

A cure for liberalism?

John Milbank & Adrian Pabst consider Western society's many problems and offer a prescription: virtue.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Politics of Virtue

Postliberalism and the Human Future

By John Milbank and Adrian Pabst
Rowman & Littlefield

This book could perhaps be called prophetic in that it elucidates a crisis that the Brexit vote and the election of Trump now so vividly epitomize. Democracy has yielded oligarchies and the tyranny of majorities; capitalism has become criminalized and venal; there's a pervasive sense of a society that's losing the adhesive qualities we thought held it together. John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, never short of a grand phrase, call this the "metacrisis of liberalism."

What is liberalism? Philosophically, it's a position that "refuses to accept anything not rationally proven or demonstrable" and "disallows any public influence for the non-proven—the emotively or faithfully affirmed." It believes we are "isolated, autonomous individuals whose activities can only be coordinated by an absolutely sovereign center, holding a monopoly of violence, power and ultimate decision making." It has economic and political manifestations, contrasting the free market with the bureaucratic state à la Reagan and Thatcher, yet also social and cultural dimensions, insisting on individual rights and equality of opportunity for self-expression. Crucially, it regards the economic and political as prior to social bonds and cultural ties, making the latter subject to law and contract.

Sociologically, liberalism became normative beginning in the 1950s: "after that decade, the whole of social reality, including the family, became gradually capitalised and commodified, through the construction of 'the consumer' rather than 'the worker' as the crucial economic and cultural actor."

Theologically, it arose in the 17th century, when agreement concerning the transcendent good began to be associated with conflict and warfare. Whereas Christianity believes in an original harmony between people disrupted by sin, liberalism assumes an original agonistic condition that only contract and the state can restrain.

Biologically, liberalism perceives a meaningless nature and a nonexistent spirit, and thus reduces reality to the establishment of power through beneficial exchange conducted by a technologically assisted abstract human will in a world without intrinsic meaning.

Liberalism isn't simply a boo word: the authors acknowledge that there is a generous sense of the term which denotes the upholding of constitutional liberties to ensure the exercise of justice, the humanitarian treatment of the weak, and the creative flourishing of all. But amid the benign aspirations toward equality, freedom, and happiness, they sniff the liberal assumption that we are basically "self-interested, fearful, greedy and egotistic creatures, unable to see beyond our own selfish needs and, therefore, prone to violent conflict." Milbank and Pabst extensively argue these formidable claims, with passion, flair, and flourish and across the fields of politics, economics, constitutional polity, culture, and international relations.

Anticipating the obvious criticism that their account is all critique with no remedy, the authors match each chapter of diagnosis with a corresponding account of a cure. That cure is, in a word, virtue.

What is virtue? In short, it's the recovery of the notion of *telos*. "A more universal flourishing for all can be obtained when we continuously seek to define the goals of human society as a whole and then to discern the variously different . . . roles that are required for the mutual advancement of those shared aims."

What this is describing, I suspect, is the same thing people recall as the goodness that was at large when the nation was at war in 1917 or 1943: a common project—a team game. The aim of social relating is not "mainly the satisfaction of private predilections, but relationship as such, and the good of the other, besides oneself, in the widest possible range."

Meaning belongs primarily in the social, the relational, the specifically located. "Community is always a 'being with,' . . . a series of exchanged and binding gifts, which originally constitute society prior to any economic or political contract." To pursue such foundational relationality is to become vulnerable to wounds inflicted by the other. The market and the state promise to insulate us from such hurt through impersonal transactions, but in bureaucratizing security we lose the capacity for genuine joy. Freedom is not a given but a gift that can be discovered by all through healthy formation.

In practice, virtue translates into fostering intermediate associations such as guilds, cooperatives, ethical and profit-sharing businesses, trade unions, voluntary organizations, universities, and free cities. (The BBC is often cited as such an organization, jeopardized by rampant liberalism.) The authors outline a whole vision

of a civil economy to amplify the economics of virtue. What's needed is a politics of the common good, and community organizing has a role to play in that.

Provided one keeps in view the argument's two building blocks—liberalism and virtue—it's possible to read the book without drowning in the sweeping rhetoric, the breadth of illustration, the admirably extensive practical recommendations, and the seemingly endless ramifications. There's no doubt some of the authors' commitments will be widely indigestible, notably their remarkable paean to constitutional monarchy along the lines of that found in Britain, a vision many might perceive as gratingly theocratic. The authors' criticism of capitalism seems like a critique of the capitulation of government to business interests through deregulation. Globalization might better be seen as an unavoidable reality rather than a manifestation of a specific ideology.

Interspersed are some gems. "The United States has been caught from the outset between oligarchic stasis and corruption on the one hand, and the claims of a majoritarian tyranny, manipulable by the propaganda of opinion, on the other." Politics has become a perpetual guarding against aliens: the terrorist, the refugee, the foreigner, the criminal, the dissident, the welfare-scrounger, the shirker, the spendthrift, the non-hardworking family, and so on. Populism arises from the liberal emptiness of purpose and its founding narrative of overcoming violence.

My favorite section is on the way liberalism enhances boredom by insisting on superficial choices and diminishing attention to detail and creative use of what is given: "It is one of the most basic tenets of liberal belief that most people were bored out of their minds for most of human history."

The book is an awesome tour de force. It's easy to say the term *liberalism* is stretched far too broadly and that by choosing this term the authors unnecessarily antagonize many who might otherwise be more sympathetic to their vision. It's easy to say postliberalism has to find an identity that's more constructive than being simply "post" something. It's easy to wonder if the book's truly theological insights are largely buried under a weight of assertion and "and another thing" momentum. It's easy to bridle at the elitism that surfaces in reference, for example, to the "certain lassitude and tasteless hedonism, which the lower-end of the consumer market ceaselessly fosters" or to the "average proletarianised middle-class product of most British universities today." There's no doubt that the style often betrays the argument.

But more importantly, this is a profound and often brilliant cry to recognize the procedural follies and criminalized economics that have converged to undermine the social and cultural relatedness and embeddedness that constitute the true goods of human existence. We have, as a liberal democratic society, lost the plot. The plot is and should always have been about healthy, gifted forms of relationship and the cultivation of creative expression in the service of the common good. Who could be against that? It turns out, our whole political and economic superstructure.