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Review: *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, by Patrick J. Deneen. Sentinel, 2023. Pp. xvi/169. Hardcover, \$30.00.

Patrick Deneen's *Regime Change* follows on the heels of his widely read and discussed book *Why Liberalism Failed*. In his original diagnosis, he makes an argument from the shared premises of Alexis de Tocqueville and Robert Nisbet that liberalism's obsession with individual autonomy inherently undermines the very institutions that provide the individual with social, economic, and psychological support. Theories of liberation lead in practice to realities of alienation as the individual finds himself not liberated from constraint, but cast adrift from anchors of stability. The result is social breakdown, increasing economic inequality, family dysfunction and decline, increasing deaths of despair, and declining life expectancy (ix).

Deneen remains convinced that liberalism is to blame for these social depredations. Both in its classical and progressive forms, liberalism prioritizes "creative destruction" over social stability and the rule of a new elite over an integrated and humane "mixed constitution" of elites and people working together. Social change and the destruction of older social forms is a virtue for both economic and social liberalism. The first sees increasing efficiency and Gross Domestic Product as worth whatever price is paid in terms of declining employment prospects and signs of flourishing for ordinary people. The second sees increasing liberation from traditional forms of life as essential to a life of self-realization, no matter the cost to normal ordinary people cast adrift and increasingly susceptible to socially and personally destructive forms of existence, including deaths of despair.

The solution to this nefarious class of elites is a *regime change*, a "peaceful but vigorous overthrow of a corrupt and corrupting liberal ruling class and the creation of a postliberal order in which existing political forms can remain in place" (xiv). He argues not for revolution, but for a "different ethos" to inform our public institutions. The current liberal

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regime arose from the destruction of the ancient regime, establishing a self-described meritocracy. But like ruling classes before it, this new elite is hereditary, although it obscures that quality beneath a veneer of merit. It disassembles the guardrails that keep most people on a path of a flourishing life, and then socializes its own children in the skills to operate without them. While this new form of accomplishment works well for those in the elite who receive such guidance, it leaves the masses adrift, many floundering without the social guidance that kept their forbears from destructive behavior. The result is rule by an elite convinced of its own superiority. Its members “made it” and the rest did not. Our elites are just as privileged in terms of heredity as the old aristocracy, receiving from their families the skills and social networks to reap the benefits of the social changes they championed. Such skills and networks are much more difficult to come by for the lower classes (27–28).

Our elites have adopted “emotive soft egalitarianism,” a weaponized form of John Stuart Mill’s “harm” principle whereby they can attack and destroy anyone who falls outside the elite views on race and gender (38–39). They use private power, such as “woke capital,” to advance their liberal agenda. Notions of “diversity and inclusion” and identity politics are likewise ways in which elites maintain their status. In such a way, an illiberal liberalism has developed that invites the use of power to suppress its opponents and force conformity to its particular values and worldview, especially against those of the majority in the lower classes (48–52). The attack upon the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in Indiana is an example of economic elites defeating a democratic effort to preserve traditional values for the sake of social liberalism. The enemies of traditional values are the corporate elites and not the unwashed masses (57). The irony is that throughout all this, these powerful figures and corporations dub normal people adhering to traditional values the oppressor class (58).

Deneen’s solution, “common good conservatism,” includes various policies drawn from the economic left and the social and political right. While the term bears a resemblance to his fellow traveler Adrian Vermeule’s “common good constitutionalism,” Deneen embraces the conservative label and Vermeule eschews it.<sup>1</sup> The common good is the “everyday requirements of ordinary people” (230). The goal of common good conservatism is to stabilize society, to avoid the creative destruction celebrated by classical and progressive

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<sup>1</sup> See Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022).

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liberalism. If there is one thing that defines both classical and progressive liberal elites, it is deference to experts. Against that liberal penchant for pedants, Deneen advocates for “common sense,” another term for traditional knowledge, “the collective memory of ordinary people from the lessons drawn from daily life” (111). In short, it is appeal to the “wisdom of the people.”

