

Mark Lilla: the liberal who counts more enemies on the left than the right

The academic-turned-polemicist believes liberalism has lost its way but detractors accuse him of 'trolling disguised as erudition'. Here he answers back



Mark Lilla collects the harshest and funniest tweets about his work for his entertainment. Photograph: Christophe Dellory

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Mark Lilla has spent much of his almost four-decade career trafficking in a certain kind of hyper-scholarly intellectual debate. His witty, densely argued essays analyzing Hannah Arendt, Derrida, and the French far right usually find a natural readership in places like the New York Review of Books or the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Then, 10 days after the presidential election in November 2016, Lilla, a Columbia professor of humanities, published a New York Times op-ed, *The End of Identity Liberalism*. It became the Times' most read political op-ed of the year and marked his transition from academic and occasional public intellectual to polemicist.

Addressed to liberal Democrats, the op-ed was both a call to arms and a rebuke. Trump's accession to the White House, Lilla argued, was a backlash against an obsession with identity politics on the part of the American left.

"American liberalism," he wrote, "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."

Wasting no time, 2,444 Times readers responded with comments. A wave of reaction pieces and rebuttals took up the debate. The same publicity photo of Lilla, peering at the reader through round, black, Harry Potter-style glasses, was suddenly everywhere.

In August, Lilla doubled down on his argument with *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (2017), a short book and his first for a popular audience. "We need no more marchers. We need more mayors," he wrote. Only by articulating a political vision that speaks to all Americans, Lilla believes, can Democrats secure political power, turn the tide of Trumpism, and help minorities.

Lilla, a liberal, wants to save liberalism from itself.

Many progressives, however, are less than pleased with Lilla's prescriptions. Some critics resent the notion of a middle-aged white male encouraging the left to turn away from social activism. There's also the question of ideological purity: Lilla began his career as a protege of neoconservative intellectual Irving Kristol. Most controversially, Lilla's criticisms of identity politics come at a time when progressives believe minority groups need greater attention, not less.

In debates on the progressive left, Lilla has therefore become a kind of shorthand, or meta-concept - a punching bag whose invocation is understood to stand in for smug bourgeois centrism.

After his op-ed last fall, Lilla got his "first Twitter bath, all in acid", he later told an interviewer, with left-leaning Twitter users offering their two cents on his politics in disparaging and often explicit detail. "If I ever thought I wanted to read what Mark Lilla thinks, I would hit myself in the head with a hammer until the feeling went away," one of the more printable tweets suggested.

In a rebuttal of Lilla for the Los Angeles Review of Books, Katherine Franke, a colleague of Lilla's at Columbia, accused him of 'Making White Supremacy Respectable. Again' and

compared him to former Klan leader David Duke. In a hostile review for the New York Times, Yale historian Beverly Gage called Lilla's book "trolling disguised as erudition".

During a recent interview in his university office in Manhattan, Lilla, 61, brushed off such criticisms, which he described as a "willful misreading" of his ideas. (As for Twitter, he collects the harshest and funniest tweets for his entertainment.) Lilla's dark suit and tie, juxtaposed with his eccentric, rather professorial eyewear and rumpled hair, seemed representative of his new position with one foot in academia and the other in punditry.

The *Once and Future Liberal* is not an academic text, he said; it's an "intervention, like in a psychological case where you sit down with the person in the family who's become an alcoholic".

American liberalism has become addicted to a losing political strategy, he believes, and the window for effective intervention is closing.

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Macomb County, Michigan, Lilla's birthplace just outside Detroit, was one of the rust belt counties that voted twice for Obama before going for Trump - a fact which complicates the progressive "whitelash" thesis that Trump voters were motivated by racial resentment.

But Macomb was already famous in the political science world as ground zero of the phenomenon of the Reagan Democrats: working-class whites - union members and lifelong Democrats - who began defecting in the 1970s and 1980s to the GOP.

These were Lilla's people. His father worked on the line at Chevrolet, then learned to draft and became a draftsman at a tool-and-die shop. His mother was a nurse. His maternal grandmother, a staunch New Deal Democrat, kept a picture of FDR on the wall. Every year on Palm Sunday she would go to church and get a palm leaf to put behind the picture. It would stay up all year until she put up a new one. "If I worship anywhere, I still worship at that altar," Lilla told me.

Lilla saw firsthand the deterioration of the relationship between the Democratic party and working-class whites in Michigan, a breakdown motivated in part by "the sense people had that there was a Democratic cultural elite that looked down on them and their religion and their family life and their traditional views".

In an influential 1985 study of Macomb, Stan Greenberg, a pollster, argued that white rust belt voters lost faith in the Democratic party due to a perception that it advocated for other groups - black Americans, the very poor, recent immigrants, feminists - but not them.

