

SUBSCRIBE TODAY FOR  PREMIUM ACCESS

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

LOG IN SUBSCRIBE

 SECTIONS

THE CHRONICLE INTERVIEW: CAMPUS IDENTITY POLITICS IS DOOMING LIBERAL CAUSES, A PROFESSOR CHARGES

THE CHRONICLE INTERVIEW

Campus Identity Politics Is Dooming Liberal Causes, a Professor Charges

By *Evan R. Goldstein* | DECEMBER 15, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM

Columbia U.

Mark Lilla

The day after the presidential election, Mark Lilla had to get something off his chest. "I wrote in a fever," he says. The article that resulted, which appeared in *The New York Times*, argues that "American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender, and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force."

Mr. Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University, pinned the blame, in part, on academe and its fixation

on identity politics. "How to explain to the average voter the supposed moral urgency of giving college students the right to choose ... gender pronouns?" he asked. "How not to laugh along with those voters at the story of a University of Michigan prankster who wrote in 'His Majesty?'"

The article has provoked an avalanche of response and rebuttal. "Stop blaming our society's political and social crises on campus-based demands for color- and gender- coded justice that reflect the crises far more than

they cause them," wrote Jim Sleeper, a lecturer in political science at Yale University, in the *Times*. "It is unconscionable, this know-better recrimination, directed at the very people who just put the most work and energy into defeating Trumpism, coming from those who will be made least vulnerable by Trump's ascension," wrote Rebecca Traister in *New York* magazine.

A Columbia colleague accused Mr. Lilla of aiding and abetting white supremacy. The article also struck a chord in Europe, where it was republished on the front page of *Le Monde* and debated in newspapers across the continent. Mr. Lilla has been interviewed nonstop for a month and is considering writing a book on identity politics.

After checking the NFL schedule, he found time to talk with *The Chronicle* last weekend about political correctness, being likened to David Duke, and why academics need to watch more Fox News.

Are colleges too obsessed with diversity?

They're too obsessed with identity. There's a subtle distinction. Diversity as a social goal and aim of social reform is an excellent thing. But identity politics today isn't about group belonging; it's about personal identity. From the '70s into the '90s, there was a shift in focus from group identity to the self as the intersection of different kinds of identities. Identity became more narcissistic and less connected to larger political themes. For many students, their political interest and engagement end at the border of how they've defined themselves.

It's extraordinary how much time and thinking they devote to exactly what they are as the subtotal of other identities, rather than seeing their time at the university as an opportunity to leave those things behind, or overcome them, or become something that's actually themselves and autonomous in some way.

Are identity-based departments and centers part of the problem?

Well, they do many things. Research on the history of women, the history of gay groups, that's all a very good thing. But when one has majors or faculty lines that are devoted simply to a particular identity, or to the question of identity, that leads to a kind of withdrawal from a wider engagement with

the university. These programs tend to be closed entities in which people talk to themselves and encourage one another, and students can fall into this and major in women's studies or African-American studies or gay and lesbian studies, and I think that's a missed opportunity for them.

In your article, you argue for a liberalism that works "quietly, sensitively, and with a proper sense of scale" when it comes to highly charged issues like sexuality and religion. Is there a campus corollary to that?

Yes, because there has been a radicalization of student demands and also a loss of a sense of proportion. Our campuses are not Aleppo. And to witness the rage around some of these issues — whether it's the naming of buildings, the transgender-bathroom issue, or the pronoun issue — we're an evangelical country, and we tend toward fanaticism whenever we try to reform ourselves. It's unfortunate to see the university become a place where this kind of self-induced hysteria is drawing in students who should be thinking more outside of themselves. College administrators and professors have stood by and not resisted that very strongly.

It has created a spectacle that is very damaging — and here I speak as a liberal — to the liberal cause. A fact of our political lives as liberals is that everything we do and say is filtered through conservative media. To constantly feed the beast the way these identity theatrics do only harms the liberal cause when it comes to reaching out to voters. It's an enormous distraction and an enormous loss of energy — energy that could be directed outward, toward common political goals in the real world. Instead it's directed inward, toward the self and the little utopic communities we try to create for ourselves on our campuses.

Is academe in part to blame, then, for American liberalism slipping into a moral panic about identity?

Yes, because the Democratic Party has become the party of educated elites. All the people who do the thinking and shaping of political strategy have been shaped by the university. On the website of the Republican Party is something called "Principles for American Renewal." Click on it, and you get 11 issues that are central to the GOP, beginning with the Constitution

and ending with immigration. There's no such link for the Democratic Party. Instead you have 17 links to different groups. Identity politics has shaped the thinking of people in the party.

I think the two basic principles of liberalism are equal protection under the law and solidarity. We've lost that narrative, and we've not articulated our core principles in a way that *anyone* can see themselves in them.

What do liberal academics not understand about political correctness?

Two things. One, there are very few Republicans on campuses. And there's an intolerance and hostility toward Republicans, conservatives, and evangelicals. So liberal academics don't rub up against other people.

Two, they also, amazingly to me, don't watch Fox News. We are in our own bubble as much as those who are in the Fox News bubble. You need to see who your adversary is and not have any illusions. And there are convenient illusions, like that they're all racists or Trump's election is just "whitelash."

Liberal academics need to engage with conservative ideas, have conservative speakers and professors on campus, learn something, try to build bridges.

You've become the poster boy of anti-PC. What's that like?

I don't know if you saw the article by Katherine Franke.

Yes. She likened you to David Duke.

Right, that he and I just wear different clothing but act the same. Which is a slur, not an argument. My basic reaction was: I rest my case, your honor.

You're white. You're male. You're heterosexual. Are you the best person to make this argument?

Arguments are arguments. Period.

America has a long history of anti-intellectualism, but this election revealed widespread distrust and hostility toward expertise, and the institutions, like universities, that produce it. Are scholars trusted less than ever?

Absolutely. Part of that is due to the public image of the university as being full of spoiled, privileged professors and students who are wrapped up in crazy issues, who are snobs and are contemptuous of other people's work, their opinions, and religions.

There's a segment on Tucker Carlson's show called "Campus Craziness," and 90 percent of the examples *are* crazy. This informs the public's picture of learning and scholarship. And you can even tie that attitude to skepticism about climate change. Nick Kristof had a recent column pointing out that people use the word "academic" not to mean scholarly, but to mean totally detached from reality.

It seems like, as a society, we're no longer able to adequately police the line between fact and fiction.

The university was at the forefront of that when professors convinced themselves and convinced their students that all discourse is perspectival, that there are no impartial points of view, that certain people shouldn't be allowed to speak about certain issues. We went through this back in the '90s with the Sokal affair.

It's a very American idea that not only do I get to determine what I do with my life, because I'm free, and now even what my body is like via modern medicine and technology, but I get to decide what's truth. That's the ultimate freedom.

What role can intellectuals play in the Trump age? They seem pretty marginalized at this point.

The most important thing for any intellectual — any human being — to have is a sense of proportion. And given the scale of the challenge not only to partisan liberals like myself but to the life of learning, the pursuit of truth, we must focus our attention and energies on the real big issues. Our focus must be outside the university, outside the ivy walls, and into the wider world. And we should encourage our students to engage with that wider world, not just with themselves.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.