Furthermore, he advocates a mixed constitution, a combination of the many and the few, the commoners and the elites. Two English political figures, Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli, pursued a political program along these lines. Burke argued at length for communities, little platoons, a way in which the community of the nation could be bound together in a great chain of being from the local and personal to the enormous and political, from the commoners to the king. In this way, political order could secure stability, continuity, and tradition. Similarly, Disraeli advocated for a conservative working class which had little tendency toward revolution, as other nineteenth century thinkers alleged. Deneen writes, “[Members of the working class] were, rather, deeply conservative, seeking more to preserve and pass on a heritage than to disrupt and overthrow traditions, and relied especially upon an elite that would protect them from other spirants to political, social, and economic rule whose aim was to damage and even destroy the traditional and organic society that they viewed as an obstacle to progress” (143). Like Burke, Disraeli attacked the monied interests and the liberal philosophers, whatever their differences, because both “combined to advance the destruction of mediating institutions of church, estate, guild, and local power, and ultimately had its aim at the nation itself” (142).

Deneen calls his new movement “aristo-populism.” Rejecting American fusionism, the strategy of allying conservatives with classical liberals to achieve shared goals, aristo-populism embraces a different strategy, one that would combine the elites with the people in a shared movement toward the common good. He would reorder and re-incentivize the ruling class to care about the sorts of things that create well-being among those in the working class, balancing change and order in such a way that it “allows for strong families and encourages strong social and civic forms” (163). Political realism is necessary. We must be willing to use “Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends.” The people ought to put political pressure upon the elites to make sure that they pay attention to genuine wellbeing and in such a way that elites “actually take on features of *aristoi* and nobility—excellence, virtue,

magnanimity, and a concern for the common good—and by means of which the people are elevated as a result” (167).

Efforts to integrate the classes should aim not at progress, but at human flourishing. Where liberalism had separated the classes, Deneen would mix them. Rather than meritocracy, where those who “make it” are seen, and see themselves, as superior to those who don’t, inevitable differences of talent and outcomes should be seen as a sign of solidarity: we all have our role to play for the good of all. Greater achievement is not reason for aloofness, but only increases social, economic, and political obligations for those who achieve. Against the ethos of individual autonomy and self-fashioning is the idea of integration of the “working-class ethos of social solidarity, family, community, church, and nation, with the supportive requisite virtues of those blessed by privilege” (190).

As far as many of Deneen’s assertions are concerned, with a charitable reading there is little to which one might reasonably disagree. Who can deny that our elites are self-serving? Or that our lower classes are struggling and have been ill-served by our public policy? As for Deneen’s goals, there is little to which a humane person would disagree. Who would deny that the elites and the people should work more profitably together? Or that virtue ought to be play a larger role in our meritocracy?

Other reviewers in this symposium convey objections to those concerns and goals, and depending upon one’s reading, there are legitimate concerns to raise and objections to make. I very much doubt that the working class is as virtuous as Deneen thinks it is.

For my part, I begin by granting Deneen’s primary concerns and turn instead to his practical recommendations. I think some are interesting efforts to reimagine our political scene.<sup>2</sup> But others either ignore political and social reality in the present time or they miss the mark in some other way. For some I will accuse him of just the sort of failure of imagination that he, Vermeule, and others launch at their critics. That said, he does style his recommendations as a starting point for reflection upon salutary reform. He invites just the sort of criticisms I bring to bear (184).

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<sup>2</sup> This was an important point made by Adrian Vermeule, “‘It Can’t Happen’; Or, the Poverty of Political Imagination,” *The Postliberal Order Substack*, November 19, 2021. Vermeule thought critics of the postliberal project complaining of its “impossible” political program were failing to understand the role reimagination of the possible plays in political policy. The social left has achieved all sorts of things that only a few decades ago would have been politically impossible. But they succeeded in reimagining what is possible.

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I don't have space to address all of his reform suggestions. I organize my discussion according to how they advance his idea of a mixed regime and common good conservatism. I find his suggestions addressing the former more persuasive than those addressing the latter.

