
Review

The once and future liberal: After identity politics

Mark Lilla

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Once and Future Liberal can be seen as an extension of Lilla's provocative essay published in *The New York Times* titled, 'The End of Identity Liberalism' (November 2016). The book under review here cannot be divorced from the newspaper essay that tried to grapple with the election of Mr. Donald Trump as President of the United States, and the subsequent polarising reactions it fanned across the country. International readers have approached this essay in the context of Brexit, the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India and a general rise of 'right-wing' politics across the globe. These events have triggered debates on the questions of identity, diversity, democracy and liberalism, both in academic and non-academic spaces.

There are four parts to this short book. The introduction sets the tone of the book in terms of Lilla's positionality and the political context that has made this work necessary. This is followed by two chapters titled *Anti-Politics* and *Pseudo-Politics* that outline the background of the problem confronted by the book – 'American liberalism in the twenty-first century is in crisis: a crisis of imagination and ambition on our side, a crisis of attachment and trust on the side of the wider public' (p. 5). After a succinct account of American political history mapping the crisis in liberalism, the chapter *Politics* proposes a path for liberalism to overcome its present challenges.

Lilla outlines his template for liberal politics in the US from his self-identified standpoint of a 'frustrated American liberal' (p. 6). He is 'frustrated' since liberalism as ideology had prevented liberals from delivering a vision of the US that can inspire citizens from every walk of life and region of the country. In contrast to the Republicans, who during Reagan's administration offered a blueprint for what American life ought to be, the liberals 'don't bring an image of what our shared way of life might be' (p. 7). The author is trying to orient the Democratic Party to win elections and influence political institutions so that, in the long run, liberals can bring the changes they want and need.



In the book, political history of the US has been broadly divided into two ‘dispensations’ – Roosevelt’s and Reagan’s. Roosevelt’s administration or ‘dispensation’, the word used by Lilla, projected an American society where solidarity, opportunity and public duty were the watchwords; during Reagan administration, instead, self-reliance and the minimal state were given pre-eminence. Thus, for Lilla, the former was political and the latter anti-political. He suggests that liberals failed to counter the political imagination of what ought to be the American way of life during the Reagan administration. This failure did not come unexpected: its seeds lay in what Lilla terms ‘the great liberal abdication’. (p. 8)

Lilla argues that, after Roosevelt’s administration, liberals did not grasp the social transformations taking place and were not able to propose a vision for shared destiny. The rise of identity liberalism reinforced Reaganism, i.e. individualism. In the second chapter, *Pseudo-Politics*, Lilla plots the shift within the civil rights movement that triggered the move from ‘we’ to ‘me’. He argues that, initially, the aim of the civil rights movement was to articulate the problems of the vulnerable citizens in terms of their citizenship rights deprivation. However, the movement shifted gears in the later stage to foreground identification with different social groups. He suggests that, from a concern with ‘What can I do for my country?’ the discourse shifted to ‘What does my country owe me by virtue of my identity?’ Lilla traces the journey of New Left in the US polity, foregrounding its present concentration in universities. He analyses the emergence of identity liberals on campuses and how they engage in debates where there is no communication beyond the affirmation of political positions emanating from subject positions.

Even though the initial articulation of identity politics can be seen as correcting historical wrongs, especially with regard to African-Americans, later on it became a site for exclusionary self-definition. Its net effect is that it ‘turned young people back onto themselves, rather than turning them outward toward the wider world’ (p. 10). As a result, the pursuit of the common good was lost, and so the advance of identity liberalism marked the retreat of liberal politics. Politically, it meant that a politics centred on people and their belonging to different groups failed to appeal to all people – therefore, identity liberalism could not win elections and exercise power. Identity liberalism is no longer a political project: it is currently reduced to an evangelical one. Why is that so? Evangelism speaks truth to power while politics is about capturing power to speak the truth. The way forward for Lilla is to articulate a civic liberalism that resonates among citizens and that conceives of the state as something shared by all Americans, irrespective of their background. Every citizen should be treated as a citizen, and this requires that identity politics be left behind. As Lilla says, it is time to ‘get real’.

‘Citizenship’ as political status transcends the exclusions associated with identity labels and helps foster a sense of solidarity. He warns that ‘as soon as you cast an issue exclusively in terms of identity you invite your adversary to do the



same.’ (p. 130) Lilla wraps up his short and crisp political history of modern US by setting an agenda for liberals. He makes a call beyond anti-Trump politics to rescue liberals and liberalism. The solution he offers has four components – the priority of institutional politics over movements, the priority of democratic persuasion over aimless self-expression, priority of citizenship over group and individual identity and civic education to overcome individualistic and atomised nation. Finally, he pleads for an education which moves beyond identity-based concerns so that future citizens can think with, relate and have a sense of compassion for people outside their worlds. The key for the survival of liberalism and production of liberal citizens is the imagination of a different future.

One can disagree with the tone of Lilla’s dismissal of identity politics. Nevertheless, he raises an important question about the feasibility and effectiveness of identity politics given the difficulty of forging alliances between identity groups. Lilla takes on a difficult task, and he has received brickbats from leftists, centrists and liberals since he started to work on this topic in November 2016. The focus on identity politics as *the* mode of politics in diverse societies raises two important concerns: how to bridge the gap between the majority and minority communities without pitching one against the other; and secondly, will the deepening of identity politics hinder the possibility of forging inter-community dialogues and solidarities? Both these questions are critical since any feeling of deprivation or alienation by any social group can upset the working of a democracy.

Lilla’s work can be seen as an attempt to reach a Pareto optimal political condition. This is a difficult task since it requires scaling down the democratic value of certain political phenomena, such as social justice movements, without dismissing them. The argument he makes against Black Lives Matter has already received its share of criticism. To live up to the commitments we made to the rule of law, equality and justice, our politics demand equal treatment of all at all times. In other words, one has to shift the focus from the effort to become more and more sensitive to the other to an effort to see this other as part of ‘us’. Such a position will demand us to push identity in the background in the pursuit of the equal treatment of people. Lilla says ‘one has to get real’ and this is a difficult task. This book has stirred the hornet’s nest but Lilla does not control the outcome of his intervention: we do.

Is this work damning identity politics? Is it a manifesto for Democrats? Or is it a template for liberalism to navigate the choppy political waters? It is definitely not a dismissal of identity politics. Lilla makes it very clear that the way out is to appeal to something that all Americans share but this does not imply denying the existence and importance of identities (p. 120). In providing a manifesto for Democrats, he is trying to highlight the limits of identity liberalism. This is a powerful and controversial suggestion, and a crucial one to engage with. Can we organise society and mobilise voters without making an appeal that finds resonance with all? In the absence of a shared common ground, not only liberalism but also democracy will



have difficulty moving forward. This is this book's provocative invitation to reflection.

Rakesh M. Krishnan
University of Hyderabad, Telangana 500046, India
rakeshmkrishnan@gmail.com