Why so many people voted to "make America great again"

A historian on Trump's primal appeal

Updated by Sean Illing | @seanilling | sean.illing@vox.com | Nov 9, 2016, 9:46am EST

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Back in September, I spoke with Mark Lilla, a political theorist and historian of ideas at

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Columbia University. He had just published a book titled ***The Shipwrecked Mind***, a short meditation on the rise of political reactionaries.

Of all the conversations I've had about this election, the one with Lilla now stands out.

To the surprise of many, myself included, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States last night, and we have to reckon with that fact.

Trump's appeal isn't reducible to any one thing. But Lilla, more than anyone else, touched on something fundamental, something difficult to measure.

The thesis of his book was simple enough: For at least two centuries, Western politics has been shaped by the forces of revolution. But the revolutionary fervor has given way to something equally potent, what Lilla calls the reactionary spirit.

Like the revolutionary, the reactionary forsakes the present — only she does it not in defense of some future vision but out of a nostalgia for

America is not, it turns out, better than this

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the past. Such an orientation, Lilla argues, is dangerous because it's fueled by an irrefutable narrative about a lost golden age.

Nostalgia is ostensibly about the past, but what animates it is a fear of the present and, perhaps more importantly, the future.

If Trump supporters have anything in common, it's a vague belief in yesterday. They want to make America great *again*, which is to say they want to relive what they imagine was a better time, a better world.

The question is, what is it about the present that they're rejecting? And what was so great about this imagined past? These questions don't admit of easy answers, but there are plenty of clues. Race, no doubt, has a lot to do with it.

Here's what we know: Yesterday, millions of Americans elected a buffoonish dilettante, a man with no ideas, no political experience, and no understanding of the world he wants to lead.

Worse still, he put fascism on the ballot, and

half of America's voters said "Yes."

Make no mistake: this is a crisis. Trump's campaign represents a rejection of our democratic norms. The depth of that rejection, and the rage bubbling beneath it, has yet to be understood. But there is no doubt that Trump won on the backs of white, working-class rural voters who responded to his bile and his bigotry and his false promises.

My conversation with Lilla, re-posted below, helps to clarify what we witnessed yesterday, or at least it helps to clarify one dimension of the Trump phenomenon.

It was insightful at the time. Today, in the wake of the most cataclysmic political event of my lifetime, it takes on a renewed significance.

Sean Illing

The title of your book is *The Shipwrecked Mind*. That's a colorful metaphor — what are you getting at?

Mark Lilla

Well, it's a very old metaphor to think of time

as a river. This goes back to ancient mythology. In thinking about that metaphor, I started thinking about what it would be like to feel as though the current of time was passing you by. The idea that somehow you're stuck somewhere while things are moving on and feeling cut off from a place you left, unable to get back to the river and dreaming of either going back or jumping ahead and creating a new and better future.

Sean Illing

That's an old metaphor, but it captures something new or ascendant in our politics. In the book, you say the revolutionary spirit that inspired political movements for nearly two centuries has faded, but the reactionary spirit is very much alive and equally potent. Can you explain?

Mark Lilla

The revolutionary spirit was born out of a hope in a particular kind of revolution that would be both predictable and good. It was a means to something better, something transformative. But 20th-century experience seems to have

undercut those assumptions.

Reactionaries, I argue, are nostalgic. They're thinking about a past that's been lost, and that past is always there. You may lose hope in a particular picture of the future, but you have a picture of the past that's untouchable, which is why I say in the book, "Hopes can be extinguished but nostalgia is irrefutable."

It's only when revolutionary fervor has us scared that we see this so clearly, but in fact, if you weren't buying into the revolutionary myths of the 19th and 20th century, if you were paying attention and didn't assume that it was going to sweep all things with it, you would have seen that the spirit of reaction was as strong. Certainly in parts of the 19th century, it was much stronger than the spirit of revolution. The 19th-century story in Europe is really about the resistance to the revolution, I think even more than the attempt to fulfill it and defend it.

“PEOPLE ALL OVER ARE FEELING DISPLACED. ... SO IT'S QUITE NATURAL THAT

UNLESS THERE'S A PICTURE OF THE FUTURE THAT IS COMPELLING BEFORE THEM, THEY'RE GOING TO FEEL AN URGE TO RETURN TO SOMETHING THAT THEY BELIEVE IS FAMILIAR."

Sean Illing

I'm trying to think about this distinction in the context of our current political drama. What's interesting to me is how little ideology has to do with Trump's popularity. His campaign is largely a negation — of the present, of the direction of the country, of the establishment. That Trump has virtually no solutions or plan for the future seems to be an afterthought to his supporters.