### MIXED REGIME

Deneen argues for *expanding the congressional representatives in the House* to bring "local knowledge" to bear upon national policies. This is one to which I am sympathetic as are many localists. Originally, Congressional Representatives hailed from every 30,000 citizens, today it is 750,000. Concerns were raised at the Constitutional Convention that one representative for every 30,000 people was simply too large for adequate representation. Keep in mind that many state legislatures at the time had representatives from towns of only a few hundred. You likely personally knew your state representative. There was a decent chance you were related by blood or marriage.

Bringing the "people's" representatives closer to the people might make for more local knowledge and better representation. Complaints that Congress must defer to the bureaucracy on policy-making would be allayed if there were more members of Congress to write legislation rather than empowering unelected bureaucrats to in effect do the same. With so many members of Congress around to carry on this work, we might be able to cut back on the administrative state in some ways. The role of the Senate might transition to a sort of approval committee, unable to carry on the sort of grunt work as the House, but able to monitor and approve meaningful policies into legislation. The House would take on the interests of small, local districts; the Senate would take those of state and national elites. Compromise between the two may better approximate goods common to all.

The primary problem will be incentivizing current members of Congress to go through with this system. They now face reelection odds at over 90 percent. Why would they agree to a scheme that would redraw their districts? Most already sit in safe seats. There is little incentive for most to make them safer. Furthermore, why would they dilute their own vote and influence in Congress? One out of every 435 is much better than one out of every 10,000. Think of all the committee assignments they would have to give up for their constituents. How would we incentivize Congress to agree? What sort of pressures could be brought to bear upon them? What sort of work of *reimagination* would have to happen for

the people to be able to demand this of their members of Congress when they generally plan to reelect them at the next opportunity? It's worth considering.

*Reviving the idea of national service.* The military draws disproportionately from the working class. The age-old republican problem is a division between those who send troops into battle and those who actually fight. Forcing mass conscription would overcome this hurdle. But mandatory national service need not be limited to the military. It might include repairing our infrastructure, working in healthcare and education, and the like (173-74). Our elites rarely engage in what we would think of as national service. The working class does. But such a program, Deneen thinks, would bring children of elites and children of the working class together on projects that benefit the whole country. People would be required, or incentivized, to enroll in these programs after college as a way to student loan forgiveness. "Not only should there be an accompanying requirement to contribute to the commonweal in exchange for such benefits, but a universal requirement of a year's service to the nation would afford the invaluable benefit of mandating opportunities for interaction with people outside one's bubble" (174).

Along with this, Deneen suggests *providing incentives for wealthy institutions, especially colleges and universities, to forgive student loans* for those entering public or social service, religious vocations, and the like. In such a way, rather than perpetuating the elite, our elite institutions might train people for non-elite vocations. This would encourage the sort of "mixing" necessary for an aristo-populist regime to arise.

I think the idea of national service is generally one that would be too easily coopted by either the military industrial complex or other unsavory interests. It seems like it would also perpetuate the brain drain. People will seek service opportunities that are prestigious over those that are not. It might lead to mixing of elites and non-elites in some ways, but they would disproportionately be talented individuals leaving their various localities and congregating in the same geographical location. Instead, such a national call to service should be tied to local service. What might it take to keep people local? What might incentivize people to stay closer to home? Might we tie loan forgiveness to staying in-state? Or taking a job within a hundred miles of one's parents? There are all sorts of ways to game such a system, but we might think more in terms of decentralization of service rather than nationalization of service. For decades we've aggregated all the talented individuals in a

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handful of major cities. A public policy emphasizing not national service, but local service, might do more than anything to break up the oligarchic concentrations in certain metropolitan areas.

Deneen recommends *encouraging the trades* as a viable alternative to college and to balance the enormous subsidies the middle and upper classes receive to pursue a college education. He also argues that we should require college students to work with their hands as part of receiving a college degree. I think this means making woodworking, or plumbing, or automotive learning, essentially “shop class,” part of the core or distribution requirements of every student at our colleges and universities. A broader requirement of working with one’s hands will bring students into contact with reality, how things actually work in the real world. Such a movement might help those receiving, in Deneen’s words, a “gnostic” education, one entirely focused on the mind, to appreciate the real world with salutary and conservative consequences. Those who do not do manual labor might acquire an appreciation for the skill and work of those who do. They might also begin to understand the real limitations imposed by the world they live in, deflating the penchant for arrogant meddling so characteristic of our elites.

