



The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics

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From Reader Review The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics for online ebook

Mars Cheung says

The general message was well-worth hearing although some of the points regarding the Roosevelt/Reagan dispositions were difficult to understand. I still gave it a four as I felt the points the author was trying to make were well worth listening to. As an individual who identifies as 'liberal'(more or less in the classical sense) who leans center-left, it's been a disappointing experience to see those on the left 'double-down' on identity politics. Engagement of diverse viewpoints has automatically been attributed as consorting with the enemy or as racist/sexist from the get-go. As outrage reigns, the nuances and complexities of today's issues left behind and friends/allies become alienated by shaming and virtue-signaling. The author theorizes how we came to be here and argues that, while some of the concerns are certainly legitimate, the means used to address them are tearing us apart as a people. It concludes with a few ideas on how the identity politics can be addressed. Worth a read, though to truly get the most out of it, I'd pair it with one of the Modern Political Thought classes from the Great Courses to give the reader a broader perspective on the principles of liberalism and conservatism. Overall, an 'ok' read.

Brad Lyerla says

THE ONCE AND FUTURE LIBERAL is a short polemic written for a politically liberal audience with the goal of reinvigorating the electoral prospects of the Democratic Party in the United States. ONCE AND FUTURE was written in response to Hillary Clinton's surprising loss last November. It is most decidedly not a book directed to a conservative audience. Yet, many of the reviews that one finds in GoodReads are from conservatives. Perhaps, even most of the reviews come from conservatives. This caused me to wonder that Lilla might be on to something to have stirred them up so. Now, after reading THE ONCE AND FUTURE LIBERAL, I conclude that, yes, he is on to something.

ONCE AND FUTURE is very short. It is less of a book and more of a pamphlet, truth be told. I read it on an e-reader and it is less than 70 pages formatted for that medium. There is a limit to how much can be accomplished in such a short document, of course. Don't expect the erudition of Lilla's scholarly works. Don't expect exhaustive research or comprehensive treatment of what ails liberalism in America currently. Instead, Lilla offers an argument sketched so broadly that there is little point in examining it closely.

His thoughts on what went wrong with the Democratic Party in the last 50 years are not the interesting part anyway. Plus, if you have read the dust cover of the book, you already know that Lilla blames identity politics for the current fortunes of the Democrats. He equates the Democrat's identity politics to the Republican's anti-government politics and concludes that they both have proven to be self-destructively individualistic and have left voters angry and grasping.

In the last 15 pages of his book, Lilla gets down to business. He calls this a time for Democrats to "Reset". He exhorts Democrats to revive and re-commit to the concept of citizenship as a way of re-invigorating Democratic politics. He wants to persuade us that a re-examination of what citizenship means offers great potential for a new vision of what our future as a nation can be.

Lilla offers four lessons for the resetting of the Democratic Party. First, he urges Democrats to give priority

to institutional politics over movement politics. That is, work inside government to achieve liberal goals. The obvious corollary to this is to do what it takes to win more elections at every level of government.

Second, he wants Democrats to give priority to democratic persuasion over self-expression. This seems a swipe at the latte elitism that infects liberal thinking from time to time. (In Chicago, where I live, we refer to this as the “lake front liberal” problem.) The ancient Greeks referred to it as demophobia. But I could be misstating it. It’s a concern that must be refined further.

Third, Lilla urges that Democrats give priority to citizenship over group or personal identity. Lilla demonstrates that identity politics has done much to undermine the Democratic Party with swing voters and centrists. I am not qualified to speak for Democrats, but Lilla has persuaded me that identity politics (group or personal) must be minimized for the Democrats to reverse their fortunes. However, Lilla understands that some liberals correctly will see this as a challenge to their pet projects. So, he warns us to expect some howling.

Finally, Lilla urges that we emphasize civic education. First create citizens, then convince them to be Democrats, he reasons.

It is this final thought that appeals most strongly to someone like me. ‘Let’s make citizens’ goes off in my head like the proverbial light bulb. Of course! Let’s take Lilla at his word. Making citizens is not empty sloganeering. Lilla has me convinced that citizenship is the place to start. Let’s have a national conversation about citizenship.

Extremists and disruptors on both sides, with their reflexive negativity for our “goddam” government and simpletons’ rhetoric “who needs it?”, will be at a disadvantage in that conversation. They might try to squash it. But that is all the more reason to make it happen. And we should thank Mark Lilla for starting us off.

Jay says

This is the worst response to the post-Trump crisis of the Democratic Party I have seen so far. The core issue with Lilla’s book is that he has a muddled and inconsistent understanding of relationship between individualism and Liberalism. This, for an author who is an intellectual historian and is a self-proclaimed Liberal, is extremely embarrassing.

Lilla critiques at length the individualism of Reagan’s politics, claiming that it destroyed the concept of ‘citizenship’, which entailed both rights and duties for every American. Instead, he says that Reagan ushered in the era of atomized suburban families, who would reach their apogee in the Tea Party. The maxim of Reagan and his libertarian descendants was ‘government is good for nothing, so leave us alone!’

He then paints identity politics as the Left’s counter-punch to Reagan’s bleak and self-interested system. However, Lilla claims that identity politics lost its way: it started out as mass group politics to correct injustices, (the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s suffrage movement), but devolved into college students discussing the oppression of their own racial or gender categories. Therefore, he claims that identity politics is only a surface-level response, keeping the individualistic core of Reaganism while substituting its top-level values.

