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Introduction: The End of Liberalism

A political philosophy conceived some 500 years ago, and put into effect at the birth of the United States nearly 250 years later, was a wager that political society could be grounded on a different footing. It conceived humans as rights-bearing individuals who could fashion and pursue for themselves their own version of the good life. Opportunities for liberty were best afforded by a limited government devoted to “securing rights,” along with a free-market economic system that gave space for individual initiative and ambition. Political legitimacy was grounded on a shared belief in an originating “social contract” to which even newcomers could subscribe, ratified continuously by free and fair elections of responsive representatives. Limited but effective government, rule of law, an independent judiciary, responsive public officials, and free and fair elections

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were some of the hallmarks of this ascendant order and, by all evidence, wildly successful wager.

Today, some 70 percent of Americans believe that their country is moving in the wrong direction, and half the country thinks its best days are behind it. Most believe that their children will be less prosperous and have fewer opportunities than previous generations. Every institution of government shows declining levels of public trust by the citizenry, and deep cynicism toward politics is reflected in an uprising on all sides of the political spectrum against political and economic elites. Elections, once regarded as well-orchestrated performances meant to convey legitimacy to liberal democracy, are increasingly regarded as evidence of an impregnable rigged and corrupt system. It is evident to all that the political system is broken and social fabric is fraying, particularly as a growing gap increases between wealthy haves and left-behind have-nots, a hostile divide widens between faithful and secular peoples, and deep disagreement persists over America's role in the world. Wealthy Americans continue to gravitate to gated enclaves in and around select cities, while growing numbers of Christians compare our times to that of the late Roman Empire and ponder a fundamental withdrawal from wider American society into updated forms of Benedictine monastic communities. The signs of the times suggest that much is wrong with America. A growing chorus of voices even warn that we may be witnessing the end of the Republic unfolding before our eyes, with some yet-unnamed regime in the midst of taking its place.

Nearly every one of the promises that were made by the architects and creators of liberalism has been shattered. The

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liberal state expands to control nearly every aspect of life while citizens regard government as a distant and uncontrollable power, one that only extends their sense of powerlessness by relentlessly advancing the project of “globalization.” The only rights that seem secure today belong to those with sufficient wealth and position to protect them, and their autonomy—including rights of property, the franchise and its concomitant control over representative institutions, religious liberty, free speech, and security in one’s papers and abode—is increasingly compromised by legal intent or technological fait accompli. The economy favors a new “meritocracy” that perpetuates its advantages through generational succession, shored up by an educational system that relentlessly sifts winners from losers. A growing distance between liberalism’s claims and its actuality increasingly spurs doubts about those claims rather than engendering trust that the gap will be narrowed.

Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded. As liberalism has “become more fully itself,” as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology. A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom. Its success can be measured by its achievement of the opposite of what we have believed it would

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achieve. Rather than seeing the accumulating catastrophe as evidence of our failure to live up to liberalism's ideals, we need rather to see clearly that the ruins it has produced are the signs of its very success. To call for the cures of liberalism's ills by applying more liberal measures is tantamount to throwing gas on a raging fire. It will only deepen our political, social, economic, and moral crisis.

This may be a moment for more than mere institutional tinkering. If indeed something more fundamental and transformative than "normal politics" is happening, then we are in the midst not just of a political realignment, characterized by the dying gasp of an old white working class and the lashing out of debt-burdened youth. We may rather be witnessing an increasingly systemic failure, due to the bankruptcy of its underlying political philosophy, of the political system we have largely taken for granted. The fabric of beliefs that gave rise to the nearly 250-year-old American constitutional experiment may be nearing an end. While a number of our Founding Fathers believed that they had lighted on a "new science of politics" that would resist the inevitable tendency of all regimes to decay and eventually die—even comparing the constitutional order to an entropy-defying perpetual motion device, "a machine that would go of itself"—we should rightly wonder whether America is not in the early days of its eternal life but rather approaching the end of the natural cycle of corruption and decay that limits the lifespan of all human creations.

