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## The Liberal Crackup

Liberals should reject the divisive, zero-sum politics of identity and find their way back to a unifying vision of the common good



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID PLUNKERT

*By Mark Lilla*

Aug. 11, 2017 9:07 a.m. ET

**Donald Trump's surprise** victory in last year's presidential election has finally energized my fellow liberals, who are networking, marching and showing up at town-hall meetings across the country. There is excited talk about winning back the White House in 2020 and maybe even the House of Representatives in the interim.

But we are way ahead of ourselves—dangerously so. For a start, the presidency just isn't what it used to be, certainly not for Democrats. In the last generation, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama won the office with comfortable margins, but they were repeatedly stymied by assertive Republicans in Congress, a right-leaning Supreme Court and—what should be the most worrisome development for Democrats—a steadily growing majority of state governments in Republican hands.

What's more, nothing those presidents did while in office did much to reverse the rightward drift of American public opinion. Even when they vote for Democrats or support some of their policies, most Americans—including young people, women and minorities—reject the term “liberal.” And it isn't hard to see why. They see us as aloof,

elitist, out of touch.

It is time to admit that American liberalism is in deep crisis: a crisis of imagination and ambition on our side, a crisis of attachment and trust on the side of the wider public. The question is, why? Why would those who claim to speak for and defend the great American *demos* be so indifferent to stirring its feelings and gaining its trust? Why, in the contest for the American imagination, have liberals simply abdicated?



President Franklin D. Roosevelt smiled from his car during a spur-of-the-moment speech to the residents of Galveston, Texas, May 1937. PHOTO: CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

Ronald Reagan almost single-handedly destroyed the New Deal vision of America that used to guide us. Franklin Roosevelt had pictured a place where citizens were joined in a collective enterprise to build a strong nation and protect each other. The watchwords of that effort were solidarity, opportunity and public duty. Reagan pictured a more individualistic America where everyone would flourish once freed from the shackles of the state, and so the watchwords became self-reliance and small government.

To meet the Reagan challenge, we liberals needed to develop an ambitious new vision of America and its future that would again inspire people of every walk of life and in every region of the country to come together as citizens. Instead we got tangled up in the divisive, zero-sum world of identity politics, losing a sense of what binds us together as a nation. What went missing in the Reagan years was the great liberal-democratic *We*. Little wonder that so few now wish to join us.

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*‘There is a mystery at the core of every suicide.’*

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There is a mystery at the core of every suicide, and the story of how a once-

successful liberal politics of solidarity became a failed liberal politics of “difference” is not a simple one. Perhaps the best place to begin it is with a slogan: *The personal is the political*.

This phrase was coined by feminists in the 1960s and captured perfectly the mind-set of the New Left at the time. Originally, it was interpreted to mean that everything that seems strictly private—sexuality, the family, the workplace—is in fact political and that there are no spheres of life exempt from the struggle for power. That is what made it so radical, electrifying sympathizers and disturbing everyone else.

But the phrase could also be taken in a more romantic sense: that what we think of as political action is in fact nothing but personal activity, an expression of me and how I define myself. As we would put it today, my political life is a reflection of my identity.



Women walked down New York City's Fifth Avenue in a march organized by the National Organization for Women, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted American women full suffrage, Aug. 26, 1970. PHOTO: JOHN OLSON/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

Over time, the romantic view won out over the radical one, and the

idea got rooted on the left that, to reverse the formula, *the political is the personal*. Liberals and progressives continued to fight for social justice out in the world. But now they also wanted there to be no space between what they felt inside and what they did in that world. They wanted their political engagements to mirror how they understood and defined themselves as individuals. And they wanted their self-definition to be recognized.

This was an innovation on the left. Socialism had no time for individual recognition. Rushing toward the revolution, it divided the world into exploiting capitalists and exploited workers of every background. New Deal liberals were just as indifferent to individual identity; they thought and spoke in terms of equal rights and equal social protections for all. Even the early movements of the 1950s and '60s to secure the rights of African-Americans, women and gays appealed to our shared humanity and citizenship, not our differences. They drew people together rather than setting them against each other.

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All that began to change when the New Left shattered in the 1970s, in no small part due to identity issues. Blacks complained that white movement leaders were racist,

feminists complained that they were sexist, and lesbians complained that straight feminists were homophobic. The main enemies were no longer capitalism and the military-industrial complex; they were fellow movement members who were not, as we would say today, sufficiently “woke.”

It was then that less radical liberal and progressive activists also began redirecting their energies away from party politics and toward a wide range of single-issue social movements. The forces at work in healthy party politics are centripetal; they encourage factions and interests to come together to work out common goals and strategies. They oblige everyone to think, or at least to speak, about the common good.

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*‘In movement politics, the forces are all centrifugal.’*

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movement politics, the forces are all centrifugal, encouraging splits into smaller and smaller factions obsessed with single issues and practicing rituals of ideological one-upmanship. Symbols take on

outsized significance, especially in identity-based movements.

The results of this shift are now plain to see. The classic Democratic project of bringing people from different backgrounds together for a single common project has given way to a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition. And what keeps this approach to politics alive is that it is cultivated in the colleges and universities where liberal elites are formed. Here again, we must look to the history of the New Left to understand how this happened.

After Reagan's election in 1980, conservative activists hit the road to spread the new individualist gospel of small government and free markets and poured their energies into winning out-of-the-way county, state and congressional elections. Also on the road, though taking a different exit on the interstate, were former New Left activists heading for college towns all over America.



