands overall economic growth, real people and communities are hurt when factories close down.¹ Moreover, the market’s laser focus on profit maximization has a natural tendency to undermine “extra-rational” or unprofitable intangibles, such as customs, traditions, and sentiment that the market needs to exist, but cannot support. Goldberg recognizes this but does not seem to see why this continues to create a dilemma for market-based liberalism.

¹ Note, for example, Tucker Carlson’s recent skewering of Paul Singer, a prominent Republican donor and hedge fund operator, who destroyed a Nebraska town for profit <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/tucker-vs-vulture-capitalists-paul-singer-republican-party/> (last accessed 12/4/19).

The problem is that Goldberg’s argument is too utilitarian. The market is good because it works, even though it does not really work on its own in a vacuum, and even though its very success creates a class that disdains it. Similarly, Goldberg rightly recognizes that the family is the most important institution in society and that it is breaking down. He has a long section summarizing the research on this issue. But he punts on the question of *why* the family is important: “whether it [the nuclear family] is natural or not misses the more salient point: the nuclear family *works*.”² But it only “works” if families stick together, and they are no longer doing so in sufficient numbers, at least in part because utility alone is insufficient to motivate people through the trials and difficulties of family life.

Goldberg wrote the book, as his title suggests, because he is afraid that the West is on the verge of destroying itself. He thinks this is primarily because we are ungrateful for the Miracle of capitalism and democracy. In reading him, however, one is repeatedly struck by the fact that he simultaneously acknowledges that capitalism and liberal democracy depend on the values and beliefs of family, religion, and restrained liberty, and yet admits that capitalism and especially unrestrained individual liberty tends to actively destroy those crucial values. Perhaps it is not simply ingratitude that endangers liberalism, but liberalism itself.

Indeed, that is Deneen’s central claim. He makes two powerful arguments. First, that liberalism, while wildly successful in its aims of freeing man from any limits and increasing economic wealth, was destined from the outset to collapse from its own weight. Again and again Deneen shows that “liberalism has drawn down on a preliberal inheritance and resources that at once sustained liberalism but which it cannot replenish.”³ Deneen does not fully sketch out what that preliberal inheritance is, but it seems safe to assume that the importance of the family,

² Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, (Crown Forum, NY, 2018), 263.

³ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2018), 29-30.

church, and tradition would be at the top of the list. Deneen argues that liberalism is centered on two assumptions: that the most important thing about humans is voluntarism, defined as complete autonomous choice, and second, that humans are separate from and opposed to nature.⁴ Together, these claims redefine liberty. Liberty is no longer as the ancient philosophers and Christians thinkers defined it, “the right to do what one ought.” It is instead the “right to do what one wills.” Much of Deneen’s book is dedicated to teasing out this idea and its consequences and arguing that the result of this faulty understanding of liberty as license is a depletion of both our moral self-command and natural resources.

Second, Deneen launches a sustained critique of radical individualism in America. He notes repeatedly that the conservative focus on individuals and the market and liberal focus on individuals and the government actually masks the way in which the two have a parasitic relationship. Why? Because in the absence of meaningful community, we seek out something to replace it. It is telling that both Goldberg and Deneen cite President Obama’s infamous “Life of Julia” ad. The ad was a campaign attempt to show how Obama’s policies would do a better job than those of his 2012 opponent, Mitt Romney, to help a young girl, Julia, as she grew through life from a 3-year-old in early education to a senior citizen. Conservatives like Goldberg justifiably criticized the ad as creepy, and argued that Obama sought to replace Julia’s family, friends, and communities with the state. Deneen, though agreeing that Obama’s ad is problematic, argues it is a logical consequence of the libertarian focus on the individual above all else. Deneen notes that liberalism assumes society will continue to practice the values of Judeo-Christianity while undermining them, a problem that Goldberg recognizes but does not fully grapple with. As an example, consider the rise of no-fault divorce. This was justified on

⁴ In both cases Goldberg would agree with him.

individualistic grounds—marriage is nothing more than a contract between two adults, rather than a permanent covenant between a husband and wife, for them and their children. Whatever one thinks of that argument, one result of the policy is a vast increase in state power and aid to families. Single parents tend to need much more help than married parents, and in modern society, who else exists to provide that help but the government? Deneen’s critique of our modern adherence to the individual above all else is compelling and worth dwelling on.