This political philosophy has been for modern Americans like water for a fish, an encompassing political ecosystem in

which we have swum, unaware of its existence. Liberalism is the first of the modern world's three great competitor political ideologies, and with the demise of fascism and communism, it is the only ideology still with a claim to viability. As ideology, liberalism was the first political architecture that proposed transforming all aspects of human life to conform to a preconceived political plan. We live in a society and increasingly a world that has been remade in the image of an ideology—the first nation founded by the explicit embrace of liberal philosophy, whose citizenry is shaped almost entirely by its commitments and vision.

But unlike the visibly authoritarian regimes that arose in dedication to advancing the ideologies of fascism and communism, liberalism is less visibly ideological and only surreptitiously remakes the world in its image. In contrast to its crueler competitor ideologies, liberalism is more insidious: as an ideology, it pretends to neutrality, claiming no preference and denying any intention of shaping the souls under its rule. It ingratiates by invitation to the easy liberties, diversions, and attractions of freedom, pleasure, and wealth. It makes itself invisible, much as a computer's operating system goes largely unseen—until it crashes. Liberalism becomes daily more visible precisely because its deformations are becoming too obvious to ignore. As Socrates tells us in Plato's *Republic*, most humans in most times and places occupy a cave, believing it to be a complete reality. What's most insidious about the cave that we occupy is that its walls are like the backdrops of old movie sets, promising seemingly endless vistas without constraints or limits, and thus our containment remains invisible to us.

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Among the few iron laws of politics, few seem more unbreakable than the ultimate unsustainability of ideology in politics. Ideology fails for two reasons—first, because it is based on falsehood about human nature, and hence can't help but fail; and second, because as those falsehoods become more evident, the gap grows between what the ideology claims and the lived experience of human beings under its domain until the regime loses legitimacy. Either it enforces conformity to a lie it struggles to defend, or it collapses when the gap between claim and reality finally results in wholesale loss of belief among the populace. More often than not, one precedes the other.

Thus, even as liberalism has penetrated nearly every nation on earth, its vision of human liberty seems increasingly to be a taunt rather than a promise. Far from celebrating the utopic freedom at the “end of history” that seemed within grasp when the last competing ideology fell in 1989, humanity comprehensively shaped by liberalism is today burdened by the miseries of its successes. It pervasively finds itself to be caught in a trap of its own making, entangled in the very apparatus that was supposed to grant pure and unmitigated freedom.

We can see this today especially in four distinct but connected areas of our common life: politics and government, economics, education, and science and technology. In each of these domains, liberalism has transformed human institutions in the name of expanding liberty and increasing our mastery and control of our fates. And in each case, widespread anger and deepening discontent have arisen from the spreading realization that the vehicles of our liberation have become iron cages of our captivity.

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POLITICS

Citizens of advanced liberal democracies are in near revolt against their own governments, the “establishment,” and the politicians they have themselves selected as their leaders and representatives. Overwhelming majorities regard their governments as distant and unresponsive, captured by the wealthy, and ruling solely for the advantage of the powerful. At its inception, liberalism promised to displace an old aristocracy in the name of liberty; yet as it eliminates every vestige of an old order, the heirs of their hopeful antiaristocratic forebears regard its replacement as a new, perhaps even more pernicious, kind of aristocracy.

Liberalism was premised upon the limitation of government and the liberation of the individual from arbitrary political control. But growing numbers of citizens regard the government as an entity separate from their own will and control, not their creature and creation as promised by liberal philosophy. The “limited government” of liberalism today would provoke jealousy and amazement from tyrants of old, who could only dream of such extensive capacities for surveillance and control of movement, finances, and even deeds and thoughts. The liberties that liberalism was brought into being to protect—individual rights of conscience, religion, association, speech, and self-governance—are extensively compromised by the expansion of government activity into every area of life. Yet this expansion continues, largely as a response to people’s felt loss of power over the trajectory of their lives in so many distinct spheres—economic and otherwise—leading to demands for further intervention by the one entity even

nominally under their control. Our government readily complies, moving like a ratchet wrench, always in one direction, enlarging and expanding in response to civic grievances, ironically leading in turn to citizens' further experience of distance and powerlessness.

