

The Atlantic

Challenging the Dogmas of Right and Left

Two authors, Mark Lilla and Henry Olsen, see a politics rejecting the broad messages of Roosevelt and Reagan for the narrow claims of victim-group grievance and purist ideology.



Aaron Bernstein / Reuters

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Two leading political intellectuals. One vexed question: the relative roles of class and race in American electoral politics. Two books, published only a few weeks

apart. They speak to different worlds—but they benefit from being read together.

In *The Once and Future Liberal*, Mark Lilla speaks as a liberal to liberals about liberalism—and finds it wanting. Lilla laments that today’s liberalism too often shifts the conversation “from we to me”—or, more precisely, from a broad national “we” of citizens to a narrower “we” of ethnocultural subgroups. As a result, “argument” is replaced by “taboo” and propositions become “pure or impure, not true or false.” Lilla seeks to summon liberals to a politics of broad national interest, a politics he identifies with the New Deal tradition in America. “We must relearn how to speak to citizens as citizens and to frame our appeals—including ones to benefit particular groups—in terms of principles that everyone can affirm.”

What Lilla and Henry Olsen, the author of *The Working Class Republican*, both see and recoil from is the weakening of the appeal of American nationhood—and the strengthening of subgroups: identity groups on the left; plutocratic possessing classes on the right. Instead of the broad messages of Roosevelt and Reagan, they hear the narrow claims of victim-group grievance and purist ideology.

In *The Working Class Republican*, Olsen speaks as a conservative to conservatives about conservatism, which he likewise finds wanting. “Conservatives ... fail to understand that conservative election victories since 1980 have not been rejections of the New Deal’s promises but rather actions representative of the public’s wish for [those promises’] fulfillment.” Olsen’s book, a close study of the career of Ronald Reagan, urges conservatives to accept a principle that Olsen sees as Reagan’s own: “The primacy of human dignity sanctions government help for those who need it.”

There is a symmetry in the purpose and form of the two books, and a symmetry

too in that both authors are long-standing personal acquaintances of mine. But there is very little symmetry in the books' reception by their intended audiences. *Working Class Republican* has been politely [applauded on the right](#)—and its message as politely disregarded. *The Once and Future Liberal* has been vehemently denounced on the left-of-center, including [right here](#) in the pages of *The Atlantic*, even as its message ignites ferocious debate.

The Once and Future Liberal arrives as Democrats intensely introspect the 2016 result and its implications for their future. Should they [woo disaffected Republicans](#) with business-friendly policies? Or [energize their base](#) by embracing single-payer healthcare? Should they take to heart their mass rejection by white working-class voters, formerly the bedrock of their party—by, for example, [rethinking their party's open-armed response to immigration](#), legal and illegal? Or should they [write those voters off](#) as irredeemably racist, and try to pile up the votes in their new core constituencies, especially racial and ethnic minorities?

By invoking the New Deal past, Lilla challenges the minorities-first approach favored by so many left-of-center thinkers and writers—and challenges it with an unforgivably sharp style and keen intellect. Liberals, Lilla laments, have :

lost themselves in the thickets of identity politics and developed a resentful, disuniting rhetoric of difference to match it. You might have thought that faced with the Republicans' steady acquisition of institutional power, they would have poured their energies into helping the Democrats win elections at every level of government and in every region of the country, reaching out especially to working-class Americans who used to vote for it. Instead they became enthralled

with social movements operating outside those institutions, and developed disdain for the demos living between the coasts. You might have thought that faced with the dogma of radical economic individualism that Reaganism normalized, liberals would have used their positions in our educational institutions to teach young people that they share a destiny with all their fellow citizens and have duties toward them. Instead, they trained students to be spelunkers of their personal identities and left them incurious about the world outside their heads.

Lilla anticipates the obvious counter-argument to his own: *This white working class of you which you speak—and (although Lilla disdains to invoke his own “speaking as a ... “ rights) from which you spring—is it not an “identity” too? And a narrow and distorting one at that?*

Lilla argues an emphatic “not so.” The change he deplors is not a change in the ethnicity of liberalism’s voters, but a change of the promises liberalism makes to its voters. The old liberalism offered programs and policies: roads, schools, pensions. The new liberalism offers feelings. Lilla accuses its proponents:

They ... wanted there to be no space between what they felt on the inside and what they did out in the world. They wanted ... political movements that mirrored how they understood and defined themselves as individuals. And they wanted their self-definition to be recognized. ... 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 speak, about the common good. In 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.

The one-upmanship has been accelerating since Hillary Clinton's unexpected Electoral College loss in November 2016. Those practicing it have not much relished Lilla's condemnation—nor his invocation of a lost past they accuse him either of romanticizing or altogether inventing.

The lack of any analogous debate on the Republican side may explain why Henry Olsen's challenge has been received with less hostility but also less attention than Lilla's. Like Lilla, Olsen has challenged ideological dogmas on his side of the political spectrum—and in particular the minimal-government message that Republican leaders advanced from the loss of power in 2008 until the party succumbed to Donald Trump in 2016.

The ultimate question every voter asks is “Do you care about people like me?” ... The working class, nonevangelical white voters who had elected Reagan and who had largely left the GOP since heard nothing in [Paul] Ryan's words to reassure them. They wanted someone who would share their values, and those values included more than caring about the poor. These voters were not poor. They might have been afraid of becoming poor, but they were more afraid about the changes that were buffeting their lives that no politician seemed to see or care about. They wanted someone who would see the world as they saw it, tell them they were right, and promise them he had their backs.