However, I think that Deneen’s third claim is more problematic. Deneen argues that the problems of liberalism today were baked into the American Founding. He makes this argument in just a few pages in the second to last chapter of the book, but his conclusions from it can be seen throughout the work. In Deneen’s view, the American founding and the early 20th century progressives were not at odds, but instead, united in a shared commitment to liberalism. To demonstrate this, he attempts to show that James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, like John Dewey and Woodrow Wilson, publicly supported democracy even as they created anti-democratic or “republican” forms of government. Deneen’s evidence for this is a handful of quotes from Madison in *Federalist* #10 and Hamilton in *Federalist* #34. From *Federalist* #10 Deneen concludes that Madison wanted to use the “enlarged orbit” of modern republicanism to create “heightened levels of mutual distrust among citizenry.” He directly cites Madison on this point: “Where there is a consciousness of unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.” Deneen concludes that Madison views society as groups of citizens that distrust each other and a class of representatives that govern in their best interest. Yet a fair reading of *Federalist* #10 does not lead one to think Madison wants to create a *Survivor* America. Rather, he is trying to avoid the problem of majority tyranny, where a majority of citizens unjustly take away the rights

of minorities, which he thinks led to the destruction of earlier city-state democracies. The quote Deneen gives is actually part of Madison’s argument that in small communities, minorities can more easily be oppressed by bigoted or self-interested majority factions. This is an obviously true claim that supporters of localism like Deneen should carefully consider. Local does not always mean better and kinder. Moreover, in *The Federalist* Madison was only focused on the federal government. He fully recognized that local levels of government would be more directly related to the public, and hopefully foster the very sort of community that Deneen wants.

But Deneen’s reading of Hamilton is even more problematic. Deneen quotes Hamilton arguing for the need for a “CAPACITY to provide for future contingencies, as they may happen; and as these are illimitable in their nature, so it is impossible safely to limit that capacity.... Where can we stop, short of an indefinite power of providing for emergencies as they arise.”⁵ From this Deneen turns Hamilton into Machiavelli—the Prince must have unlimited power to act to defend the state, which in turn will lead to greatness. Forget MAGA, Hamilton created the original MAG. In Deneen’s telling, the real goal of the Founders was to use ambition for national greatness to shift citizen’s allegiance from their communities and states to the nation, which whether they realized it or not, would eventually would lead to a nationalized state made up of a collection of real-life Julia’s.

There’s just one problem. Deneen forgets Hamilton’s limiting principle. Immediately prior to Deneen’s quote, Hamilton says, “Nothing, therefore, can be more fallacious than to infer the extent of any power, proper to be lodged in the national government, from an estimate of its immediate necessities.” This lays out a principle that both Hamilton and Madison regularly reiterated against anti-federalist critiques. As Hamilton put it in *Federalist* #31: “the means ought

⁵ Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* #34, ed. Clinton Rossiter (Mentor, 1961).

to be proportioned to the end; that every power ought to be commensurate with its object; that there ought to be no limitation of a power destined to effect a purpose which is itself incapable of limitation.”⁶ This meant that if the government was to be given a responsibility, for example, to protect the common defense, the Constitution should not unduly tie the hands of a future Congress in carrying out this duty. This was why the Constitution did not ban a standing army, despite the fear at the time that such an army was a threat to liberty. Similarly, in *Federalist* #34, Hamilton was merely arguing that the federal government’s power to tax should not be limited, so long as that power was directed toward legitimate ends. In context, Hamilton was arguing against anti-federalist opponents that wanted to specifically list each limitation on the federal government. Hamilton repeatedly argued that the proper way to limit government was not to set out every verboten power, but instead to enumerate specific powers and responsibilities for government and provide it adequate means for carrying them out. Hamilton’s view is that responsibility must be matched with requisite power. That’s a far cry from Machiavelli.

But Deneen has to make this outsized claim in order to persuasively argue that the Founding and the progressive era are aligned. He argues that for all of their other differences, both the Founders and Progressives saw politics as a way of mastering nature, expanding power and breaking individuals from personal bonds. Yet this fails to recognize how unique the American Constitution really is. It was an attempt to create a dual sovereign structure, with a federal government of limited ends and local governments of unlimited ends. This was so counterintuitive that the anti-federalist critics never really understood the goal of the Federalists. If all Hamilton and Madison wanted to do was establish an empire, there were easier ways to go about it. They chose not to, and for well over 100 years the federal government did not actually

⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* #31.

take large swaths of power from the states, and communities did not look to Washington to solve their problems.