Lilla’s solution is to return to ‘citizenship’ as the basis for American political life. He believes that the

problems identity politics calls out in American society — systemic racism, sexual violence and patriarchy, homophobia — can all be solved through pragmatic politics and the idea of ‘equal protection under the law’.

This, for me, is where Lilla’s intellectual dishonesty begins to seep in. He understands enough about the claims of the identity politics movements to know that nothing short of a fundamental restructuring of American society can solve their demands. For example,

- * To protect black people, both casual and systemic racism will have to be purged from American society.
- * To protect women and queer people, the basis of private life (the heterosexual nuclear family) will have to be replaced, or at least supplemented.
- * Reparations to Native Americans may require giving back the land.

Not everything can be corrected through legislation, civil rights enforcement, and a civic ethos. If Mark Lilla expects there to be social justice, then he cannot comfortably live in his Brooklyn brownstone while his homeownership gentrifies his neighborhood and he steps over homeless people on the street.

Further, Lilla thinks that there is no vision of communal life being put forward to challenge Reaganist individualism. But he does not understand that identity politics, except in their most vapid format, *are* visions of communal life. He claims dishonestly that intellectual politics are all about the specialness of the individual — invoking the stupid cajoles of alt-right commentators about ‘snowflakes’ on college campuses. Yet he is either unaware of the intellectual legacy of afro-futurism, ecofeminism, and queer liberationism (to name only a few), or has intentionally chosen to overlook them. These are all visions of how we should live together in society, how we would define citizenship, and what is expected of each member of our community.

I have some other unorganized thoughts on Lilla’s book, which I will leave below:

- * He has a silly reverence for ‘pragmatic’ politics, while forgetting that mass movements are what push politicians to do things for the people. For example, his description of LBJ is hagiographic when discussing the Voting Rights Act. Lilla says that MLK’s movement would have died without any achievements had LBJ not been willing to make deals and compromise with Congress to pass legislation restoring rights to black Americans. But this is silly: to think that LBJ would have done anything for blacks had the South not been foaming with riots and mass demonstrations is nonsense.
- * Lilla seems confused about whether he believes individualism is a recent phenomenon in America (introduced by Reagan) or is the long-running core of American political thought, (introduced by the Calvinist settlers of the continent). Or, if he is making a more nuanced argument about the origins of individualism, it was lost on me.
- * His critique of identity politics is one-sided and hollow: Lilla presents the best arguments for Liberalism against an ill-formed presentation of identity politics. (He talks about college freshmen’s arguments about race, instead of the arguments of intellectuals like bell hooks or Ta-Nehisi Coates. Lilla never presents a substantial critique of Liberalism, which he would have discovered after five minutes of research in any branch of an identity politics movement.)
- * If you want to read about the value of citizenship and overlapping consensus in politics, just go read Rawls. At least then you will have an intelligent mind to grapple with.

Dan Graser says

This short, cogent, and at times provocative examination of several issues in leftist identity politics is the sort of thing that should have been circulated decades ago. Being more of an Independent I can't totally

understand how much of this discussion could be surprising or revolutionary for someone of a leftist disposition but if it effects some much needed change is how their discourse and campaigns are run then I'm all for it. I don't want my review to seem longer than the work itself (just over 140 very small pages) so to share some of his more salient points:

"Identity is not the future of the left. It is not a force hostile to neoliberalism. Identity is Reaganism for lefties."

After explaining how fishing normally works - "The identity liberals' approach to fishing is to remain on shore, yelling at the fish about the historical wrongs visited on them by the sea, and the need for aquatic life to renounce its privilege. All in the hope that the fish will collectively confess their sins and swim to shore to be netted. If that is your approach to fishing, you had better become a vegan."

"In democratic politics it is suicidal to set the bar for agreement higher than necessary for winning adherents and elections."

Perhaps my favorite issue discussed is the increasing need for a revitalization of the concept of shared citizenry. Frequently that is a term only brought up during stupid debates as to who is a citizen and who isn't or at minimum just generates very old-fashioned notions of civics classes and such. The focus here is on what it means to participate in the governing of a country as one of its citizens, a membership we all share as Americans. That being, maintaining your awareness of fundamental flaws in our system based on varying identities but functioning as a unified political citizenry to make the case for the development of political solutions that work to benefit as many communities as possible, all the while not allowing the fetishizing of every bit of individuality to divide what could otherwise be an effective coalition working towards a shared objective. You may be thinking that is what politicians have been talking about for a long time, and sometimes they do in one or two speeches, however their actions, policies, and the environment on campuses and social media doesn't even come close to this concept.

A quick and well-written manifesto that probably would have had a much greater impact during the latter part of the, "Reagan Dispensation," for the American left.

Jack Wolfe says

Fact: There are currently 34 Republican state Governors.

Fact: There are currently 32 states in which Republicans control both houses of Congress (there's also weird ol' Nebraska, which has only one house of Congress... Republicans control that one, too, of course).

Fact: There are Republican majorities in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

Fact: There is a Republican president in office. He's fucking insane

Fact: There is a definite rightward slant to the U.S. Supreme Court, and to the nation's judiciary at large.