I find this suggestion the most intriguing. There are now forming a number of trade school/liberal arts colleges such as the College of St. Joseph the Worker that combine credentials in the skilled trades with a liberal arts education. Students end their studies with both a liberal arts degree and marketable skills in a trade. To bring this to a broader range of students would require state legislatures making such requirements of their state universities. We might tie it into the broader movement now underway to encourage civic education in both public and private institutions of higher education. As long as we are reforming higher education, we might add this in as one of the reforms. I see this as a broadening of education, educating the mind as well as the body has a long history. Students should receive basic knowledge of the history and order of the political world they have inherited, and they should receive basic knowledge and experience in the physical world they have inherited.



### COMMON GOOD CONSERVATISM

I think Deneen is less persuasive in his policy prescriptions on economic and moral matters, those related to his “common good conservatism,” but for very different reasons.

*Treating liberal cities like corporate monopolies and break them up.* Just as progressives broke up alleged economic monopolies, so conservatives should break up municipal monopolies. What exactly this means isn't clear. I don't think he means state governments should change the municipal corporate charters so that major cities become a collection of smaller cities. This would create problems in terms of services. How might one disaggregate police, fire department, trash pickup, water services, etc.?

I think he means disincentivizing corporations from placing headquarters in only three or four major cities and incentivizing them to move elsewhere or to decentralize their operations by having multiple centers in smaller cities, including those in the Midwest and South. Instead of our talented youth headed to New York City, Washington DC, Chicago, San Francisco, or Seattle, they head to Pittsburgh, Lincoln, Columbus, Atlanta, or whatever their closest large city. We might look to the movement of corporate headquarters to Austin and Dallas currently taking place as an example of what might happen nation-wide. What are Austin and Dallas doing to incentivize those movements? What is Texas doing? Can it be replicated by other states and municipalities? Or can analogous state policies be implemented to encourage such movement of corporations from different industries?

The plausibility of this development depends on how it is carried out. Deneen's analogy to progressive policies is unhelpful for a variety of reasons. One is that it was centralized political power, itself highly problematic for a conservative society, that intruded into monopolies. The other such political power easily becomes the creature of those monopolies. I would instead argue for political decentralization setting the tone to encourage economic decentralization. Deneen suggests this, pointing out that the federal government spread the federal bureaucracy around the country, driving jobs to various midwestern and southern cities. Such decentralization of the federal bureaucracy might be a helpful step toward decentralization in general. Once the federal agencies and departments are spread out among several states, it is a smaller step to just return those services to the states themselves. At the very least, it means moving those prestigious positions around the country,

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allowing or even encouraging talented individuals to stay geographically closer to home when taking a federal job.

Deneen argues that the federal government should be much more involved in *shoring up manufacturing* as necessary to national security, stability, and prosperity. A strong manufacturing base furthermore means a “society of producers” rather than a “society of consumers.” Congress could mandate that certain things, like military equipment, are manufactured in the United States. Other items related to medicine, basic food stuff, and anything else necessary to a secure, functioning society should likewise be manufactured in the country. Deneen does, to his credit, acknowledge that tariffs are a “crude instrument” and tend to bolster “domestic political advantage.” That is the core problem with nearly all of the economic solutions put forth by the Postliberals and the economic left in general. They rely upon a starry-eyed view of old economic policies associated with the New Deal. But there is very little in economic regulation that isn’t the result of jockeying for “domestic political advantage,” empowering the very economic behemoths that concern Deneen. We might benefit more from trying to understand why that economic power concentrated in the first place. Scratch the surface and there you often find the sort of backscratching between political and economic elites that rightly concerns Deneen. Concentrations of economic power are often the result of concentrations of political power. Political favoritism plays to the advantage of the wealthy and well-connected, our elites, not to the poor and socially isolated. To put it another way: his political solutions to the economic problems he describes were often the very political means that created the economic problems he is addressing.