In 1974 Lilla started college in Michigan at Wayne State, working his way through, then won a scholarship to transfer to the University of Michigan. "Suddenly I was being lectured to about

the working class by the children of Ford Motor executives.” He wanted to use public policy to help people, so he decided to do a master’s at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

There Lilla was mentored by the sociologist Daniel Bell, who, like many of the famed “New York intellectuals” of the cold war era, was a liberal disaffected with elements of the left. Bell co-edited *The Public Interest* with another ex-leftwing intellectual, neoconservative Irving Kristol, and they hired Lilla as an editor. At the time neoconservatism was not associated with foreign policy as it is now; *The Public Interest* was known for its critiques of failed Great Society social programs. Many of the contributors, like Lilla, were Democrats.

By the end of his time there, however, *The Public Interest* had drifted too far to the right for Lilla’s comfort. “Neoconservatism left me. As neoconservatism developed as it did into dogmatic tax-cutting, ‘cut all benefits’, foreign adventurism, I didn’t recognize myself in that at all.”

He was also still strongly pro-union and pro-working class. “I [believed in] a party that was close to and expressed the aspirations of the working class and was not interested in trampling on their values, even if I didn’t always share them.”

Lilla left *The Public Interest* in 1984 to do his doctorate, and has since carved a niche in academia as a “historian of ideas”. As a scholar, his familiarity with conservative thinkers has served him in good stead. His best-known books include *The Reckless Mind* (2001), about 20th-century intellectuals drawn to totalitarianism; *The Stillborn God* (2008), on religion and the modern west; and *The Shipwrecked Mind* (2016), a study of reactionary thought.

Lilla believes students’ lack of exposure to conservative ideas does them a serious disservice. Progressive activists today are poorly equipped to combat the right, he thinks, in part because one cannot debate an adversary one doesn’t understand. “You have to learn about what people actually think and not rely on a fantasy sense of what they think.”

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The Once and Future Liberal describes modern American politics as falling into two historical eras, or “dispensations”. The Roosevelt dispensation emphasized Americans’ obligations to each other as citizens. Then the pendulum swung the other way. The Reagan dispensation viewed government as the cause of social problems, not their potential solution; individualism won the culture.

Lilla believes the left’s preoccupation with identity politics is an unconscious channeling of that individualism - “Reaganism for lefties”. In *The Once and Future Liberal* he argues for a universal liberalism that transcends individual identity and builds coalitions. One passage criticizes the tactics (though not goals) of Black Lives Matter as a “textbook example of how not to build solidarity”.

In his widely read essay *The First White President*, published in October, Ta-Nehisi Coates argued that Lilla's critique of progressive identity politics effectively excuses *white* identity politics: "What appeals to the white working class is ennobled. What appeals to black workers, and all others outside the tribe, is dastardly identitarianism."

Thomas Chatterton Williams, a journalist known for his commentary on race, noted that *The Once and Future Liberal's* telling of 20th-century history fails to mention the race-baiting "Southern Strategy" that Republicans used to drive a wedge between Democrats and working-class whites. But Williams told me he largely agreed with Lilla's assessment of the state of progressive politics. He sees the backlash against Lilla as "ridiculous and indicative of the self-defeating purity tests the left imposes on itself".

For his part, Lilla sees the pushback as a commentary on the state of political discourse. "It's depressing to see the low intellectual level, the lack of reflection, the unwillingness to simply engage with the very pragmatic case that I make. Not only do we have to fight Republicans, and argue with each other," it turns out "we've also got to fight against this kind of self-satisfied expression of the political id."

Jonathan Rauch, a Brookings fellow and gay rights advocate, defended Lilla in the *New York Review of Books*. Democrats are failing miserably at securing and holding power, Rauch argued, especially at the local level, and progressives are in denial: "Over the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, Democrats lost, on net, more than one thousand elected offices, including thirteen Senate seats, sixty-nine House seats, twelve governorships, and more than nine hundred state legislature seats."

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Lilla thinks Danica Roem, who recently became the first openly transgender person elected to the Virginia legislature, is a good example of how Democrats can advance identity issues.

"She's proudly and openly trans, but her campaign was not about being trans. She talked about the issues that affect most people, and would not be baited by her opponent into making [her gender identity] the issue."

I asked Lilla about a recent *Politico* article by Michael Kruse, who interviewed voters in western Pennsylvania whom Trump had promised he would bring back the coal and steel industries. Almost every person Kruse talks to acknowledges that Trump probably won't make good on that promise - but that they'll probably still vote for him again in 2020 anyway.

Instead of economic inequality, the issue that seems to make them most angry is the kneeling NFL football players, whom one person describes with a racial slur.

Working-class white voters are "doing a kind of expressive voting", Lilla said. "It's all about symbols, and an assertion of what they are in the face of what they deem to be a hostile culture

... People who don't make it in this country are going to feel bad about themselves, and when they feel bad they get defensive.”

“When people are in that kind of psychological position, you need to talk them down from the ledge and show them where their real interests lie.”

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