Fact: Liberals cannot win fucking elections for shit

Mark Lilla has written a book that left-leaning people need to read, plain and simple. Most lefties will disagree with some of it-- a lot of us will disagree with a lot of it. Many of us will write it off based on a single poorly chosen word or phrase, like a fucking parody of the sort of easily offended Puritan liberal college-educated New Yorker Lilla criticizes all book long (I've already seen several people take umbrage with Lilla's use of the term "mau-mauing"... which might not have been a wise choice, on his part, but STILL, who cares... it's one phrase, gang). I have problems with Lilla's view, too. But the point of Lilla's book is that our problems with each other, as liberals, should not get in the way of crafting a vision for society that incorporates as many folks as possible under the umbrella of citizenship. Somewhere along the

way, we alienated a lot of people in a lot of places. In Lilla's eyes, this doesn't mean Democratic ideals-- equality, racial justice, etc-- have lost their luster. It means that we've forgotten how to talk to people-- how to actually persuade people that our side is the one that cares, that our side is about bringing us all up, together.

Most of the issues Lilla has with the modern left are rhetorical. We don't say "we." We emphasize the labels of race and gender and sexuality and play down our commonalities as Americans. We insist on our moral superiority and look at other views not as political opinions, but as evidence of irredeemable barbarity. But Lilla also addresses-- and attacks-- the persistent interest of liberals in protest and "movements" at the expense of campaigning, forming alliances, voting, etc-- i.e. the hard work of politics that pays off in winning elections. As Lilla says, it's not that marches and parades and energy and making signs aren't important. It's that, minus liberal governments, those things can never really attend to people's needs. Until liberals have real political power, they can never inspire real social gains. Obtaining that power is gonna require changes from all of us. It does not mean running away from our beautiful multicultural coalition... And it definitely doesn't mean going outside and shooting a deer in the fucking head, or whatever hillbilly field trip you wanna go on. But it might mean rethinking our language, our ways of framing debates, our methods of persuasion. And it absolutely means VOTING for NOT DONALD TRUMP, which DOESN'T MEAN VOTING FOR JILL STEIN AUGHHHH

Jim Coughenour says

My tepid rating has as much to do with my own weariness as with anything Lilla writes. At the most general level – and there's not much specific in this short book – I agree with Lilla's argument.

What's extraordinary – and appalling – about the past four decades of our history is that our politics have been dominated by two ideologies that encourage and even celebrate the *unmaking* of citizens. On the right, an ideology that questions the existence of a common good and denies our obligation to help fellow citizens, through government action if necessary. On the left, an ideology institutionalized in colleges and universities that fetishizes our individual and group attachments, applauds self-absorption, and casts a shadow of suspicion over any invocation of a universal democratic *we*.

In short: greedy bigots vs. sanctimonious idiots.

I don't think either the right or the left has a monopoly on intolerance or self-absorption. I grew up in the conservative evangelical Midwest; I've lived in San Francisco for the past 25 years. Lilla is a liberal, and as Christians used to say, "let judgment begin in the house of God." His harshest words are for his own kind, although his criticism will only wound the intentionally thin-skinned. Given the spirit of the moment, his focus is identity politics. Here's another capsule summary, with an echo of René Girard:

What replaces argument, then, is taboo. At times our more privileged campuses can seem stuck in the world of archaic religion. Only those with an approved identity status are, like shamans, allowed to speak on certain matters. Particular groups – today the transgendered – are given temporary totemic significance. Scapegoats – today conservative political speakers – are duly designated and run off campus in a purging ritual. Propositions become pure or impure, not true or false.

Shamans made me laugh out loud. I came out a few years before AIDS hit the gay community. Identity

politics were more celebration than protest, and even protestors (often drag queens etc.) were alive to the sense of comedy inherent to *all* identities. I remember an ancient argument with my father, who was ranting about the Gay Agenda. You're right, I said, there is one – and it can be summed up in two words: "equal rights." In the right contexts identity politics opens the door to everyone, celebrates diversity and inclusion. But it's not enough: the practical politics that guarantee protection for everyone require hard work, organizing at local and state levels, which admittedly isn't as much fun as cavorting around statues or pronouns. As Oscar observed, the problem with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings.

As I write, a merry band of anti-white-supremacists are making their way down Market Street with all the carnival capers and mockery the supremacists deserve. But already these right vs left symbolic battles have exhausted their potency. Like Lilla, I'm still "liberal" enough to believe that everyone, on the coasts and in the heartland, religious and atheist, of all racial and gender blends, have more in common than not – and that we have a common enemy in the plutocracy that is dispossessing us all.

Alex Stroshine says

A bracing repudiation by a centrist liberal of the identity politics that have engulfed the political left. Mark Lilla argues that activist liberalism's obsession with identity (women, black, LGBTQ, etc...) has handicapped and hindered the Democrats' ability to offer a broad-range vision of the common good for Americans. Lilla uses religious vocabulary, speaking of the "Roosevelt Dispensation" that stretched from the 1930s-1960s and that focused on New Deal initiatives that bound Americans together, followed by the "Reagan Dispensation" that promoted rugged self-reliance and a libertarian attitude that has now exhausted itself. America is awaiting a new dispensation and with the Trump "administration" flailing wildly amidst faux-pas after tweeted faux-pas, the political left seem in a prime position to offer it, as long as they can transcend tribal identities and be more open to dialogue and compromise with those who differ from them on hot-button issues. Though I would not consider myself a liberal, I do share Lilla's belief that government is often necessary to provide programs like health care and I think Lilla writes fairly (he admits that if identity is largely about social construction, then Rachel Dolezal and her supporters have a point in claiming that she is black). As other reviewers have already commented, this book has strong "explanatory power" for our cultural moment and how we got from the 1960s to the present.