Marchers gathered near Trump Tower to protest President Donald Trump's decision to ban transgender people from serving in the U.S. military, New York, July 29. PHOTO: ERIK MCGREGOR/PACIFIC PRESS/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

Conservatives concentrated on attracting working people once attached to the Democratic Party—a populist, bottom-up strategy. The left concentrated on transforming the outlook of professional and party elites—a top-down strategy. Both groups were successful, and both left their mark on the country.

Up until the 1960s, those active in the Democratic Party were largely drawn from the working class or farm communities and were formed in local political clubs or on union-dominated shop floors. That world is gone. Today they are formed primarily in our colleges and universities, as are members of the overwhelmingly liberal-dominated professions of law, journalism and education.

Liberal political education, such as it is, now takes place on campuses that are far removed, socially and geographically, from the rest of the country—and particularly from the sorts of people who once were the foundation of the Democratic Party. And the political catechism that

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is taught is a historical artifact, reflecting more the idiosyncratic experience of the '60s generation than the

realities of power politics today.

The experience of that era taught the New Left two lessons. The first was that movement politics was the only mode of engagement that actually changes things; the second was that political activity must have some authentic meaning for the self, making compromise seem like a self-betrayal.

These lessons, though, have little bearing on liberalism's present crisis, which is that of being defeated time and again by a well-organized Republican Party that keeps tightening its grip on our institutions. Where those lessons do resonate is with young people in our highly individualistic bourgeois society—a society that keeps them focused on themselves and teaches them that personal choice, individual rights and self-definition are all that is sacred.

It is little wonder that students of the Facebook age are drawn to courses focused on their identities and movements related to them. Nor is it surprising that many join campus groups that engage in identity movement work. But the costs need to be tallied.

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*'Classic liberal ideas like citizenship, solidarity and the common good have little meaning for many students today.'*

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For those students who will soon become liberal and progressive elites, the line between self-discovery and political action has become blurred. Their political commitments are genuine but are circumscribed by the confines of their self-definitions. Issues that penetrate those confines take on looming importance, and since politics for them is personal, their positions tend to be absolutist and nonnegotiable. Those issues that don't touch on their identities or affect people like themselves are hardly perceived. And classic liberal ideas like citizenship, solidarity and the common good have little meaning for them.

As a teacher, I am increasingly struck by a difference between my conservative and progressive students. Contrary to the stereotype, the conservatives are far more likely to connect their engagements to a set of political ideas and principles. Young people on the left are much more inclined to say that they are engaged in politics *as an X*, concerned about other *Xs* and those issues touching on *X-ness*. And they are less and less comfortable with debate.

Over the past decade a new, and very revealing, locution has drifted from our universities into the media mainstream: *Speaking as an X*... This is not an anodyne phrase. It sets up a wall against any questions that come from a non-*X* perspective. Classroom conversations that once might have begun, *I think A, and here is my argument*, now take the form, *Speaking as an X, I am offended that you claim B*. What replaces argument, then, are taboos against unfamiliar ideas and contrary opinions.

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*‘Conservatives complain loudest about today’s campus follies, but it is really liberals who should be angry.’*

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Conservatives complain loudest about today’s campus follies, but it is really liberals who should be angry. The big story is not that leftist professors successfully turn millions of young people into dangerous political radicals every year. It is that they have gotten students so obsessed with their personal identities that, by the time they graduate, they have much less interest in, and even less engagement with, the wider political world outside their heads.

There is a great irony in this. The supposedly bland, conventional universities of the 1950s and early ’60s incubated the most radical generation of American citizens perhaps since our founding. Young people were incensed by the denial of voting rights out there, the Vietnam War out there, nuclear proliferation out there, capitalism out there, colonialism out there. Yet once that generation took power in the universities, it proceeded to depoliticize the liberal elite, rendering its members 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. There can be no liberal politics without a sense of *We*—of what we are as citizens and what we owe each other. If liberals hope ever to recapture America’s imagination and become a dominant force across the country, it will not be enough



to beat the Republicans at flattering the vanity of the mythical Joe Sixpack. They must offer a vision of our common destiny based on one thing that all Americans, of every background, share.

And that is citizenship. We must relearn how to speak to citizens as citizens and to frame our appeals for solidarity—including ones to benefit particular groups—in terms of principles that everyone can affirm.



Protesters prepared to march through Charlotte, N.C., after the shooting death of Keith Scott by police earlier in the week, Sept. 23, 2016. PHOTO: JEFF SINER/CHARLOTTE OBSERVER/TNS/GETTY IMAGES

Black Lives Matter is a textbook example of how not to build solidarity. By publicizing and protesting police mistreatment of African-Americans, the movement delivered a wake-up call to every American with a conscience. But its decision to use this mistreatment to build a general indictment of American society and demand a confession of white sins and public penitence only played into the hands of the Republican right.

I am not a black male motorist and will never know what it is like to be one. If I am going to be affected by his experience, I need some way to identify with him, and citizenship is the only thing I know that we share. The more the differences between us are emphasized, the less likely I will be to feel outrage at his mistreatment.

The politics of identity has done nothing but strengthen the grip of the American right on our institutions. It is the gift that keeps on taking. Now is the time for liberals to do an immediate about-face and return to articulating their core principles of solidarity and equal protection for all. Never has the country needed it more.

*Dr. Lilla is professor of the humanities at Columbia University. This essay is adapted from his new book, "The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics," which will be published on Aug. 15 by Harper (which, like The Wall Street Journal, is owned by News Corp).*



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