Citizens thus feel only tenuously connected to political representatives whose work was to "refine and enlarge" the public sentiment. Representatives in turn express their relative powerlessness in relation to a permanent bureaucracy staffed by career employees whose incentive is to maintain or enlarge their budgets and activity. More power accrues to the executive branch, which nominally controls the bureaucracy and through administrative rules can at least provide the appearance of responsiveness to a restive polity. Political rule by an increasingly unpopular legislature that theoretically derives its legitimacy from the people is replaced with commands and mandates of an executive whose office is achieved by massive influxes of lucre.¹ Liberalism claimed to replace arbitrary rule by distant and popularly unchosen leaders with responsive rule through elected public servants. Our electoral process today, however, appears more to be a Potemkin drama meant to convey the appearance of popular consent for a figure who will exercise incomparable arbitrary powers over domestic policy, international arrangements, and, especially, war-making.

Such a keenly felt distance and lack of control is not a condition to be solved by a better and more perfect liberalism—rather, this crisis of governance is the culmination of the liberal order. Liberalism proposed that occasional consent would suffice for the elevation of a leadership class composed of those of "fit characters"—namely those, in the incompara-

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ble words of Alexander Hamilton, concerned with “commerce, finance, negotiation and war, all the objects which have charms for minds governed by that passion.” The system’s architects intended to encourage a focus on private concerns among the citizenry—a *res idiotica* that they called a “republic.” If there is difficulty “keeping it,” a republic cannot survive in the absence of “public things.” The belief that liberalism could achieve *modus vivendi* by encouraging privatism has culminated in the nearly complete disassociation of the governing class and a citizenry without a *cives*.

ECONOMICS

Civic unhappiness is mirrored in economic discontent. Citizens are more likely to be called “consumers,” yet the liberty to buy every imaginable consumer good does little to assuage the widespread economic anxiety and discontent over waxing inequality—indeed, the assumption by economic leaders seems to be that increased purchasing power of cheap goods will compensate for the absence of economic security and the division of the world into generational winners and losers. There has always been, and probably always will be, economic inequality, but few civilizations appear to have so extensively perfected the separation of winners from losers or created such a massive apparatus to winnow those who will succeed from those who will fail. Marx once argued that the greatest source of economic discontent was not necessarily inequality but alienation—the separation of worker from product and the attendant loss of any connection with the goal and object of one’s efforts. Today’s economy not only

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maintains and extends this alienation but adds a profound new form of geographic alienation, the physical separation of beneficiaries of the globalized economy from those left behind. This leads the economic winners to combine lamentations of economic inequality with sotto voce denunciations of the backward views of those who condemn globalization's course. The losers, meanwhile, are consoled with the reminder that they are wealthy beyond compare to even the wealthiest aristocrats of an earlier age. Material comforts are a ready salve for the discontents of the soul.

As the reactions in the urban centers to the outcome of the Brexit vote and the election of Donald J. Trump evince, those same leaders are shocked that the terms of the social contract appear not to be acceptable to Walmart shoppers. Still, nothing can finally be done, for globalization is an inevitable process, unstoppable by any individual or nation. Whatever one thinks of economic integration, standardization, and homogenization, it is pointless to entertain thoughts of alternatives. One of globalization's cheerleaders, Thomas Friedman, has defined it in just such terms of inevitability:

It is the inevitable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before and in a way that is enabling the world to reach into individuals, corporations and nation-states farther, faster, deeper, cheaper than ever before.²

Whether people want the world “reaching into” individuals, corporations, and nation states is not a matter for discussion, for the process cannot be stopped. The economic system that

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simultaneously is both liberalism's handmaiden and its engine, like a Frankenstein monster, takes on a life of its own, and its processes and logic can no longer be controlled by people purportedly enjoying the greatest freedom in history. The wages of freedom are bondage to economic inevitability.

