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The End of Identity Liberalism

By MARK LILLA NOV. 18, 2016

It is a truism that America has become a more diverse country. It is also a beautiful thing to watch. Visitors from other countries, particularly those having trouble incorporating different ethnic groups and faiths, are amazed that we manage to pull it off. Not perfectly, of course, but certainly better than any European or Asian nation today. It's an extraordinary success story.

But how should this diversity shape our politics? The standard liberal answer for nearly a generation now has been that we should become aware of and “celebrate” our differences. Which is a splendid principle of moral pedagogy — but disastrous as a foundation for democratic politics in our ideological age. In recent years 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 capable of governing.

One of the many lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome is that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end. Hillary Clinton was at her best and most uplifting when she spoke about American interests in world affairs and how they relate to our understanding of democracy. But when it came to life at home, she tended on the campaign trail to lose that

large vision and slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic mistake. If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded. Which, as the data show, was exactly what happened with the white working class and those with strong religious convictions. Fully two-thirds of white voters without college degrees voted for Donald Trump, as did over 80 percent of white evangelicals.

The moral energy surrounding identity has, of course, had many good effects. Affirmative action has reshaped and improved corporate life. Black Lives Matter has delivered a wake-up call to every American with a conscience. Hollywood's efforts to normalize homosexuality in our popular culture helped to normalize it in American families and public life.

But the fixation on diversity in our schools and in the press has produced a generation of liberals and progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups, and indifferent to the task of reaching out to Americans in every walk of life. At a very young age our children are being encouraged to talk about their individual identities, even before they have them. By the time they reach college many assume that diversity discourse exhausts political discourse, and have shockingly little to say about such perennial questions as class, war, the economy and the common good. In large part this is because of high school history curriculums, which anachronistically project the identity politics of today back onto the past, creating a distorted picture of the major forces and individuals that shaped our country. (The achievements of women's rights movements, for instance, were real and important, but you cannot understand them if you do not first understand the founding fathers' achievement in establishing a system of government based on the guarantee of rights.)

When young people arrive at college they are encouraged to keep this focus on themselves by student groups, faculty members and also administrators whose full-time job is to deal with — and heighten the significance of — “diversity issues.” Fox News and other conservative media outlets make great sport of mocking the “campus craziness” that surrounds such issues, and more often than not they are

right to. Which only plays into the hands of populist demagogues who want to delegitimize learning in the eyes of those who have never set foot on a campus. How to explain to the average voter the supposed moral urgency of giving college students the right to choose the designated gender pronouns to be used when addressing them? How not to laugh along with those voters at the story of a University of Michigan prankster who wrote in “His Majesty”?

This campus-diversity consciousness has over the years filtered into the liberal media, and not subtly. Affirmative action for women and minorities at America’s newspapers and broadcasters has been an extraordinary social achievement — and has even changed, quite literally, the face of right-wing media, as journalists like Megyn Kelly and Laura Ingraham have gained prominence. But it also appears to have encouraged the assumption, especially among younger journalists and editors, that simply by focusing on identity they have done their jobs.

Recently I performed a little experiment during a sabbatical in France: For a full year I read only European publications, not American ones. My thought was to try seeing the world as European readers did. But it was far more instructive to return home and realize how the lens of identity has transformed American reporting in recent years. How often, for example, the laziest story in American journalism — about the “first X to do Y” — is told and retold. Fascination with the identity drama has even affected foreign reporting, which is in distressingly short supply. However interesting it may be to read, say, about the fate of transgender people in Egypt, it contributes nothing to educating Americans about the powerful political and religious currents that will determine Egypt’s future, and indirectly, our own. No major news outlet in Europe would think of adopting such a focus.

But it is at the level of electoral politics that identity liberalism has failed most spectacularly, as we have just seen. National politics in healthy periods is not about “difference,” it is about commonality. And it will be dominated by whoever best captures Americans’ imaginations about our shared destiny. Ronald Reagan did that very skillfully, whatever one may think of his vision. So did Bill Clinton, who took a page from Reagan’s playbook. He seized the Democratic Party away from its identity-conscious wing, concentrated his energies on domestic programs that

would benefit everyone (like national health insurance) and defined America's role in the post-1989 world. By remaining in office for two terms, he was then able to accomplish much for different groups in the Democratic coalition. Identity politics, by contrast, is largely expressive, not persuasive. Which is why it never wins elections — but can lose them.

The media's newfound, almost anthropological, interest in the angry white male reveals as much about the state of our liberalism as it does about this much maligned, and previously ignored, figure. A convenient liberal interpretation of the recent presidential election would have it that Mr. Trump won in large part because he managed to transform economic disadvantage into racial rage — the “whitelash” thesis. This is convenient because it sanctions a conviction of moral superiority and allows liberals to ignore what those voters said were their overriding concerns. It also encourages the fantasy that the Republican right is doomed to demographic extinction in the long run — which means liberals have only to wait for the country to fall into their laps. The surprisingly high percentage of the Latino vote that went to Mr. Trump should remind us that the longer ethnic groups are here in this country, the more politically diverse they become.

Finally, the whitelash thesis is convenient because it absolves liberals of not recognizing how their own obsession with diversity has encouraged white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored. Such people are not actually reacting against the reality of our diverse America (they tend, after all, to live in homogeneous areas of the country). But they are reacting against the omnipresent rhetoric of identity, which is what they mean by “political correctness.” Liberals should bear in mind that the first identity movement in American politics was the Ku Klux Klan, which still exists. Those who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it.

We need a post-identity liberalism, and it should draw from the past successes of pre-identity liberalism. Such a liberalism would concentrate on widening its base by appealing to Americans as Americans and emphasizing the issues that affect a vast majority of them. It would speak to the nation as a nation of citizens

who are in this together and must help one another. As for narrower issues that are highly charged symbolically and can drive potential allies away, especially those touching on sexuality and religion, such a liberalism would work quietly, sensitively and with a proper sense of scale. (To paraphrase Bernie Sanders, America is sick and tired of hearing about liberals' damn bathrooms.)

Teachers committed to such a liberalism would refocus attention on their main political responsibility in a democracy: to form committed citizens aware of their system of government and the major forces and events in our history. A post-identity liberalism would also emphasize that democracy is not only about rights; it also confers duties on its citizens, such as the duties to keep informed and vote. A post-identity liberal press would begin educating itself about parts of the country that have been ignored, and about what matters there, especially religion. And it would take seriously its responsibility to educate Americans about the major forces shaping world politics, especially their historical dimension.

Some years ago I was invited to a union convention in Florida to speak on a panel about Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous Four Freedoms speech of 1941. The hall was full of representatives from local chapters — men, women, blacks, whites, Latinos. We began by singing the national anthem, and then sat down to listen to a recording of Roosevelt's speech. As I looked out into the crowd, and saw the array of different faces, I was struck by how focused they were on what they shared. And listening to Roosevelt's stirring voice as he invoked the freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear — freedoms that Roosevelt demanded for “everyone in the world” — I was reminded of what the real foundations of modern American liberalism are.

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