This critique applies to Deneen’s political solutions to the problem of our atrophying civil society as well. He argues that we must find ways in which the political power might be employed to *protect civil society institutions* from the destructiveness of concentrated economic power. Deneen writes, “A common-good conservatism, moreover, rejects the right-liberal stance that a healthy civil society can result both from encouragement and the shrinking of government. Government, both local and national, can serve as a counterweight to the destructive forces of a destabilizing economic order” (181). Healthy local institutions require the protection of a broader political and economic order that do not undermine the context for local institutions to thrive. Blame for the collapse of civil society institutions so necessary to humane existence is placed on economic aggregations of power. Deneen sees

government, national and local, as a counterweight to economic power, a means to stabilize neighborhoods, towns, and regions, so that civil society can flourish.

The problem with this assessment is that it is more likely the aggregation of political power that caused the decline of civil society. This is certainly Robert Nisbet’s assessment in *The Quest for Community* published in the middle of the last century. Robert Wright capably demonstrates in *Liberty Lost: The Rise and Demise of the Voluntary Association in America Since Its Founding* how growth in federal programs edged out the civil society institutions that provided much needed community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the provision of services, including fraternity.<sup>3</sup> Whatever might be said of economic aggregations of power, it is the political intrusions that seem to have caused the most damage to civil society. There is a vast realm of necessary social interactions that simply cannot be monetized. For at least two centuries in this country, voluntary associations filled that void. But the government intruded in a way that economic associations could not. Asking that governments intrude again, but this time to aid civil society, is just the sort of meddling that led to the cooption of function and authority so devastating to our civil society institutions in the first place. The political solutions to the civil society problems he describes were the very political means that created the civil society problems he is addressing.

A better tact, I think, is to attempt to recreate the legal landscape that led to the thriving of civil society institutions. For example, how might we revive the vast plethora of legal forms under which the voluntary associations operated so that they can be replicated today? Wright’s work is essential on this point.<sup>4</sup>

Along with civil society policies, Deneen argues for *supporting the family through family friendly policies*. This could be a Cabinet level position or a “family czar,” something like Hungary’s Ministry of Family Affairs. There are legitimate questions over whether Hungary’s family-friendly policies actually work.<sup>5</sup> But a White House official devoted to parsing various policy efforts for their effect on the family might be a good way of catching taxes, regulatory policies, and the like that have negative effects upon the family before they become law. Perhaps more relevant might be key legislators hiring legislative assistants to work on family

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<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Wright, *Liberty Lost: The Rise and Demise of Voluntary Association in America Since Its Founding* (Great Barrington, MA: American Institute for Economic Research, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Liberty Lost*, 47–63.

<sup>5</sup> Lymen Stone, “It’s Time for Social Conservatives to Stop Fawning Over Hungary,” *The Public Discourse*, April 18, 2021.

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policy. The Speaker of the House could play an essential role in this regard, making sure that pending legislation is reviewed by a committee that considers possible effects upon families.

Deneen suggests *enforcing moral media* by deprogramming transgression and libertinism, banning pornography, especially as it tends to victimize poor women, and otherwise encouraging civic virtue. Deneen does not address ways in which one must be wise as a serpent when pursuing these policies. For example, the federal courts will simply not permit the banning of pornography. It's a nonstarter. But as we have found recently, we can limit access through age verification. This not only protects children, but adults who, not surprisingly, don't want their names associated with their porn search history. Such policies don't obliterate pornography, but they do make its access more difficult, habituating the populace to averting their gaze, thus contributing to virtue in an Aristotelian sense. Sly navigation of this terrain is required to achieve these victories.