EDUCATION

The rising generation is indoctrinated to embrace an economic and political system they distinctly fear, filling them with cynicism toward their future and their participation in maintaining an order they cannot avoid but which they neither believe in nor trust. Far from feeling themselves to constitute the most liberated and autonomous generation in history, young adults believe less in their task at hand than Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the mountainside. They accede in the duties demanded of them by their elders, but without joy or love—only with a keen sense of having no other choice. Their overwhelming response to their lot—expressed in countless comments they have offered to me over the years describing their experience and expectations of their own education—is one of entrapment and “no exit,” of being cynical participants in a system that ruthlessly produces winners and losers even as it demands that they understand this system to be a vehicle of “social justice.” One can hardly be surprised that even the “winners” admit during frank moments that they are both swindlers and swindled. As one student described the lot of her generation to me:

We are meritocrats out of a survivalist instinct. If we do not race to the very top, the only remaining option is a bottomless

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pit of failure. To simply work hard and get decent grades doesn't cut it anymore if you believe there are only two options: the very top or rock bottom. It is a classic prisoner's dilemma: to sit around for 2–3 hours at the dining hall "shooting the breeze," or to spend time engaged in intellectual conversation in moral and philosophical issues, or to go on a date all detract from time we could be spending on getting to the top and, thus, will leave us worse off relative to everyone else. . . . Because we view humanity—and thus its institutions—as corrupt and selfish, the only person we can rely upon is our self. The only way we can avoid failure, being let down, and ultimately succumbing to the chaotic world around us, therefore, is to have the means (financial security) to rely only upon ourselves.³

Advanced liberalism is eliminating liberal education with keen intent and ferocity, finding it impractical both ideologically and economically. Students are taught by most of their humanities and social science professors that the only remaining political matter at hand is to equalize respect and dignity accorded to all people, even as those institutions are mills for sifting the economically viable from those who will be mocked for their backward views on trade, immigration, nationhood, and religious beliefs. The near unanimity of political views represented on college campuses is echoed by the omnipresent belief that an education must be economically practical, culminating in a high-paying job in a city populated by like-minded college graduates who will continue to reinforce their keen outrage over inequality while enjoying its bounteous fruits. Universities scramble to provide practical "learning outcomes," either by introducing a raft of new programs aimed to make students immediately employable or by rebranding and reorienting existing studies to tout their economic relevance. There is simply *no choice* to do otherwise in a globalizing, economi-

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cally competitive world. Few remark upon the fact that this locution becomes ever more common in advanced liberalism, the regime that was supposed to ensure endless free choice.

At the moment of liberalism's culmination, then, we see the headlong evacuation of the liberal arts. The liberal arts were long understood to be the essential form of education for a free people, especially citizens who aspired to self-government. The emphasis on the great texts—which were great not only or even because they were old but because they contained hard-won lessons on how humans learn to be free, especially free from the tyranny of their insatiable desires—has been jettisoned in favor of what was once considered “servile education,” an education concerned exclusively with money making and a life of work, and hence reserved for those who did not enjoy the title of “citizen.” Today's liberals condemn a regime that once separated freeman from serf, master from slave, citizen from servant, but even as we have ascended to the summit of moral superiority over our benighted forebears by proclaiming everyone free, we have almost exclusively adopted the educational form that was reserved for those who were deprived of freedom. And yet in the midst of our glorious freedom, we don't think to ask why we no longer have the luxury of an education whose very name—liberal arts—indicates its fundamental support for the cultivation of the free person.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Today's students are especially encouraged to study a discipline that is useful, particularly those related to STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Liberalism's tools

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for liberating humanity from various forms of bondage were especially to be achieved through transformations in politics, namely the representative system that today seems out of our control; economics, particularly market capitalism, whose globalizing logic cannot be resisted; and science and technology, arguably the greatest source of our liberation and simultaneously the reason for our imperiled environment, the deformations wrought by our own technologies on our personhood, and deep anxiety over our inability to control our own innovations. The modern scientific project of human liberation from the tyranny of nature has been framed as an effort to “master” or “control” nature, or as a “war” against nature in which its study would provide the tools for its subjugation at the hands of humans. Francis Bacon—who rejected classical arguments seeking to conform human nature to the natural order—instead urged human dominion over nature, noting that “the nature of things betrays itself more readily under the vexations of art than in its natural freedom.”