Mark Lilla

Yeah, well, one of the things fueling reactionary thinking and the reactionary mood not only here but in Europe and the developing world, the postcolonial world, is a sense of displacement. The idea that all the changes wrought by a global economy and the Internet

and mass migration will undermine our culture. People all over are feeling displaced, and it's an unfamiliar setting. So it's quite natural that unless there's a picture of the future that is compelling before them, they're going to feel an urge to return to something that they believe is familiar.

Sean Illing

Do you think people are on some level rejecting a world that they feel has passed them by?

Mark Lilla

The things that we read most seem to suggest that. There's a white middle class in this country that certainly feels that way, fairly or not. Why relatively young men who are working in cubicles and earning a decent salary feel that way, I don't know. Certainly just the idea of making America great again is obviously compelling.

What makes Trump difficult to fit into or equate with some of the other present and past reactionary movements and leaders is that those leaders succeeded by offering a

precise picture of what it would be like either to reconstruct the past or to hop into a future that would overcome the problems of the present though a rebirth of something in the past in a kind of hyper- or postmodern form — fascism, for example, offered that.

Trump's message is: “Insert your ad here.” And he's succeeded because of that. What makes him interesting to me in this regard is that revolutionary prophets are always vague on intent. If you go back to the 19th century and look at the utopian socialists like Saint-Simon, they'd labor over details of what the future society would look like — what the cities would look like, how labor would be divided, etc. But the more details you got, the more absurd it looked. All Marx and Engels had to say was, you should be able to fish in the morning and criticize in the afternoon and enjoy dinner in the evening, and that was enough.

Trump, in a way, is being vague like successful revolutionaries have been in the past, and that makes him different from, say, the Taliban on the one hand and fascism on the other. It's the openness of the message, and it's an

interesting psychological test of a population whether they respond without things being precise or whether in fact they respond more if things are not precise.

Sean Illing

It's part of the brilliance of his campaign: He's a kind of political Rorschach test. By being so vacuous, people can project whatever they want or need to project onto him.

Mark Lilla

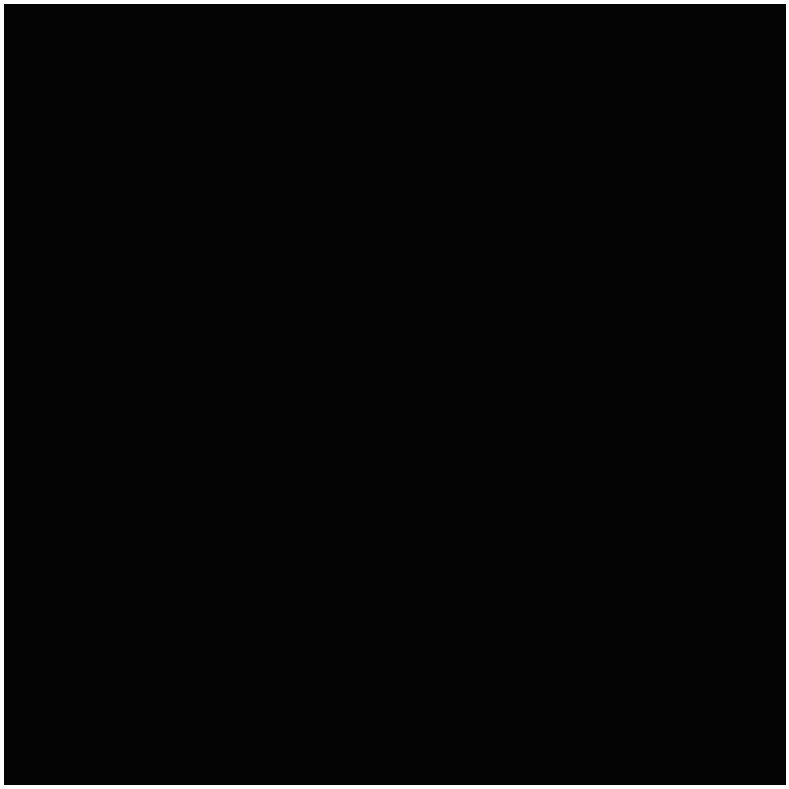
Of course that assumes that the people we're asking are to be taken seriously. I think something very different is going on, and that is that people just don't give a damn and they don't take seriously the responsibility to be informed about things and to make choices.

That has something to do with the broader problems in our political system, but it also has to do with the reigning libertarianism in our society, with the selfishness of people who turn away from politics into the cocoon of their private life.

I've been trying to explain to people who don't

live here what's going on, and there are two ways of looking at it. One is that the people who are voting for Trump are serious people who have real grievances and we need to understand those grievances in order to respond to them.

The other idea is these people don't have ideas, they don't have common sense. They've checked out of politics, and their support has to be understood in that way. So there's this big question mark for me in terms of how to understand this phenomenon.