Unlike the Republicans of the 1990s and 2000s

Reagan never failed this test. Virtually every speech had [the working American] in mind, and virtually every speech had something that person could relate to. The frequent invocations, acknowledged or hidden, of Roosevelt were one example of how he did this. The regular praise of the average worker rather than that person's educated boss was another.

Olsen powerfully argues that post-Reagan Republicans have misunderstood their hero and mislearned his lessons. Ronald Reagan did not divide the world between makers and takers. He did not idealize the heroic entrepreneur. It was the average man and woman in whom Reagan believed, and that belief followed him through life and beyond. "I know in my heart that man is good. That what is right will always eventually triumph. And there's purpose and worth to each and every life." That credo was carved on Reagan's tomb. His successors mouthed his words. They lost his music. And by losing it, they opened the way to Donald Trump.

Trump rejected and ridiculed the dogmas of the post-Reagan Republican Party. He professed to speak for working people as Reagan had—but whereas Reagan spoke to what was good and generous in them, Trump exploited what was angry and aggrieved. In Reagan's final public address, at the Republican convention of 1992, he requested this epitaph for himself.

And whatever else history may say about me when I'm gone, I hope it will record that I appealed to your best hopes, not your worst fears, to your confidence rather than your doubts.

Whatever else history may say of Donald Trump, it won't say that.

Olsen and Lilla share a message: Politics must be affirmative. Opposition—whether to “big government” or “white supremacy”— is a mood, not a program.

Lilla provoked angry reaction by critiquing intellectually dominant—and at least politically influential—factions on the left. The factions criticized by Olsen, on the other hand, have already been disheartened and discredited by the course of events. For the time being, at least, they lack the strength or spirit to argue back.

If silenced, however, the factions criticized by Olsen have not been subdued. Trump built a white working-class coalition. He did not deliver a working-class politics. He did not deliver much of anything. Immigration laws are being enforced a little more strictly than before—but not in the workplace, where it matters most. The project of a Trans-Pacific Partnership was cancelled, at large strategic cost, but no new trade agenda has been substituted. Trade policies that,

unlike TPP, were actually in place in January 2017 remain in place in September, including NAFTA, so reviled by Trump. Instead of advancing a worker-friendly healthcare policy, Trump could think of nothing better than to revert to the pre-Obamacare status quo, on a more or less gradual schedule.

Olsen recognizes this.

Imagine if Trump were to leave office, for whatever reason, tomorrow. Where would conservatism and the Republican Party be? Would voters across the broad potential Republican coalition have started to think of themselves as Republicans? Or would they view a Trump-less party as just what it was before, something that excited hard-core conservatives and business types but seemed cold and uncaring to others who would prefer not to vote for progressive Democrats?

The donor base and the congressional leadership of the GOP hope for the latter outcome: a Republican party that reverts to what it was before. Their strategy for achieving that outcome is to cooperate with Trump in the short term, counting on him to blow up and his movement to blow over. Who these days is making a public argument for Paul Ryan-style Republicanism? Not even Paul Ryan.

The result is that the people Olsen is trying to change will not join the argument he is trying to start.

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Olsen incisively warns: “The reason so many conservative legislators turn into

big spenders once they are in office a while isn't because they get corrupted by lobbyists. It's that they don't have a strong enough sense of what government *should* do to let them act strategically to oppose what it should not." Lilla cautions liberals against their analogous weakness: "Most people will not feel the sufferings of others unless they feel, even in an abstract way, *it could have been me or someone close to me*. The civil-rights movement achieved its gains, Lilla argues, "by consciously appealing to what we share ... That those leaders did not achieve complete success does not mean that they failed, nor does it prove that a different approach is now necessary. No other approach is likely to succeed."

The haunting question behind both books, however, is whether there still exists the social basis for the politics they want. Both men yearn for politics of broad national coalitions, supporting broad national programs. But that kind of politics flourishes, when it flourishes, not because smart and patriotic people think it desirable (indeed, when it was going strong in the middle years of the 20th century, smart and patriotic people tended to dislike it as not ideological enough). It flourishes, when it flourishes, because it accords with the nation's deep geography. The Americans of, say, 1970 genuinely had more in common with each other than will the Americans of 2020. Their incomes banded more closely together, and so did their health outcomes. Almost all adults lived in married households; almost everyone watched one of three television evening news programs. These commonalities can be overstated, but they can also be overlooked.

One more thing they had in common: a conviction that the future would be better than the past. "What is justice?" President Lyndon Johnson asked in [his speech](#) at Howard University in 1965. He answered his own question: "It is to fulfill the fair expectations of man." He revealed no doubt that all these fair expectations could be met without unfairly impinging on one another. Johnson's

successors are not so sure.

Scarcity begets competition, and competition begets animosity. Those who can exploit intergroup animosity successfully prey upon those vulnerable to it. That is the story of the modern American university. It speaks to ideals that no longer excite even those who uphold them; it retreats before demands antithetical to its purpose and even existence. Nor are universities the only institutions so vulnerable—as we have seen this year, the government of the United States can be fissured in just the same way.

Americans were not talked into this predicament. They will not be talked out of it. They will emerge, if they emerge, because the conditions of their lives have changed. These two important and harmonious books offer a vision of what that change might look like. The path toward the vision, however, will be harder to discern—and harder still to walk.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DAVID FRUM is a senior editor at *The Atlantic*. In 2001–02, he was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush.

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