Even if we do not speak in these terms any more, the modern scientific project now dominates what we regard as useful and rewarding inquiry. Yet nature seems not to have surrendered. As the farmer and author Wendell Berry has written, if modern science and technology were conceived as a “war against nature,” then “it is a war in every sense—nature is fighting us as much as we are fighting it. And . . . it appears that we are losing.”⁴ Many elements of what we today call our environmental crisis—climate change, resource depletion, groundwater contamination and scarcity, species extinction—are signs of battles won but a war being lost. Today we are accustomed to arguing that we should follow the science in an

issue such as climate change, ignoring that our crisis is the result of long-standing triumphs of science and technology in which “following science” was tantamount to civilizational progress. Our carbon-saturated world is the hangover of a 150-year party in which, until the very end, we believed we had achieved the dream of liberation from nature’s constraints. We still hold the incoherent view that science can liberate us from limits while solving the attendant consequences of that project.

Meanwhile, we are increasingly shaped by technology that promises liberation from limits of place, time, and even identity. The computer in every person’s pocket has been shown to change the structure of our minds, turning us into different creatures, conforming us to the demands and nature of a technology that is supposed to allow expression of our true selves.⁵ How many of us can sit for an hour reading a book or simply thinking or meditating without an addict’s longing for just a hit of the cell phone, that craving that won’t allow us to think or concentrate or reflect until we’ve had our hit? This same technology that is supposed to connect us more extensively and intimately is making us more lonely, more apart.⁶ Devices increasingly replace humans in the workplace, apparently granting us liberty but making us our technology’s ward and helpmeet. And advances in the manipulation of nature inevitably raise the possibility of remaking humanity itself, potentially pitting Humanity 2.0 against those who refuse or can’t afford to shuck version 1.0.⁷

What is supposed to allow us to transform our world is instead transforming us, making us into creatures to which many, if not most of us, have not given our “consent.” It is

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making us ever more into the creatures that liberalism supposed was our nature in that “state of nature” that existed before the coming of civilization, law, and government. Ironically, but perhaps not coincidentally, the political project of liberalism is shaping us into the creatures of its prehistorical fantasy, which in fact required the combined massive apparatus of the modern state, economy, education system, and science and technology to make us into: increasingly separate, autonomous, nonrelational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone.

Liberalism’s success today is most visible in the gathering signs of its failure. It has remade the world in its image, especially through the realms of politics, economics, education, science, and technology, all aimed at achieving supreme and complete freedom through the liberation of the individual from particular places, relationships, memberships, and even identities—unless they have been chosen, are worn lightly, and can be revised or abandoned at will. The autonomous self is thus subject to the sovereign trajectory of the very forces today that are embraced as the tools of our liberation. Yet our liberation renders us incapable of resisting these defining forces—the promise of freedom results in thrallldom to inevitabilities to which we have no choice but to submit.

These tools were deployed to liberate individuals from the “givenness” of their condition, especially through “depersonalization” and “abstraction,” liberalism’s vision of liberty from particular duties, obligations, debts, and relationships. These ends have been achieved through the depersonaliza-

tion and abstraction advanced via two main entities—the state and the market. Yet while they have worked together in a pincer movement to render us ever more naked as individuals, our political debates mask this alliance by claiming that allegiance to one of these forces will save us from the depredations of the other. Our main political choices come down to which depersonalized mechanism will purportedly advance our freedom and security—the space of the market, which collects our billions upon billions of choices to provide for our wants and needs without demanding from us any specific thought or intention about the wants and needs of others; or the liberal state, which establishes depersonalized procedures and mechanisms for the wants and needs of others that remain insufficiently addressed by the market.

