

Us against us

Author Mark Lilla reflects on how identity politics fractures the Left

BY MEGAN WILDHOOD
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

I had thought the malaise of relentlessly focusing on identity was just me. That only I was feeling like an ant under a magnifying glass in the sun, and occasionally like the person holding the glass. That gaining a robust understanding of what it means to be the race, gender, age, economic status I am, and having the sexual and gender orientation I have was not only not doing anything about the problems that scared me the most in the world, but were maybe making them worse.

I'd started, horrifyingly enough, to think that perhaps I wasn't a liberal after all; certainly I could not be a member of Donald Trump's party? Enter Mark Lilla's "The Once and Future Liberal."

Lilla provides an elegantly concise how-we-got-here history; "here" being that liberalism is currently not much more than identity politics, which Lilla refreshingly nails as "a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition that is now cultivated in our colleges and universities. The main result has been to turn young people back onto themselves, rather than turning them outward toward the wider world. It has left them unprepared to think about the common

good and what must be done practically to secure it — especially the hard and unglamorous task of persuading people very different from themselves to join a common effort. Every advance of liberal identity consciousness has marked a retreat of liberal political consciousness, without which no vision of America's future can be imagined."

He goes on to claim both that we are governed by parties that have no bigger vision than

obstructing the other party, and that the reason liberalism is losing is that they have no cohesive image for American life to compete with that of the Republicans. Indeed, the Republican Party has a vision for the country. You can easily find it on their website. You don't have to like it, but it brings together people who would view one another with suspicion if they were Democrats. Go to the Democratic Party's website and you'll find links to different "people" — Native Americans, women, LGBTQ, etc. Each link takes you to a home page tailored specifically for that group. There isn't even an attempt at solidarity.

I know. We liberals have been trained to mistrust the word "we" in any form, and for good reason. A sense of "us" has all too often been used to cover up legitimate grievances; attempts to find common ground have been used as ways to steamroll those who are already marginalized far too many times. But listen to Lilla's response: Fragmenting in terms of identity leaves all-too vulnerable groups even more vulnerable. "In a democracy, the only way

to meaningfully defend (minorities) — and not just make empty gestures of recognition and 'celebration' — is to win elections and exercise power in the long run at every level of government." And liberals aren't even in the contest anymore. "The paradox of identity liberalism is that it paralyzes the capacity to think and act in a way that it professes to want."

It's not that identities don't matter. Lilla champions Martin Luther King Jr. as "the greatest movement leader in American history. But, as Hillary Clinton once correctly pointed out, his efforts would have been futile without those of the machine politician Lyndon Johnson, a seasoned congressional dealmaker willing to sign any pact with the devil to get the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act passed." For that matter, neither he "nor Elizabeth Cady Stanton nor Angela Davis received an identity-based education. And it's difficult to imagine them becoming who they became had they been cursed with one."

It's that, "as soon as you cast an issue exclusively in terms of identity, you invite your adversary to do the same." The more we emphasize the differences between us, Lilla argues, "the less likely it will be to feel outrage at the mistreatment of others." We don't have to like it, but that's how human beings work. Why should nonmembers of group X care about members of group X, unless they believed they shared something in common? Healthy party politics, Lilla points out, encourage work toward common goals; movement politics encourages smaller and smaller splits and "the practicing of ideological one-upmanship."

We're already facing hideous levels of isolation, which is as bad for human health as smoking. We can't afford any more division. And Lilla reminds us that it was Bernie Sanders who pointed out that, while a black or female CEO is a sign of progress, "if (they're) going to be shipping jobs out of the country and exploiting workers, it doesn't mean a whole hell of a lot if (they're) black or white or Latino ..."

Lilla's answer is that, if liberalism is to revive, it needs to stop focusing on identity and start focusing on what we all have in common; the only thing he knows of is citizenship. He clarifies that he is not talking about the polluted discourse surrounding immigration, who should be granted status and who shouldn't be. "We are a republic, not a campsite. Citizens are not roadkill. They are not collateral damage. They are not the tail of the distribution. A citizen, simply by virtue of being a citizen, is one of us. We've stood together to defend the country against foreign adversaries in the past. Now we must stand together at home to make sure that none of us faces the risk of being left behind. We're all Americans and we owe that to each other. That's what liberalism means."

But we will have to start from the ground up. It's not like there has historically been this sense of solidarity or commonality and we've somehow lost it. It would be anachronistic to say this country was founded on identity politics, but it was founded deliberately and systematically on division, not to mention frontierism, which is to say rugged individualism. The white elite government of the colonies calculatingly

turned poor whites against black slaves. Then they turned both against Native Americans in order to obtain more and more land. Then they diverted the anger of the poor toward the British and away from themselves, who were arguably exploiting the masses of destitute colonists as much as the crown was oppressing the colonies in order to win the Revolutionary War. Then, they set up the country so that only white men who owned property could vote, and it stayed that way until ... well, my mother was a teenager when Martin Luther King Jr. cast his dream from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Citizenship, as Lilla suggests, may indeed be the way forward — certainly emphasizing what we have in common rather than giving in to the fear and hatred of the current administration, and recovering a sense of duty to one another is necessary — but a direction is not a map.

Reprinted from Street Roots sister paper, Real Change, in Seattle, Wash.



ILLUSTRATION BY JON WILLIAMS

We're already facing hideous levels of isolation, which is as bad for human health as smoking. We can't afford any more division.

Us against us

How the war on drugs has become a civil war in some cities

By [Name] and [Name]

PHOTO BY [Name]

IN A CITY where the streets are littered with discarded needles and the air is thick with the smell of burnt tires, the war on drugs has become a civil war. In some cities, the police are fighting a losing battle against a powerful drug cartel that has taken control of the streets. The police are being outmaneuvered and outgunned by a network of drug dealers and distributors who have established a tight grip on the city's economy.

The drug war has become a civil war in some cities. The police are being outmaneuvered and outgunned by a network of drug dealers and distributors who have established a tight grip on the city's economy. The streets are littered with discarded needles and the air is thick with the smell of burnt tires. The police are fighting a losing battle against a powerful drug cartel that has taken control of the city's economy.

The drug war has become a civil war in some cities. The police are being outmaneuvered and outgunned by a network of drug dealers and distributors who have established a tight grip on the city's economy. The streets are littered with discarded needles and the air is thick with the smell of burnt tires. The police are fighting a losing battle against a powerful drug cartel that has taken control of the city's economy.

The drug war has become a civil war in some cities. The police are being outmaneuvered and outgunned by a network of drug dealers and distributors who have established a tight grip on the city's economy. The streets are littered with discarded needles and the air is thick with the smell of burnt tires. The police are fighting a losing battle against a powerful drug cartel that has taken control of the city's economy.

The drug war has become a civil war in some cities. The police are being outmaneuvered and outgunned by a network of drug dealers and distributors who have established a tight grip on the city's economy. The streets are littered with discarded needles and the air is thick with the smell of burnt tires. The police are fighting a losing battle against a powerful drug cartel that has taken control of the city's economy.