Germany, Berlin, Kreuzberg, red flag on demonstration on

May 1. | Getty Images

Sean Illing

I suspect there's a bit of truth in both of those views. In any event, I want to talk about the major themes of your book. I'm struck by the role of narrative in your broader accounts of revolutionary and reactionary orientations.

The revolutionary treats the present as a means to some future utopia. The reactionary sees the past in all its splendor and wants to relive it. In both cases, however, it's present experience that seems least important.

Mark Lilla

Oh, I couldn't agree with you more. It's the unwillingness to live within the envelope of what the present gives you. This is what liberalism at its best does: It lowers your expectations for politics; it forces you to take responsibility for mastering what's going on in the present and urges you to think about what is ameliorating problems rather than wiping the slate clean.

We're creatures built for escape, and we try to escape ourselves psychologically in so many ways, and it's a natural tendency to want to escape the present rather than think it through when there are moments of crisis and dislocation.

Sean Illing

In a previous life, I taught political theory, and I was very taken by Albert Camus's critique of revolutionary ideologies. His objection was that they were totalizing narratives that obscured present experience in dangerous ways. The belief, for example, that history had a direction or some higher meaning led to the justification of crimes in the name of future progress.

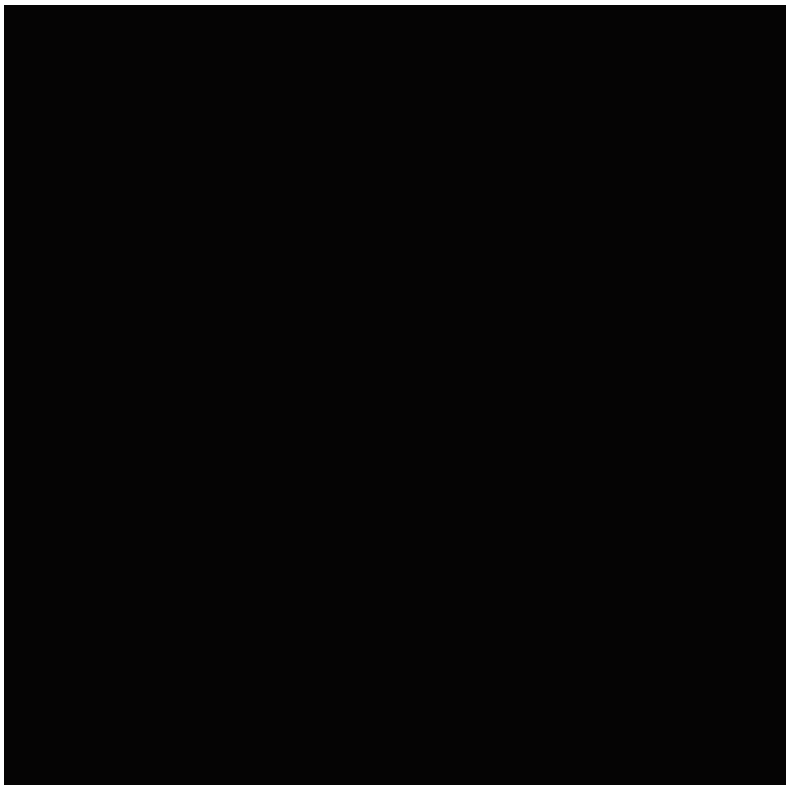
Mark Lilla

Yes, and this comes not only from Camus but also from someone like Reinhold Niebuhr, the famous American theologian, who similarly worried about our inability to accept that we're fallen creatures. The revolutionary assumes that we're not fallen creatures, that we're made wicked by virtue of our social conditions.

Thus, if we change social conditions, we can improve human nature.

The debate is really over how fallen human beings are, and to what degrees society can change things. There are all sorts of other things, of course. But the nostalgic reactionary shares the picture of the revolutionary that somehow history has twisted human nature.

While the revolutionary thinks that we've yet to become what we were meant to be, the reactionary believes we once were who we're supposed to be and we've departed from our nature.



The cover of Mark Lilla's *The Shipwrecked Mind.* | The New York Review of Books

Sean Illing

You claim that political Islamists, European nationalists, and the American right all tell their ideological children essentially the same tale, which is that there was a moment at which history split and, for whatever reason, things went sideways and human nature and society were corrupted. Can you say a bit more about this grand narrative?

Mark Lilla

Well, two things. One is that you could tell the story of the shipwreck and say we need to withdraw from political life in a kind of monastic impulse and keep alive the old forms of life pushed away by history. You can treat it as if it's fate.

What the reactionary believes is that there was an agent of change, that it was not just fate, and that it's possible to pinpoint exactly who the agents were and exactly the time when history broke in two. Once you do that, you know what kind of enemy you have and you know what your role is as the fading remnant.