Cameron Bernard says

I imagine this book will be mocked by many. However, Lilla's call for our politics to think and feel through the lens of "citizenship" could be an amelioration for our discourse. Doubt enters when we ask from where will this mood originate.

I am not sure Lilla's argument will win his party over. But everyone should at least consider his arguments. We all need to start living outside of our own heads. And despite how hard it can be, those who seek to be politically active must learn to play the game first in order to change it long term.

Jason says

If Al Gore had not already taken the title, Mark Lilla could have easily called his book 'An Inconvenient

Truth.'

'The Once and Future Liberal' is a damning indictment of modern liberalism's infatuation with identity politics and its compulsion to segment and hyphenate Americans.

Lilla, himself a liberal and academic, shows how liberalism has veered so far off track and the far-reaching consequences this has had on American politics. The author lays out simple remedies for a return to relevance and viability for American liberalism. Unfortunately, Lilla's criticisms will likely fall on deaf ears or be drowned out in a chorus of protests towards another "entitled white male."

'The Once and Future Liberal' is one of the most important political books I've read in years. Any one who remotely cares about the course of American politics should read it.

Laura Little says

A slim incendiary volume that expands upon Lilla's infamous November 2016 NYTimes op-ed, "The End of Identity Liberalism." It may be impossible to read this book neutrally -- and, as a liberal historian deeply disenchanted with the American Left, Lilla certainly writes with the all fervor of a Calvinist preacher trying to save the damned. And it is easy to critique Lilla's glibly summarized history of the past 80 years of American politics. Still, this book is a fascinating read with some critical content to engage with, particularly for those with a liberal bent.

--Lilla posits two great American "dispensations": one liberal "Roosevelt Dispensation" covering the New Deal up until the late 60s and declining into the 70s, and one conservative "Reagan Dispensation" that continues to mark the American moment. The former has the hallmarks of engaged citizenship -- Lilla harkens often back to the "we" of FDR and JFK -- while the latter pronounced a new orthodoxy focused on hyperindividualism, capitalism, and a dismantling of the state. While critics (notably Beverly Gage at NYT, who likely took a hatchet to this book) can easily point out the missed nuances in summarizing these two movements, Lilla effectively draws the contrast in a way that can be discussed over the dinner table.

--The book deftly contrasts 60s era protest with today's "Facebook slactivism." Essentially, Lilla argues that the 60s era was focused outside the self ("Young people who were incensed by the denial of voting rights out there, the Vietnam War out there, nuclear proliferation out there, capitalism out there, colonialism out there"), while today's generation is far more focused on self-discovery of the inner self, and trying to make the outside world reflect a self-referential orthodoxy of identity. Lilla also traces some of this shift in part due to the political education of liberal America moving from factory shop floors to America's (elite) universities. Lilla goes for style over substance here at times -- claiming liberals need more mayors and fewer marchers, for instance. I would have preferred a much more in-depth treatment of the topic of activism of past and present, but the topic hangs together with Lilla's overall theme: that liberals today have become too focused on narrow identity politics to be effective as a national party (to say nothing of state and local elections.)

[An interesting aside: Lilla actually opens an interesting line of argument about Marxism, which he admires (at least narrowly) for lifting laborers, farmers, and the like out of their narrow concerns and into the "we" of class consciousness. He later posits that it may be progressives such as Bernie Sanders who are more likely to move liberals beyond the narrow concerns of identity groups. I wish he had developed this more, given there are fascinating implications for a new strong-left-of-center politics.]

--Lilla is at his best when critiquing political romanticism, purity testing and "atonement", fractional in-fighting, and "evangelism" of the Left and reminding the reader of the only true goal: getting officials elected at all levels of government. The most forceful line of the entire book can be summarized thus: "Identity liberalism has ceased being a political project and has morphed into an evangelical one. The difference is this: evangelism is about speaking truth to power. Politics is about seizing power to defend the truth." He goes further, even suggesting that in being in thrall to identity politics is merely the Left's version of Reaganism (I can surely imagine many liberal-leaning heads exploding at the thought.) It's a persuasive line of argument, albeit one that leaves Lilla open to criticism for not engaging the Right's own identity politics whatsoever. I'll take it that was not his aim for the book.

--Lilla makes some pithy claims that, by nature of his position, needed more support than he granted in "The Once and Future Liberal." Most seriously, he outright dismisses BLM as a productive social movement. I would think that a liberal scholar would at least critically analyze BLM, if not outright sympathize with its aims. While supportive of 60s era progressive causes (Civil Rights Movement, first/second wave feminism), he finds no identity-based causes useful today. Why? Is that really the case? I expected more here.

--Lilla continues to seek the answer to identity based politics (and its failures) in common purposes, citizenship, and institutions (and perhaps more "big tent" politics.) This argument is persuasive and evocative, but Lilla is long on style and short on tactical solutions. How should Democratic candidates respond to identity-based social movements like BLM? How do liberals balance the needs of the vulnerable minority groups (e.g. transgender people) against the common "we" -- particularly when the conservative Right is actively legislating against those minority groups? How far should liberals go to not alienate white moderates when research is demonstrating more white Americans are seeing racial equality politics as a "zero sum game?" Again, Lilla is silent.

