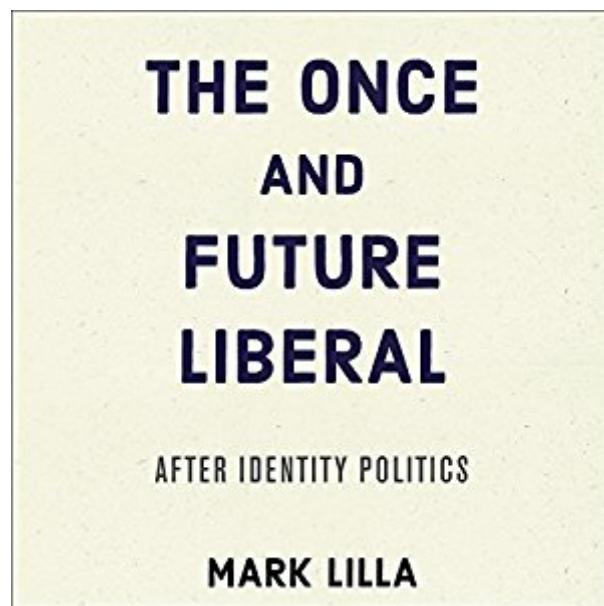


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# The Once And Future Liberal: After Identity Politics



## Synopsis

From one of the country's most admired political thinkers, an urgent wake-up call to American liberals to turn from the divisive politics of identity and develop a vision of our future that can persuade all citizens that they share a common destiny. In *The Once and Future Liberal*, Mark Lilla offers an impassioned, tough-minded, and stinging look at the failure of American liberalism over the past two generations. Although there have been Democrats in the White House, and some notable policy achievements, for nearly 40 years the vision that Ronald Reagan offered - small government, lower taxes, and self-reliant individualism - has remained the country's dominant political ideology. And the Democratic Party has offered no convincing competing vision in response. Instead, as Lilla argues, American liberalism fell under the spell of identity politics, with disastrous consequences. Driven originally by a sincere desire to protect the most vulnerable Americans, the left has now unwittingly balkanized the electorate, encouraged self-absorption rather than solidarity, and invested its energies in social movements rather than in party politics. With dire consequences. Lilla goes on to show how the left's identity-focused individualism insidiously conspired with the amoral economic individualism of the Reaganite right to shape an electorate with little sense of a shared future and near-contempt for the idea of the common good. In the contest for the American imagination, liberals have abdicated. Now they have an opportunity to reset. The left is motivated, and the Republican Party, led by an unpredictable demagogue, is in ideological disarray. To seize this opportunity, Lilla insists, liberals must concentrate their efforts on recapturing our institutions by winning elections. The time for hectoring is over. It is time to reach out and start persuading people from every walk of life and in every region of the country that liberals will stand up for them. We must appeal to - but also help to rebuild - a sense of common feeling among Americans and a sense of duty to each other. A fiercely argued, no-nonsense book, enlivened by Lilla's acerbic wit and erudition, *The Once and Future Liberal* is essential listening for our momentous times.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Let me begin by observing that this book could have been written as a ten or twenty page essay with no loss of substance. It is stuffed with idle observations and sketchy political history, all of which are irrelevant or not used to develop Lilla's main argument. Lilla's critique of identity politics is correct, but it applies mainly to the university communities, not to electoral politics. Personally, I am deeply offended by the post-modern tilt of the scholarly left, whose writers and speakers I find utterly distasteful and for whom I have nothing but contempt. I also think they are uniformly rather stupid (this is in contrast to the Marxists of an earlier generation, who were radically on the wrong track, but were smart and interesting to read and debate). Basically, the new regressive Left (or ctrl-Left) has replaced the class analysis of Marxism with a race analysis (the world is divided into hegemonic and oppressed races/ethnicities). There are two problems with this. First, there is no serious social analysis associated with this division of the world---it is purely emotional and normative. Contrast with Marxism's elaborate economic and social theory (wrong, but still challenging and useful). Thus regressive Left politics is reduced to moral posturing and its proponents are sanctimonious and self-righteous prigs. Second, regressive Left world views are inherently racist. For instance, my critique of the regressive Left will predictably be countered by calling me a white nationalist or otherwise wielding ad hominem with no intellectual value. Lilla is correct in preferring the language of classical liberalism (we are all citizens with rights and we should be judged, as ML King suggested, by the content of our character not the color of our skin). His critique of Black Lives Matter in this regard is apt. Black lives matter because all lives matter, not because African Americans are an oppressed group (whatever that means). But Lilla's critique of identity politics does not seem to me to apply to electoral politics. Democrats have embraced the values of American urban life pretty well, and have rejected the values of rural life and the smoke stack remnants of an earlier age. They may have lost the last election (to Donald Trump), but the demographic groups that support them are growing and will continue to do so. The leaders of the Democratic party are in no way identity politicians.