Deneen himself implicitly acknowledges this by his repeated references to Alexis de Tocqueville's surprise at how much Americans cared about civic life. Deneen examines Tocqueville and Cotton Mather's understanding of the difference between liberty as license and liberty as a free choice made to do rightly. Tocqueville correctly recognized that this belief in America traced its roots to Puritanism and the likes of John Winthrop and John Wise. But of course, Tocqueville visited America in 1831, almost 45 years after the Constitution was written. If the Founding was really a secret plot to take power from the people, as Deneen seems to suggest, how is it that Tocqueville is so struck by the difference between America and his own centralized France, both in terms of virtue and civic practice? Tocqueville repeatedly notes the contrast: in France, if a school or a bridge needed to be built the people waited until a noble or the central government did it, but in America, they created an "association," they self-organized and acted without waiting for anyone's permission. This would seem to be localism personified half a century into the American regime.

Deneen, like some anti-federalists, argues that the Constitution inevitably turns into a centralized Leviathan with the problems of modern liberal society. But the anti-federalists were not arguing this would happen 230 years later, but immediately. And they were wrong. Brutus, a prominent anti-federalist, was wrong to argue that the federal judiciary would immediately take over and abuse its power just as he was wrong to argue that the executive would become a king. It did not happen immediately, or indeed, for over 100 years. So why did the central government take so much more power in the 20th century, and why or when did our understanding of liberty turn to licentiousness?

Deneen's argument is that the rot was not a perversion *of* the system, but latent *in* the system. The Lockean and Hobbesian ideas inevitably led to dissolution. But if so, why did it take so long to flower? A better answer is that the Founding was not purely Lockean. The Constitution was not a rejection of America's Puritan roots; it combined the Christian belief in natural law and God as a source of rights with Whig arguments for British historical rights and Lockean claims of natural rights. Far from abandoning Christianity or virtue or a conception of limited liberty, the Founders repeatedly noted that virtue was a necessary pre-condition for liberty.

When was this lost? When Woodrow Wilson and the progressives decisively denied the importance of God and history and even individual rights in favor of the will of the state. As the progressives themselves argued, they were a decisive break with the Founders. This conclusion fits better with the historical evidence—even with Deneen's own arguments and references to Tocqueville—whether we are looking at the actual time period that the size and scope of government dramatically increased, or the beginnings of the sexual revolution, or the cultural abandonment of faith.

Early on in his book, Goldberg warns against what Rudyard Kipling called a “just-so” story—where an idea leads to a distant conclusion without sufficient evidence. It's a good warning. It is somewhat ironic then that both Goldberg and Deneen arguably both fall into the trap of telling a “just so” story: of recognizing that ideas have consequences, but stretching too far to justify how a particular idea led to a chain of events that eventually led to something else—without demonstrating how the ideas were linked together in the historical record. Goldberg tends toward this when he repeatedly wants to connect divisions between Enlightenment philosophers and Romantics to contemporary politics. Similarly, Deneen attempts to argue that

much of our current feelings of alienation can be traced back to Hobbes and Locke via the Founding, despite the fact that the Founders overwhelmingly disdained Hobbes's philosophy and that many Founders appealed far more to God and British history than to Locke.

A final problem for each of these disparate visions of conservatism is that neither of them have much in the way of solutions to the problems they identify. Patrick Deneen can be forgiven for this. After all, he is a political philosopher, and other than Plato and Rousseau, few political philosophers have offered meaningful solutions to problems—their role instead is often to define problems for the rest of us. To the extent he offers any solutions they are brief and of limited utility. First, he suggests that we need “actual human liberty in the form of both civic and individual self-rule, not the ersatz version that combined systemic powerlessness with the illusion of autonomy in the form of consumerist and sexual license.”⁷ Here, Deneen sounds a note similar to Anthony Esolen's argument in *Life Under Compulsion*. Esolen argues that we in modern America are obsessed with being free from external control, but in practice live a life under compulsion to our own desires.⁸ They are right of course, but it's not clear that Deneen is right to point to liberalism as the reason for this, rather than man's own sin nature and turn from God. After all, it is not as though the effects of man's sin nature are unique to democracy. Deneen's second suggestion is that citizens turn away as much as possible from participating “in the abstract and depersonalizing nature of the modern economy” and turn back to “household economics” where one makes and does things for oneself.⁹ Essentially, this is a Wendell Berry type argument to opt-out of globalization as much as possible. It sounds nice, but in practice, we cannot all live on farms.