If you are seeking a book that parenthetically explains how we got to the current political moment of Trump and fractional identity politics, particularly on the Left -- and are willing to objectively seek content amid writing that often comes off as a jeremiad against the Left -- this book accomplishes that. If you're a young liberal looking to get motivated to a bigger purpose, this book may either incense you or inspire you (or both). If you're a conservative worried about what Trump's America presages for America -- this book is also an interesting (if unintentional) orthogonal read about the Right. All in all, I came away from this book deep in thought and ready to seek political action outside myself -- which I think was Lilla's goal.

Jim Robles says

Wow! Between this and "Fragile by Design - The Political Origins of Banking Crises & Scarce Design," by Charles W. Calomiris and Stephen H. Haber, it is hard to offer any defense of the performance of Baby Boomer progressives.

What Lilla misses, in evaluating the rise of Trump, is the unwillingness of Baby Boomers, across the political spectrum, to share. He does capture what John Rawls was getting at with his Concept of an Overlapping Consensus.

Trump is the apotheosis of Baby Boomer rule. Our consensus has always been that we would have great benefits (Social Security and Medicare) or ourselves and the elderly (protected by the Left), maintain a strong defense (bipartisan consensus), and not pay for it (tax increased blocked by the Right).

The concomitant squeeze on discretionary spending has prevented any investment in the future (infrastructure, research, training, education, etc. -- after all, how would it benefit us during our entitled lives?) or any succoring to those left behind by (mostly) technology and (somewhat) globalization.

Trump's ascendance is a direct consequence of that: he listened to those we ignored. The Left and the Right are equally culpable in his election. His policies are the apotheosis of Baby Boomer entitlement. Go Boomers!!

I found this "brief but brilliant book" in:

Opinions -- The Democrats should rethink their immigration absolutism

By Fareed Zakaria Opinion writer August 3

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinio...>

and in:

"But as Mark Lilla points out in his essential new book, "The Once and Future Liberal," many identity communities are not even real communities. They're just a loose group of individuals, narcissistically exploring some trait in their self that others around them happen to share."

Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

In Praise of Equipose

David Brooks SEPT. 1, 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/op...>

"The most important lesson is this:

that for two generations America has been without a political vision of its destiny" (p. 99).

"And the work doesn't stop once legislation is passed. One must keep winning elections to defend the gains that social movements have contributed to" (p. 110).

"As most historians agree, the unintended consequence was to marginalize the blue-collar unions and public officials who had been pillars of the party structure, and replace them with educated activists tied to single issues or to particular presidential campaigns" (p. 112).

"Black Lives Matter is a textbook example of how not to build solidarity" (p. 129).

"Whatever might be said about the legitimate concerns of Trump voters, they have no excuse for voting for him" (p. 133).

Jeanette says

He is a liberal who understands the "we" as a national entity for core necessity within successful political movements. Having incredible insight and also applications for this "we" surety in the American past, he STILL does not role model its core connotation.

Regardless all liberals or progressives should read this book because it bottom line delineated how/ why you can't impress and convince what you hold in disdain.

It's not any easy read despite the length.

There are many quotes that are worth listing, especially upon past party core platforms and present era college learning methods and "argument think". An individual self identity building taught philosophy which comes out of a rebel based type of romanticism.

It's going to probably fall on deaf ears since the divisions scored by identity based political agendas seem to be deeper the longer and more angrily expressed. The anger feeds upon itself for the expression. That is never realized by the angry.

Lastly, he doesn't begin to form any cohesive substance for what the new Democratic Party would use for the uniting, POSITIVE agenda of inspiration. He rather backs himself in a corner intellectually, IMHO. Because in his own rigidity he preaches and does NOT hold any capacity for compromise. His own role modeling chides and is a 180 from what he advises in the copy.

And that is essential- compromise without the mean superiority. But as far as his present evaluation of political liberalism right now in the USA, he is correct.

Conor says

This is the Mark Lilla book I was hoping for when I read *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction*.

It discusses the rhetorics of the era of FDR, when we worked together to build this country, and the era of Ronald Reagan, when the individual was the hero. Lilla seems to think we are at the cusp, perhaps in a palate-cleansing period, and won't say what he thinks is coming next. He certainly loathes Trump and understands him to be dangerous.

But he warns us away from identity politics. It is not a winning strategy, we are told. We can be as woke as we like, but a predicate assumption to supporting any political position is the power to implement it, and on this front the Left in this country has been woefully, if not irretrievably outflanked.

I'm not sure I join Lilla in his mocking denunciation of "social justice warriors," and I wonder how he proposes that black people bring light to their brutalization by the state without saying something akin to "Black Lives Matter," which Lilla derides as hopelessly counterproductive. But I do think the American Left needs to seriously rethink its rhetoric and strategy if it ever wants to regain power in this country. Sadly, Lilla doesn't really provide us with any answers--even the class-based call for unity he derides.

Still, I think he's onto something that I've been seeing in the sharpest commentaries on the rise of the alt-right, white nationalism, and American anomie. Things are getting desperate and this could be progressivism's last best shot.

Charles says

Mark Lilla has been a bad, bad boy. He has dared to point out the feet of clay upon which stand King Liberal, and he, like Cassandra, will not be thanked. Still, this short book is an excellent political analysis,

and it points the way, if only loosely, to a wholly new order of things, thus starting to answer my perennial question, “What is next?”