Another concern with Deneen's approach is focusing on victimization of women. It is true that women, especially poor women, are victimized in making pornography. This is well established. But that is a cramped understanding of the destructive nature of sin, and sexual sin in particular. St. Paul addresses sexual sin in I Corinthians 6. There he describes it as desecration of one's own body. The purpose of our bodies (by extension, our minds and imaginations) are to glorify Christ. Thus, joining with a prostitute (even if imaginatively by video) is to sin against one's own body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, which exists for the glory of God. St. Paul says nothing of the exploitation of the prostitute. That is a secondary effect and a fine argument in certain circumstances. But St. Paul focuses upon the primary nature of the sin. If it were true that the prostitute was daughter of an elite family and freely chose her profession, would that change the analysis? Could a porn site be acceptable to social conservatives if it vetted its videos to only feature actresses with Ivy League degrees? You get the point.

Deneen's intent is likely to build bridges between social conservatives and feminists, a perfectly fine goal. Perhaps this is Machiavellian means to Aristotelian ends. But ignoring the primary argument against pornography, the consequences upon the sinner himself, is to ignore its primary harm. This is detrimental in two ways. First, this argument gave the game away to the online manosphere. Social conservatives yielded the field to male gurus on

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advising young men on the dangers of pornography. The way in which it saps a man's strength by tanking testosterone levels, lessens his ability to focus by hacking his dopamine pathways and harming his career prospects, and destroys his self-confidence by undermining his self-control and social intelligence, are entirely absent from Deneen's critique. But you will find them at the forefront of those advanced by many secular online men's gurus and they bear a closer resemblance to the argument of St. Paul than to that of Deneen.

This shouldn't be seen as advocacy of these secular influencers. I am not the only one to liken them to Absalom, growing in power by speaking to the real needs of young men. But why was Absalom able to do so? Because the anointed one, King David, the one who was supposed to address his subjects' concerns, refused to do so. Men waited at the gates of the city to speak with the king about their concerns. He didn't show up. Absalom did. Deneen's failure to address the core to pornography's sinister influence, its destruction of the user, follows a long line of social conservative leaders' refusal to address these sorts of "men's issues." Such factions of religious conservatives, the anointed ones, have refused to show up for young men in this basic way and ceded the field to nefarious characters. This issue might be one of the worst failures of imagination in social conservatism over the last half century. Rather than drawing from and elaborating upon St. Paul's argument, the entire issue was framed in terms amenable to second wave feminists.

One final note on this point: men are not the only porn users. Women use porn less frequently than men, but still in great numbers and to their great detriment for the same spiritual and very similar physiological and psychological reasons such use is destructive to men.

Second, with the advent of AI the entire argument regarding the exploitation of women is now dated. No women—or children—will be harmed in the making of those videos. If AI porn becomes the norm, the argument about harm to women is dead on arrival, but the harm to users of porn, men and women, becomes only more relevant. If AI porn will do anything it will only exacerbate the psychological and physiological harm to porn users by amplifying the damage to their neural pathways. Of course, the spiritual destruction will continue unabated.

The final policy I'll address is moral, *encouraging the practice of prayer*. He has much to say on reviving public Christianity, all of which I cannot address. Deneen notes that the

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civic role of religion was highlighted when the spike in “deaths of despair” correlated with the repeal of blue laws. The ability of people to attend church was hampered by relinquishing the prohibition on requiring workers to work Sundays. But it doesn’t follow that a reinstatement of blue laws will lead to a reversal in “deaths of despair.” The social damage may have already been done. People who, *ceteris paribus*, would have attended church but no longer do because they now work on Sundays will not necessarily return to church should they get their Sundays back. All this might mean is that now they can get smashed on Saturday nights as well. It really depends on the local community. I suspect in some, such a change will open the door to a salutary revival of religion in a local community, in others to a rise in deaths of despair, thus exacerbating the inequality already rampant. Deneen writes that we should “publicly promote and protect a life of prayer” (236). But there is little hope of that coming from our current national political leaders. Could orthodox Christians really pray with Biden, Harris, or Trump? There is no way past the hard work of cultural, moral, and personal re-evangelization that must take place for public Christianity to become viable.

We can certainly appreciate the attempt to “foster conditions of flourishing for ordinary people, while restraining the tyrannical impulses of the powerful to be free of the moderating and sustaining strictures of custom, tradition, and culture” (8). But a great deal more work must be done in terms of policy development to get us there.

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