⁷ Deneen, 187-8.

⁸ Anthony Esolen, *Life Under Compulsion*, (ISI, 2015).

⁹ Deneen, 194, 193.

Goldberg does not really provide a solution either. Toward the end of his book he admits that part of the reason so many are turned off by capitalism is that in the last 20 years it has not fulfilled its promises. There has been a massive growth of income inequality in the last 20 years, which itself followed a massive increase since the 1960s. Too many people have been left behind in our modern economy. He also notes that the miracle of capitalism happened in a Christian society where most people believed that “God was watching,” which served as a check on man’s actions.¹⁰ Now, that is no longer the case, and the excesses of capitalism are functionally unchecked. He quotes Irving Kristol: “[Adam Smith] could not have been more wrong. It is ideas which rule the world, because it is ideas that define the way reality is perceived; and, in the absence of religion, it is out of culture—pictures, poems, songs, philosophy—that these ideas are born.”¹¹ Goldberg takes from this Kristol’s belief that conservatives were losing because they had not recognized that the culture had abandoned religion and the implications of that abandonment. But Goldberg’s blend of libertarian conservatism does not appear to have any solution for this problem.

However, Goldberg’s recognition that we are ungrateful for the very thing that has done so much to improve our daily lives is important. He offers a useful corrective to both progressives on one side, who argue that history is a never ending series of improvements, and that we are assuredly on the “right side of it,” and a tendency of some conservatives, including perhaps, Deneen, to pine for a lost golden age. Similarly, Deneen’s concern that we’ve mistaken liberty for license and turn too much power over to the twin gods of the market and the state is a critical corrective to both modern day libertarians, like Goldberg, and liberals. It is also a warning to conservatives. Rights are not enough. We are not simply isolated individuals waltzing

¹⁰ Goldberg, 333.

¹¹ Goldberg, 339, Irving Kristol, “On Conservatism and Capitalism,” *Wall Street journal*, September 11, 1975, 20.

through history. We have relationships and responsibilities to others, and our abandonment of those responsibilities is part of the explanation of our modern discontent.

On the other hand, Sohrab Ahmari thinks he has the answer to the problem of libertarian conservatism. In a scathing piece titled, “Against David French-ism” in *First Things*, a Catholic journal, in May of 2019 Ahmari rhetorically went to war against, of all things, David French.¹²

On its face, this is puzzling. David French is a conservative, indeed, a leading First Amendment lawyer and writer—so what is going on? Matthew Continetti, in an insightful piece on the split in contemporary conservatism, put it this way, in discussing Ahmari and the new post-liberals:

One way to tell if you are reading a post-liberal is to see what they say about John Locke. If Locke is treated as an important and positive influence on the American founding, then you are dealing with just another American conservative. If Locke is identified as the font of the trans movement and same-sex marriage, then you may have encountered a post liberal.¹³

This is a perfect explanation of Ahmari and the post-liberals, or as they occasionally describe themselves, “Catholic Integralists.” In his piece against French, Ahmari notes that what drove him to this anger was an advertisement on Facebook for “a children’s drag queen reading hour” at the library. To his mind, the only way to deal with this problem, which he sees as being caused by liberalism, is to: “fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils in the form of a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good.”¹⁴

In other words, for Ahmari, classical liberalism has led to a dead end of drag queens and LGBT politics and it is partly the fault of conservatives like David French, who want to focus on legal protections for all—drag queen story tellers and Christian Bible studies can both meet at

¹² Sohrab Ahmari, “Against David French-ism,” *First Things*, May 29, 2019.

¹³ Matthew Continetti, “Making Sense of the New American Right,” *Washington Free Beacon*, May 31, 2019.

¹⁴ Ahmari, “Against David French-ism.”

the library. In Ahmari telling, the problem with this is that in the long run, the culture will not provide religious liberty for what it sees as bigotry and prejudice. This is, in his view, the logical conclusion of the same rights-based founding that Deneen criticizes. The problem with David French is that “the solution to nearly every problem posed by a politics of individual autonomy above all is yet more autonomous action.”¹⁵

Unfortunately for Ahmari, he does not actually have a solution. When pressed by French on this point his grand solution was to have Republicans in the Senate have a hearing to grill local librarians on the legitimacy of Drag Queen Story Hour. He seems to see Donald Trump’s election as a more hopeful sign, at least in the sense that Trump ran against political correctness and won. But this is a curious position for Ahmari—whatever else Trump is, he’s no social conservative. One needs to be more than just politically incorrect to solve the problems Ahmari sees.