Lilla’s project is to rescue modern liberalism from the dead-end sewer of identity politics. His purpose in doing so is, in part, simple intellectual coherency, but mostly it is an exercise in demanding that liberals focus on regaining actual power. The book’s main flaw is that it is half a loaf—it shows what is wrong with the Left’s current program, but other than vague, aspirational calls for focusing on an undefined “citizenship,” it does not explain what the new liberal program leading to real power should be, only what it shouldn’t be. This is not nothing, but the argument needs its other half.

Lilla begins by arguing that liberalism has lost America. He doesn’t sugarcoat this conclusion. In fact, it’s more like he shoves it down the throat of his readers, yelling “Take your medicine!” His analysis of where liberalism is today revolves around Lincoln’s well-known mantra, “Public sentiment is everything.” American public sentiment has moved rightward for decades, and thus “[L]iberals have become America’s ideological third party, lagging behind self-declared independents and conservatives, even among young voters and certain minority groups. We have been repudiated in no uncertain terms.” Why this is, why the response of liberals so far has been exactly wrong, and what that response should instead be, are the subjects of “The Once and Future Liberal.”

Nowhere does Lilla explain the derivation of his title. This would have been an informative exercise, because very few members of his target audience probably realize where it comes from. The title deliberately echoes T.H. White’s 1958 novel, once famous, and now forgotten except by superannuated liberals, “The Once and Future King,” which reimagined the King Arthur legend as political didacticism. To liberals of a certain age, I think (not being of that age, or liberal, I cannot be sure), White’s book is wrapped up with the mendacious Camelot legend spun around John Kennedy after his assassination. It conjures up, for them, a golden time when the future was brilliant, they were young, and liberals were in control—as it happens, also the time when their political redoubt, the “Roosevelt Dispensation” identified by Lilla, began crumbling. The end point of the Arthurian legend, of course, is that Arthur sleeps, in Avalon, whence he shall return. Lilla presumably means to evoke that liberalism will, or can, similarly return, having reclaimed Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. (Given that Arthur’s purpose in returning is to save Britain from the ravages of foreign conquerors, we can hope that across the water the actual Arthur will return any day now to kick the savages out of Londinium, and Rotherham.)

Lilla’s historical frame is that of two past dispensations, the liberal Roosevelt Dispensation (from the 1930s to the 1970s), and the conservative Reagan Dispensation, from 1980 until today, which is “being brought to a close by an opportunistic, unprincipled populist” (i.e., Trump). “Each dispensation brought with it an inspiring image of America’s destiny and a distinctive catechism of doctrines that set the terms of political debate.” The Roosevelt Dispensation was focused on collective action with a positive gloss on government; the Reagan Dispensation on individualism, with a negative gloss on government. Each reflected the public sentiment of the time. And at the dawning of the Reagan Dispensation, instead of regrouping “to develop a fresh political vision of the country’s shared destiny,” liberals lost themselves in the swamp of “the politics of identity, losing a sense of what we share as citizens and what binds us a nation.”

Why, on an intellectual level, is focusing on individual identities a “swamp”? Because it feeds atomistic individualism, which is corrosive of community, which undercuts political power. Although Lilla seems to think that conservatives are all, and are all necessarily, cut-rate versions of Robert Nozick’s pristine libertarianism, this is not true, and in many ways Lilla’s core intellectual points are identical to those made in recent years by many conservatives. While he doesn’t use precisely the same concepts or vocabulary, in this analysis Lilla sounds much the same notes as Robert Nisbet did in 1953’s “The Quest for Community,” or

Ryszard Legutko did in last year's "The Demon in Democracy." Those books attack excessive individualism and its necessary result, the substitution of the state for community (and consequent state coercion to suppress any private denial of those rights). Lilla, very similarly, complains that liberals focus far too much on individual rights. "Almost all the ideas or beliefs or feelings that once muted the perennial American demand for individual autonomy have evaporated. Personal choice. Individual rights. Self-definition. We speak these words as if a wedding vow." In part, Lilla blames Reagan, but mostly he blames society and liberals for a turning away from communitarianism. But philosophically, this is a much deeper strand in Western thought than Lilla thinks. It did not begin in 1980; it is plausible that the spiral into atomistic individuality is the necessary, inevitable consequence of the Enlightenment itself. However, Lilla is not wrong about where liberalism is today.

Whatever the intellectual origins of excessive individualism, which he also attributes to romanticism and New Left community organizers, Lilla is unsparing in his acidic treatment of modern Democrat idols and their focus. "Hope . . . in what? Yes we can! . . . do what?" "[Liberals] began to speak instead [of citizenship] of their personal identities in terms of the inner homunculus, a unique little thing composed of parts tinted by race, sex, and gender." Lilla attacks elevation of supposedly oppressed groups as treating them "like shamans Particular groups—today the transgendered—are given temporary totemic significance." Excoriating argumentation that begins "Speaking as an X . . .", Lilla notes, "One never says, 'Speaking as a gay Asian, I feel incompetent to judge this matter.'" He viciously attacks Black Lives Matters as a group that only know how to "use Mau-Mau tactics to put down dissent" (again, referring to the Mau-Mau dates him, but more importantly, in most circles this metaphor would be viewed as overtly racist, since the Mau-Mau were black Kenyan terrorists who killed mostly other black Kenyans). This is fun stuff for a conservative to read while imagining the reaction among liberals reading all this (pass the popcorn!). The reader (with pleasure, in my case) pictures Lilla grinding his teeth in rage and frustration, knowing that most of his audience is going to recoil, point an accusing finger at him, and shriek "Unclean! Unclean!," just before the stones start to fly through the air—but he still grimly forges on with his exposition, a secular Man of Sorrows.