Thus the insistent demand that we choose between protection of individual liberty and expansion of state activity masks the true relation between the state and market: that they grow constantly and necessarily together. Statism enables individualism, individualism demands statism. For all the claims about electoral transformations—for “Hope and Change” or “Making America Great Again”—two facts are naggingly apparent: modern liberalism proceeds by making us both more individualist and more statist. This is not because one party advances individualism without cutting back on statism while the other does the opposite; rather, both move simultaneously in tune with our deepest philosophic premises.

Claiming to liberate the individual from embedded cultures, traditions, places, and relationships, liberalism has homogenized the world in its image—ironically, often fueled by

claims of “multiculturalism” or, today, “diversity.” Having successfully disembedded us from relationships that once made claims upon us but also informed our conception of selfhood, our sense of ourselves as citizens sharing a common fate and as economic actors sharing a common world, liberalism has left the individual exposed to the tools of liberation—leaving us in a weakened state in which the domains of life that were supposed to liberate us are completely beyond our control or governance. This suggests that all along, the individual was the “tool” of the liberal system, not—as was believed—vice versa.

The most challenging step we must take is a rejection of the belief that the ailments of liberal society can be fixed by realizing liberalism. The only path to liberation from the inevitabilities and ungovernable forces that liberalism imposes is liberation from liberalism itself. Both main political options of our age must be understood as different sides of the same counterfeit coin. Neither Progressivism’s faith that liberalism will be realized when we move forward toward the realization of liberalism’s promise nor Conservatism’s tale that American greatness will be restored when we reclaim the governing philosophy of our Constitution offers any real alternative to liberalism’s advance.

The past can instruct, but there can be no return and no “restoration.” Liberalism has ruthlessly drawn down a reservoir of both material and moral resources that it cannot replenish. Its successes were always blank checks written against a future it trusted it could repair. Conservatism rightly observes that progressivism’s destination is a dead end, and pro-

gressivism rightly decries conservatism's nostalgia for a time that cannot be restored. Conservatives and progressives alike have advanced liberalism's project, and neither as constituted today can provide the new way forward that must be discerned outside our rutted path.

Nor does reflecting upon what follows liberalism's self-destruction imply that we must simply devise its opposite, or deny what was of great and enduring value in the achievements of liberalism. Liberalism's appeal lies in its continuities with the deepest commitments of the Western political tradition, particularly efforts to secure liberty and human dignity through the constraint of tyranny, arbitrary rule, and oppression. In this regard, liberalism is rightly considered to be based on essential political commitments that were developed over centuries in classical and Christian thought and practice. Yet liberalism's innovations—ones that its architects believed would more firmly secure human liberty and dignity—which consisted especially of a redefinition of the ideal of liberty and a reconception of human nature, have undermined the realization of its stated commitments. Moving beyond liberalism is not to discard some of liberalism's main commitments—especially those deepest longings of the West, political liberty and human dignity—but to reject the false turn it made in its imposition of an ideological remaking of the world in the image of a false anthropology.

A rejection of the world's first and last remaining ideology does not entail its replacement with a new and doubtless not very different ideology. Political revolution to overturn a revolutionary order would produce only disorder and misery. A better course will consist in smaller, local forms of resistance:

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practices more than theories, the building of resilient new cultures against the anticulture of liberalism.

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the early decades of the nineteenth century, he observed that Americans tended to act differently from and better than their individualistic and selfish ideology. “They do more honor to their philosophy than to themselves,” he wrote. What’s needed now is not to perfect our philosophy any further but to again do more honor to ourselves. Out of the fostering of new and better selves, porously invested in the fate of other selves—through the cultivation of cultures of community, care, self-sacrifice, and small-scale democracy—a better practice might arise, and from it, ultimately, perhaps a better theory than the failing project of liberalism.