An absolute must read for anyone seeking political office as a Democrat. Part III of Lilla's, "The Once and Future Liberal after Identity Politics" perfectly outlines how democratic politics should proceed into the twenty-first century. For the Democratic Party Leadership that still clings to the failed identity politics of the past, this book seriously examines how our nation has arrived at the current political 2017 situation and how it may proceed in unifying this great nation.

I just purchased this book and could not put it down. Mr. Lilla brings up so many points that have bothered me about how the left and the right operate today. He gives a good history of the right and the left, explains how we have gotten to where we are today, and shows the weaknesses of both. He explains basic civics that most of us have never learned or forgotten about. Even if you are not liberal I believe this is a worthwhile book for you to read. While he doesn't specifically give guidance for how the right can clean up their act he points out their issues so succinctly that I believe it is not hard to see how they can work on fixing them.

Author/professor Lilla contends American liberalism's embrace of identity politics that divide instead of uniting has created a crisis for the Democratic Party. Why - a sense of growing disconnect from white middle Americans and the inability to paint a compelling vision for the future. Liberals for nearly a generation have contended that we should become aware of and 'celebrate' our differences. Lilla believes this 'identity liberalism' is responsible for Trump's election - Hillary's calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters was a strategic mistake because if you don't mention every group, those left out (eg. white males, those with strong religious convictions) will notice and feel excluded. Over two-thirds of white voters without college degrees voted for Trump, along with over 80% of white evangelicals. Republicans also control two-thirds of state legislatures, two-thirds of governorships, and 24 states outright. Adding but two more, they could call a constitutional convention - something Lilla calls 'the most important threat.' Obama, in contrast to Hillary, did not list groups. Instead, he talked about 'we.' Meanwhile, young children are being encouraged to talk about their individual identities, even before they have them. Many grow up assuming that diversity exhausts political discourse - ignoring class war, the economy, and the common good. This then plays into populist demagogues wanting to delegitimize learning. Today's identity focus has also encouraged lazy journalism - eg. about the 'first X to do Y', or 'the underrepresentation of A vs. B in C.' Pressing the point, 'What do we learn about transgenders in Egypt that is helpful in understanding Egypt's future?' Bill Clinton concentrated his energies on domestic programs that would benefit everyone (like national health insurance). Bernie Sanders

noted (paraphrased) that 'America is tired of hearing about liberals' damn bathrooms.' I'll add another example - liberals' never-ending focus on more money for public schools - ignoring their failure to improve pupil outcomes despite a near tripling of inflation-adjusted per-pupil funding over the past half century. Lilla does not deny that efforts to benefit these various groups have brought important improvements - however, they have also helped divide America. Per Steve Bannon, 'If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats.' The left's identity-focused individualism, combined with the amoral individualism of the Reaganite right to shape an electorate with little sense of a shared future and near contempt for the idea of the common good. Taking the principle of individual rights seriously leads to justification of only a minimal state. By the 1980s there were countless reasons to question the assumption that government knew what it was doing and could be trusted to do it - Vietnam, Watergate, impotence in the face of stagflation, expanding welfare rates, rise of violent crime in the 1960s, uncoordinated imposition of regulations by multiple agencies, using the courts to circumvent the legislative process and public opinion. Republican gerrymandering has left incumbents susceptible to primary challenges by more radical candidates who had the pick of billionaires to fund their campaigns. Unfortunately, while Lilla is also sympathetic towards black motorists being stopped more frequently than their Anglo peers, he's also oblivious to the fact that blacks are far more likely to have committed crimes, and more likely to become violent when confronted by police. Lilla, however, also notes that eg. 'the Black Lives Matter movement's use of Mau Mau tactics to put down dissent and demand public penitence plays into the hands of the Republican right.' Democrats have embraced a divisive vision of fragmentation, trying to appease an unending series of special interest groups seeing themselves as victims requiring special attention. When combined with a weak economy, largely created by off-shoring (including Mexico), massive illegal immigration, and recent efforts to take in large numbers of Muslim refugees, the result has been strong resentment by those lacking special attention/programs.

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