The author is spot on in his analysis of specifically how liberals got to the political box canyon they now find themselves in. Beginning in the 1970s, as the country turned away from the Roosevelt Dispensation, liberalism started to rely on a form of social individualism (different from Reaganite economic individualism), in part because it seemed politically powerful, and in part because of ideology—because it was a form of religion, or what Lilla calls "evangelicalism." This religious impulse, not practicality, is what Lilla defines as a key American characteristic. When they lacked the political power to accomplish these goals of liberation, instead of building that power, liberals instead turned to the courts to "circumvent the legislative process." Consensus was ignored in favor of judicial fiat, which reinforced (or more accurately, proved) "the right's claim that the judiciary was an imperial preserve of [liberal] educated elites." As a result, "Even the slogans changed, from 'We shall overcome' – a call to action – to 'I'm here, I'm queer' – a call to nothing in particular." Liberals captured the universities—but Lilla claims that avenue has been a dead end for liberals, since universities have become a massive navel-gazing enterprise alienated from public sentiment—"a pseudo-political theater for the staging of operas and melodramas."

Of course, a necessary part of this basket of premises is that liberals don't have power, that they lost it in their descent to idiotarian identity politics. But that's at least partially false. Lilla says that the electorate has moved rightward, which is true, but he never acknowledges that during the Reagan Dispensation, on social and cultural matters, liberals have had an unbroken record of success in achieving their goals (except for gun control). Mostly, this has been done by controlling the courts (which Lilla bizarrely implies are controlled by conservatives), and which he elsewhere criticizes as inadequate to build real power. Maybe it is inadequate, but there certainly appears to be no chance of a rollback of liberal cultural victories, so democratic politics or not, nothing succeeds like success. Yes, electorally liberalism has "been repudiated in no uncertain terms."

Yes, public sentiment has moved rightward. But in terms of power, at least social and cultural power, liberalism has seized total control, imposing its will upon the electorate and an opposed public, and continues to hold its citadel against all comers.

None of this undercuts Lilla's intellectual point—that identity politics is a “me too” political philosophy, “mesmerized by symbols,” with both nothing to offer and a shattering effect on creating the political coalitions mostly necessary to actually gain power and achieve political ends. The result is a mass of individuals who are too hung up on the momentous importance of their own (mostly stupid and false) identitarian thoughts to even consider lasting coalitions with others to achieve broader political goals. Such a person “can hardly be expected to have an enduring political attachment to others, and certainly cannot be expected to hear the call of duty toward them.” At some point, whether that point has arrived or not, this must erode liberal political power.

One problem for Lilla's recommendations, though, with their pivot around recapturing “public sentiment” for liberalism, is that in Lincoln's time public sentiment was educated. Men and women stood all day in the blazing sun to wait for, and then to listen for hours to, the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Their “sentiment” was well-informed and closely reasoned; anyone purporting to advocate public policy based on his feelings or his identity, or without being able to defend his position would have been laughed at and ignored. Yes, identity politics is irrational and the antithesis of reasoning, but it's only one example of the wholesale degradation of political thought in the modern world, and the our inability to demand coherent, precise thought from our leaders. And, as well, to recognize that there are leaders, and there are followers, and distinguishing the two is important. No doubt Lilla would be an excellent leader, and his thought is closely reasoned and coherent. But on the Left, he is very close to a minority of one, and the Right is not exactly outstripping the Left by much on this score. Thus, while “recapturing public sentiment” sounds noble and fine, the simple phrase elides that recapturing it requires the remaking of our entire system of political thought, a much less easy task.

Some “factual” portions of the book are just delusional. For example, Lilla claims the right dominates the approval of judicial nominations. That may be true during Republican presidencies; the opposite was true under Obama. And no matter who dominates judicial nominations, it's only Democrats who get the results they want from the judges they appoint—as Lilla himself notes, in the context of pointing out liberal over-reliance on this as a method of achieving political goals. (Lilla also bizarrely implies that Republicans are to blame for making judicial nominations a partisan process; the name “Bork” appears nowhere.) Other claims are less central but equally delusional. For example, Lilla relies heavily as an object lesson on the legend that Republicans, starting in the 1980s, developed a massive infrastructure to train conservative young people, “a vast library of popular books and academic policy studies. They set up summer camps where college students could read Alexander Hamilton and Friedrich von Hayek, and learn to connect them.” And so on, positing a massively funded enormous campaign with its tentacles everywhere. This is nearly totally mythical. I was myself heavily involved in this world in the mid- to late-1980s, and it was tiny (especially compared to the unbelievable resources and programs the Left had (and has), supported and buttressed by the universities, the press, and innumerable “public interest” groups). Such conservative activities (i.e., those not focused on retail politics) involved maybe a few hundred young people, nationwide, at a time, most of whom I knew personally. Yes, the Heritage Foundation was a useful source for conservative policy ideas, before it became a hack group, and yes, the Federalist Society has been extremely successful. But beyond those, I hate to break it to Lilla, this conservative ecosystem of the Reagan Dispensation that he holds up to liberals as an ideal is a chimera.