In the modern world, anti-intellectualism is essential to the forces of reaction. Because it's possible to blame all these changes on the articulate class. You then appeal to people who are not articulate, and you make them feel that while they may not be able to argue with their adversaries, they have a kind of preliterate virtue that literacy and intellectual life has robbed them of. Then a kind of holy ignorance emerges, which is a sign that you are the saving remnant.

This is something very important in American politics. Take something like neoconservatism, which began as a movement of intellectuals trying to essentially hold on to a Roosevelt understanding of liberalism as opposed to a McGovernite ideal of liberalism. There was a sense, after the tumult of the ’60s, that you needed a more intellectual effort in order to explain the world and make sense of it.

It was about becoming more intellectual about these things, but then neoconservatism went through this demonic marriage with populism and suddenly the ordinary American, the ordinary guy, became this fount of wisdom because he's been untouched by these ideas that are corrupting our virtue.

Sean Illing

Neoconservatism ties in with another question I had for you. There’s a fascinating chapter in the book on Leo Strauss, the intellectual godfather of neoconservatism. Reading it, I couldn’t help but think of Nietzsche.

Strauss believed that societies needed an authoritative account of ultimate values in

order to legitimate their political institutions. Nietzsche warned at the end of the 19th century that the collapse of metaphysics would lead to a crisis of authority; that our highest values would be exposed as relative and contingent. The result, he argued, would be an era of ideological battles, where political religions would replace traditional religions as competing sources of meaning and order in human life. How does modern reactionary politics fit into this account?

Mark Lilla

These are the kinds of stories that are used by reactionaries in order to build up their historical myth. It's a story about a loss of clarity, a loss of moral authority. It's interesting to think about the way both Straussianism and neoconservatism developed through the '60s, through the '70s, through the '80s and the '90s. The first prophecy we heard is that no society can exist if these foundational myths are questioned.

The problem then became the apocalyptic neoconservatives. It turned out the problem was not that society couldn't go on without

these myths; it was that it could. Societies can live without these things, or they can replace one set of fundamental truths with a different one. What bothered neoconservatives is not that society has lost its moral presuppositions, it's that those presuppositions have changed.

So there came a moment in the late ’80s and early ’90s when certain neoconservatives threw in the towel and said American society has become hopeless.

Sean Illing

Do you buy Strauss’s claim that modern liberalism, insofar as it abolishes transcendent standards, was destined to decline into negation and relativism?

Mark Lilla

No, because it turns out it doesn't descend into relativism. What you have is a new kind of morality that isn't relativistic so much as more tolerant. This becomes the new dogma. It's not that we've lost an underlying dogma — it simply changed.

Then the question is, what kind of lives are

people actually living? Are they living good lives, or aren't they? Are they still public-spirited, or aren't they? Then you can ask serious questions about whether this kind of liberalism as opposed to an earlier kind of liberalism is healthy for individuals or whether it weakens the machine in a sense that people become too privatized and won't do their their duties. It's not that there's no longer a morality. The question is does the morality we have undercut the kinds of commitments required to have a republic.

Sean Illing

How concerned are you about the rise of right-wing populism both here and across Europe? As you know, there are plenty of historical analogues to this, and none of them inspire hope.

Mark Lilla

I see the populism as a symptom of many things, not the cause. I think what it's revealed is that the party systems that were developed after World War II no longer function. No country knows how to fund political parties

anymore because people don't adhere to parties, and that's because the cleavages between the parties no longer match the cleavages that are in society.

So you have political cleavages and tensions existing below the party structures. The pressing question for me is not what will happen with populism but whether there will be some kind of transformation within the party systems so that they are able again both to respond to some of these concerns and do what parties are supposed to do: build coalitions and consensus and focus on policy solutions.

Sean Illing

Do you think the party structure in this country is sufficiently pliable to accommodate or absorb these changes, and if not, what becomes of it?

Mark Lilla

Well, we're going to find out. After the election, win or lose, the Trump phenomenon has really put the ball in the court of the right. There's talk of starting new parties. There are talks

about how to recapture the GOP. There's clearly going to be a fight to decide the future of the party. Who knows what becomes of that.

The other fact to recognize and to see in Trump's success is that people want to hear that the government is going to respond to some of the problems that they're having, and that requires a new kind of thinking.

Sean Illing

You may be right about the need for a new kind of thinking, but I'm not sanguine about what that would look like or whether our system can adapt quickly enough. More than anything else, people have lost faith in the authority of governing institutions, and that's a very dangerous place to be.

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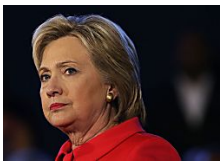

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