The bigger issue for Ahmari is that he is trying to do two conflicting things at the same time. On the one hand, he criticizes French, and the “fusionist-Reagan-consensus” of believing too much in the goodness of individual autonomy. This is essentially the same argument Deneen makes. And like Deneen, Ahmari is at his most compelling when he focuses on the limitations of thinking of every political issue as merely a choice between choices. But Ahmari’s second point is more problematic. After listing all of the ways that a focus on individual autonomy has rotted away society, he says the only solution is to fight, and win, presumably at the ballot box. But how on earth is this to be done? To hear Ahmari talk the culture is already fundamentally depraved, there are almost no functioning families left, and the barbarians are through the gates. How, exactly, is an Ahmari approved candidate going to win? They are not. To put it another

¹⁵ Ahmari, “Against David French-ism.”

way, Ahmari seems to be arguing for some sort of “Catholic integralism,” an attempt to put Catholic social thought directly into practice through politics. This is always going to be difficult in America, given that Catholicism is a distinct minority in the country, but it is even more so now, given the state of confusion in the American, and indeed, worldwide Catholic church. Like Deneen and Goldberg, Ahmari sees problems, but he lacks a meaningful solution.

Which brings us at last to two fascinating speeches from Senators Marco Rubio and Josh Hawley. It should not be surprising that politicians are more interested in practical policy than intellectuals, and both exhibit this. In a speech titled “Common-good Capitalism” Rubio attempted to connect Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 Papal Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, to our own upheaval that has resulted from the Information Revolution. In Leo’s famous encyclical he attempted to weave a middle ground between the socialist policies of Marx and the *laissez faire* arguments of capitalism. For Leo, it’s critical to remember not merely the rights of workers and businesses, but their obligations to each other. Rubio argues that this is the capitalism that we want, but not what we actually have. And unlike some of his intellectual contemporaries, Rubio gives specific applications. He critiques “financial capitalism,” where corporations spend most of their profits buying back stocks, rather than investing in future growth or rising wages, and thus sending virtually all profits back to shareholders over employees. This is, to Rubio, the result of a politics that has forgotten that “our nation does not exist to serve the interests of the market; the market exists to serve our nation.”¹⁶ Rubio contends that conservatism should care at least as much about supporting and bolstering the middle class as it does about increasing the size of the economy. For Rubio, there is a middle ground between the absolutism of the market and the total control of

¹⁶ Marco Rubio, “The Case for Common-Good Capitalism,” *National Review*, November 13, 2019.

it, a la Bernie Sanders. And he, like Josh Hawley, argues that conservatives have gotten this wrong in the last thirty years, with devastating results. As Hawley puts it, “We live in a troubled age. Every American knows it, feels it.”¹⁷ Hawley details the vast economic divide between classes with a new oligarchy of wealth and education, and he talks about some of the results of this, which includes a staggering loss of community and rise in despair across middle America that have resulted in the highest levels of suicide in America since 1938. Like each of these other thinkers, Hawley points back to our over-focus on individualism and choice and the corresponding collapse in community. Unlike Rubio, Hawley does not provide specific solutions. But he does provide a specific critique.

The surprising thing about Rubio and Hawley’s speeches is that so much of their ire is directed at a central element of conservatism—the overemphasis on free individual choice. And that brings us full circle to Patrick Deneen and Jonah Goldberg. Deneen argues that overemphasizing individualism is baked into the American consciousness, it cannot be fixed, and has ultimately caused our society to fail. It has already happened, and we are just living with the results. Goldberg contends that the real problem is that we are too willing to give up on individual freedom in exchange for the promise of economic equality, but he agrees with Deneen that individualism is what makes America. Rubio and Hawley are more accurate, however. Both of them recognize that American individual liberalism can and has gone too far—and that it has not always been so. The question is what can be done about it. This is a question that cannot be solved overnight, but conservatism needs to provide an answer, if it hopes to avoid both a turn to socialism and a growing public consensus that cornerstone freedoms like religious liberty are suspect because they are merely a pretense to protect bigotry.

¹⁷ Josh Hawley, Speech at the 6th Annual American Principles Project, November 20, 2019.