In the end, though, the biggest flaw in the book is that the reader is never told what, exactly, is the political program of the “future liberal”? We are told that America needs to work to elect more liberals, with a new

(liberal) political vision—but then that we cannot “shop for” one, because, “Political vision emerges of its own accord out of the timely encounter of a new social reality, ideas that capture this reality, and leaders capable of linking idea and reality in the public mind so that people feel the connection. . . . The advent of leaders blessed with that gift, like Roosevelt and JFK and Reagan, is as impossible to predict as the return of the Messiah. All we can do is prepare.” Leaving aside the poker-game tell of the aging liberal, the ludicrous yet reflexive assertion that JFK was a visionary leader in the mold of Roosevelt or Reagan, I agree with this, and I have been pushing the need to prepare until the Man of Destiny arrives for some time now—although the program I hope he pushes is pretty much the direct opposite of what Lilla hopes for. But regardless, this vague, aspirational, waiting-focused prescription isn’t likely to tear away today’s American liberals, caught in the pleasurable virtual reality of their own supreme self-importance, from their golden opium dream of Emancipatory Xanadu, into the cold light of compromise and building political bridges and power.

This is a short book, so maybe Lilla is merely trying to stay focused, but the reader suspects the lack of specifics is because Lilla, like Wile E. Coyote, has taken his idea, sped off with it, and when he looked down, realized that he had nowhere to go, or nowhere good to go. My guess is that Lilla suffers from much the same problem as Joan Williams in “White Working Class”—he doesn’t actually believe in political compromise, but rather in projecting the appearance of it in order to gain power from rubes. Thus, the sole example he gives of actual political compromise, or says he gives, is abortion. He admits, apparently without shame, “I am an absolutist on abortion. It is the social issue I most care about, and I believe it should be safe and legal virtually without condition on every square inch of American soil.” But he recognizes that “I should find a civil way to agree to disagree and make a few compromises in order to keep the liberal [voters] in my own party and voting with me on other issues.” What compromises does he identify? Perhaps making partial-birth abortion illegal? Limiting abortions in the second trimester? Parental notification? Waiting periods? No. Rather, merely that Robert Casey should have been allowed to speak at the 1992 Democratic National Convention (a quarter century ago), to “present a pro-life plank to the platform, even though he knew it would be defeated.” The plank’s certain defeat is something not to be challenged, of course—rather, Lilla’s only wish is that the lapdog should be allowed to jump up and down a few times, or even whimper a little, before being stuck in the corner. And pro-life women who were excluded from the 2017 anti-Trump march in Washington should have been allowed to march—not, of course, to push being pro-life, but to be anti-Trump. These are not real compromises. It is obvious that Lilla would deny both Casey and pro-life women any platform if there was any chance their views would actually be listened to and implemented.

What is more, Lilla never identifies any area, any area at all, where the radical individualism that stokes identity politics should be cut back—either by government mandate, or by the choice of individuals to be more communitarian. Elsewhere, Lilla has said “Politics . . . is not about getting recognition for certain groups who have problems; it is about acquiring power to help them.” But help them how? Modern liberals, as is the core of Lilla’s complaint, universally describe that help as emancipating them from all limits, which implies that recognition of those groups as groups is the necessary precondition, and power’s end is to remove any limits that exist for that group. Nowhere in any of this program is any reduction in individualism. Similarly, “Democratic citizenship implies reciprocal rights and duties. We have duties because we have rights; we enjoy rights because we do our duty.” (This, of course, is a core belief of conservatives from Aristotle to Reagan, totally rejected for decades by the Left, so hearing it here is a bit jarring.) But what are those rights and duties? Again, Lilla never says. His only talk of duty conflates “doing something for your country” with “doing something for your government,” thus making the basic error of conflating country and government. For all Lilla’s fine words about the need for creating a new political coalition, this is all politically worthless. Such a program of lying co-option and refusal to actually place limits on any person’s actions will never produce a new Dispensation.

He take a few more stabs at it. He wants “an ambitious vision of America and its future that would inspire

citizens of every walk of life and in every region of the country.” “This does not mean a return to the New Deal.” But what does it mean? It apparently means mostly more abortion, the only specific political issue repeatedly mentioned. He says “Nostalgia is suicidal” (meaning he has much in common with Yuval Levin in “The Fractured Republic”.) “We [liberals] have to work hard”. “We must never forget that moving hearts and minds for more than one election cycle is not easy.” Roosevelt’s vision of four universal freedoms “filled three generations of liberals with confidence, hope, pride, and a spirit of self-sacrifice.” Probably all true. But what does it mean for today? Sonorous words do not create new political movements by parthogenesis.

[Final paragraph as first comment.]

Caleb Hoyer says

My biggest fear in reading a book whose very title criticized identity politics was that it would be nothing more than someone saying they’re tired of hearing marginalized communities whine. Luckily, this book wasn’t that at all. Its definition of what identity politics is was much broader than I’d ever thought, and was a very thoughtful critique of the left’s cultural drift towards a very inward, self-focused politics, in a way that all too often doesn’t leave room for an understanding of how liberalism can benefit everyone and work for the common good. As Lilla puts it, it is an attitude that has shifted away from What can you do for your country to What does my country owe me by virtue of my identity? The book is very short, and it is such a fascinating topic that I actually wish it had been longer and more researched. There is no sourcing at all, and very few pieces of data or evidence, so it is ultimately really just one (clearly very intelligent) person’s opinion. But it was well-written and well-argued, and provided much food for thought.
